Geneffa Jonker
Sabbatical Project
2011 – 2012

The Fabric of Memory

Cabrillo College
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LETTER FROM ADMINISTRATOR

APPROVED PROPOSAL ABSTRACT

APPROVED PROPOSAL

CORRESPONDENCE SUPPORTING APPROVAL OF CHANGES TO PROJECT

SABBATICAL REPORT: ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

APPENDICES

A. Memoir Selection Process
B. Theory Reading Log
C. English 12F Excerpted Writings
D. English 12E Reflection
E. Cabrillo College Transcripts

PRODUCTS OF LEAVE

AREA 1 – ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

AREA 2 – MULTICULTURAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

AREA 3 – LITERATURE REVIEW

AREA 4 – MEMOIR

AREA 5 – ESSAY ON AUTOGEOGRAPHY

AREA 6 – ASSIGNMENTS
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with humble appreciation that I thank the following people for their support and encouragement through the process of developing this project:

Dean James Weckler, for encouraging me to pursue this project in the first place and encouraging me to align my project with my interests.

The Sabbatical Leave Review Board, especially Eric Carter and Renée Kilmer, for guiding and encouraging my efforts and supporting my need to change course.

My colleagues in the English Department, especially Cheryl Chaffin, Winnie Baer, Marcy Alan Craig, Diane Putnam, and Barbara Bloom. I would also like to acknowledge the encouraging spirits of my late colleagues, Jeff Tagami, who supported my work and to whom my multicultural bibliography is dedicated; and Jeff Towle, my dear friend who provided a safe harbor for my return to writing poetry.

Barbara Bloom for her ongoing support throughout the year: providing useful articles and ideas, advising me on my memoir, and teaching the classes that proved so useful to the development of my work.

My family of origins, for the ways they’ve shaped my life and contributed to my story: my mother for her generosity of spirit, my father for his generosity of story, my sister for her willingness to share family photos. Here I also acknowledge the profound influence of my late maternal aunt, my masi, Gulshan Ahmed, for telling me her story and providing me with our ancestral narratives over the years; also, my cousin, Sharon Ahmed, for boxing up and sending Guli’s materials, which provided me with rich, concrete sources for my writing.

Many friends and professionals who have carried me through this project: Carmen McIntyre, Sarojani Rohan, Sandy Polakoff, Thomas Lucking, Stan Abraham, Shirley Flores-Muñoz, Julie Olsen Edwards, and again, Cheryl Chaffin.

Former teachers and friends who shaped my understanding of memoir and encouraged me as a scholar: Aruna Srivastava, Jeanne Perreault, Ashok Mathur, Larissa Lai, and Janet Sternburg.

A paragraph is not enough space to acknowledge the support of my spouse, Kevin Jonker, who carried me through the year, taking over responsibilities, comforting me through the difficult phases of this project, ministering to every need, and helping me with the revision and proofing process. I am humbled to be in daily contact with such a fine writer and gentle spirit.

Finally, I acknowledge the sweet support, enthusiasm, patience, and love of my two sons, August and Adrian. I cherish the extra time we spent together while I was not teaching, and boys, I appreciate your willingness to part with me when I needed time and space to complete this project. I undertook much of the writing that follows with the two of you as my inspiration, thinking about the legacy of ancestral stories I would like to leave you. I hope that you will find some of this entertaining when you are old enough to read it; in the meantime, you can have your mommy back.
I have reviewed the sabbatical report submitted by Geneffa Jonker and can attest to her completion of the objectives and outcomes as stated in her revised proposal. Ms. Jonker’s very ambitious sabbatical project focuses on the relation between memoir and the MEMSA diaspora, driven by a very personal but analytical introspection while comfortably lending itself to the development of a praxis highly informed by the courses she took, the memoirs she read (and on which she produced an annotated bibliography), the critical works reviewed, and the careful weaving of all of that into her own memoir framed by the MEMSA diaspora.

I received a number of electronic files from Ms. Jonker—the deliverables of this project—which included:

1. an annotated bibliography
2. a bibliography of other multicultural autobiographies
3. a literature review
4. a draft portion of her own autobiography
5. a critical essay on autogeography
6. the creation of at least one assignment that incorporates autobiographical writing for each of the following courses: English 255, 100, 1A, 2, 12F, DMCP 110, and DMCP 111.

Her deliverables are complete and while of value to Ms. Jonker in both her own writing and her work as an English Instructor, they may serve also as resources to faculty who have an interest in incorporating memoir writing into their classes or to students looking for resources on autobiography and memoir.

While it was a pleasure to read through Ms. Jonker’s sabbatical report, simply acknowledging that she delivered the outcomes promised in her proposal does not do justice to what she produced. It is clear that Ms. Jonker, by choosing a topic that was intensely personal and about which she was also a student, was able to draw on a deep well of motivation to engage in the primary research, to analyze what she read, to reflect on her memories and experiences (as well as those of her relatives), and then to start her own journey into memoir.

Ms. Jonker succeeded in producing what she promised. By doing so, she has made an impressive start on her own autobiography while acquiring knowledge of and insight into the genre which will have a direct and positive impact on her students.

On that note, I am pleased to support Ms. Jonker’s Sabbatical Report.

James Reese Weckler, Ph.D.
Dean of Business, English and Language Arts Division
Cabrillo College
Sabbatical Proposal Abstract for Geneffa Popatia Jonker

Background
Since joining the Cabrillo College English department full-time faculty in fall 2000, I have given autobiographical assignments at all levels of the composition sequence and in English 12A (Creative Writing: Fiction). I propose to explore the field of autobiography further through a one-year sabbatical leave project that allows me to draft a portion of my autobiography, study and theorize the autobiographical writings of select underrepresented groups, and update techniques and texts for our composition and creative writing classes. My project can be divided into two main parts—the research and documentation of autobiographies, theories, and techniques (that satisfies Article 9.1.a, b, and d of the CCFT Contract) and the drafting of my autobiography (that satisfies 9.1.a of the CCFT Contract). Upon my return to teaching, I hope to offer new techniques and readings in composition, college success, and creative writing classes.

Objectives
1. Read and annotate current life-writings by displaced people of the MEMSA diasporas.
2. Compile and categorize a list of at least 20 autobiographies from a broader range of diasporas.
3. Update my knowledge of current theories and techniques of autobiography by reading at least 10 theoretical works on the topic of autobiography and writing a 10 page literature review.
4. Draft a portion of my autobiography amounting to at least 50 pages.
5. Research and develop my original theory of autogeography culminating in a 10 page essay.
6. Create a syllabus for English 12E.

Activities (not necessarily in order of execution)
1. Create an annotated bibliography of at least 10 autobiographies from the MEMSA diasporas.
2. Create a bibliography of at least 20 other autobiographies from a broader range of diasporas.
3. Read at least 10 works of autobiographical theory and write a 10 page literature review.
4. Draft a portion of my autobiography amounting to at least 50 pages.
5. Write a 10 page academic essay about my original theory of autogeography.
7. Research at least five syllabi from autobiography classes taught at the college level.

Benefits to the College
1. Increased currency in knowledge of underrepresented autobiographies.
2. Increased currency in knowledge of various multicultural autobiographies.
3. Increased currency in contemporary autobiographical practices and theories.
4. Increased creative ability to produce autobiographical writing.
5. Expanded knowledge of new interpretive frameworks for autobiography.
6. Updated course materials for English 12E.

Outcomes
1. Annotated Bibliography of at least 10 autobiographies by writers of the MEMSA diasporas.
2. Bibliography (non-annotated but categorized) of other multicultural autobiographies.
3. Literature Review (10 pages) of critical frameworks for analyzing and generating autobiography.
5. Critical essay (10 pages) introducing autogeography.
Sabbatical Proposal for Geneffa Popatia Jonker

Background

I joined the Cabrillo College faculty in fall 2000 as the first Basic Skills specialist in the English Department to serve the department’s need to develop its Basic Skills English offerings. At that time, the English Department’s course serving students who assess two levels below college was English 290—an innovative computer-based instructional program that used techniques of memoir to engage students in self-awareness and life-writing. While exploring the merits of English 290, I was trained in integrated reading and writing pedagogy through the De Anza Learning Communities Consortium of 2001, and since then, I have taught in various learning communities designed to improve retention and persistence among basic skills students. I have taught in the Puente Project, the ESI (now CLC), and most recently, ACE (formerly the DBA). In a desire to better serve our “at-risk” population, I pursued training in On Course and studied how to increase affective domain efficacy in our students. This led me to ACE where I have been developing a program to accelerate students to college-level proficiency in just one semester through assignments that promote critical thinking, self-awareness, and social enquiry. Although I have focused much of my teaching at the basic skills level, I have also enjoyed teaching creative writing courses and hope to teach the fall semester autobiography classes now that the current instructor is retiring and moving out of state.

While offered positions at two community colleges in fall 2000, I chose Cabrillo College in part because I was inspired by its innovative use of memoir and life-writing in its Basic English classes. Since then, I have found that teaching autobiographical texts has worked well in both basic and advanced composition classes. For instance, I have taught Anderson Cooper’s memoir, Dispatches from the Edge, in both English 255 (Basic English) and English 2 (Critical Thinking and Composition) and found that it could be adapted to both these levels. In addition to reading autobiographies, when students engage in their own autobiographical writings, they develop self-awareness crucial to their emerging identities as college students and future professionals. This is a large piece of the ACE program in which I teach the Foundation Course (DMCP 110) where oral story-telling creates strong interpersonal connections among students. Following this intensive 2-week Foundation Course, I teach Team Self Management (DMCP 111) where students journal about their lives, develop lifeline charts, and go on to write detailed autobiographies and family history papers, inviting them to integrate their pasts and shape their futures while developing personal legacies.

Since I am committed to continuing this work with students, I would like to update my techniques for teaching life-writing to reflect recent developments within the genre. I also see possibilities for our autobiography classes to diversify the models and theories they incorporate. At the same time, I have long held an interest in writing my own autobiography that includes the experiences of my family’s expulsion from East Africa and resettlement across the South Asian diaspora. As my only living grandmother is in the final stages of Alzheimer’s disease, and my mother is in its early stages, the urgency of this project presses on me.
I propose a sabbatical in which I would conduct extended research, study, and practice in the field of autobiography to inform and update the way we teach life-writing in three arenas: our composition courses, our college-success courses, and our creative writing courses. My plans for a yearlong sabbatical project for 2011 – 2012 would develop personal and departmental currency in these areas.

My project has two parts which fit the following categories under Article 9.1 of the CCFT contract:

Part I

To research and document materials in the field of autobiographical writing—its theory, teaching, and practices.

Category: Curriculum planning and development

Purpose: 9.1.a – scholarly endeavor in the discipline being taught
         9.1.b – Improvement of skills in the discipline being taught
         9.1.d – Improvement of teaching skills

Part II

To draft a portion of my autobiography (at least 50 pages)

Category: A special project

Purpose: 9.1.a – creative endeavor in the discipline being taught

Objectives

1. Read and annotate current life-writings by displaced people of the MEMSA diasporas.¹

2. Compile and categorize a list of at least 20 autobiographies from a broader variety of diasporas.

¹ While there has been much scholarly attention to literatures in exile and the writings of several prominent diasporas, I plan to focus on writings of the MEMSA diasporas (Middle Eastern, Muslim, South Asian) for the following reasons: (1) to better understand and frame my own writings as a woman of the South Asian Muslim diaspora; (2) to enhance multicultural understanding in our students (as the past decade has seen increased suspicion of and antipathy towards people of these communities); (3) to provide my colleagues in the English Department with an annotated bibliography of texts that are currently underrepresented in our courses.
3. Update my knowledge of current theories and techniques for analyzing and generating autobiographies by reading at least 10 theoretical works on this topic and writing a 10 page literature review so as to contemporize the teaching of this genre in the English department.

4. Draft at least 50 pages of my autobiography so that I have some experience from which to guide students as they begin their own autobiographical projects.

5. Research and develop my original theory of *autogeography* and write a ten page essay that defines and describes the writings of displaced peoples through this framework.

6. Create a syllabus for English 12E that incorporates critical and creative texts that are current in the field.

**Activities** (not necessarily in order of execution)

1. Produce an annotated bibliography of at least 10 autobiographical works by writers of the MEMSA diasporas.

2. Create a bibliography of at least 20 other autobiographies from a broader range of diasporas, categorized accordingly, for possible future study.

3. Read at least 10 theoretical works and write a literature review of 10 pages synthesizing and framing current practices in the interpretation and writing of autobiography.

4. Draft a portion of my autobiography amounting to at least 50 pages.

5. Write a 10 page critical essay that defines and describes the sub-genre of *autogeography* as a framework for reading and interpreting the writings of displaced peoples.

6. Develop a syllabus for English 12E (Autobiography) to be offered in future semesters.

7. Research at least five syllabi from autobiography classes taught at the college level.

8. Take English 12E (Autobiography) at Cabrillo College from Instructor Barbara Bloom during spring 2012.
Benefits to the College

1. Increased currency in knowledge of underrepresented autobiographies to adopt as texts taught in composition, literature, and creative writing classes.

2. Increased currency in knowledge of various multicultural autobiographies.

3. Increased currency in contemporary autobiographical theories and practices.

4. Increased creative ability to produce autobiographical writing.

5. Expanded knowledge of new interpretive frameworks for autobiography, such as autography and my original theory of autogeoigraphy.


Outcomes

1. Annotated Bibliography of at least 10 autobiographical works by displaced peoples of the MEMSA diasporas (see Appendix A for preliminary bibliography).

2. Bibliography (non-annotated) of multicultural autobiographies categorized according to various diasporas.

3. Literature Review (10 pages) of contemporary critical frameworks for analyzing and generating autobiography (See Appendix B for preliminary bibliography).


5. Critical essay (10 pages) introducing autogeoigraphy as a framework for reading the autobiographical writings of displaced peoples through reference to my own work, the autobiographies I’ve studied, as well as peer-refereed articles from the field of Diaspora Studies.

Appendix A
Partial Bibliography of Autobiographical Texts


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2 This preliminary bibliography reflects representative texts that should be viewed as samples. These texts may be replaced by other more relevant selections as the project develops. This list is by no means exhaustive and will be expanded to include at least ten entries.
Appendix B
Partial Bibliography of Autobiographical Theory


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This preliminary bibliography reflects representative texts that should be viewed as samples. These texts may be replaced by other more relevant selections as the project develops. This list is by no means exhaustive and will be expanded to include at least ten entries.
November 7, 2011

Dear Renee:

I am writing to you regarding my current sabbatical project. Given certain changes in the English Department’s course offerings, I’d like to redirect a few of my activities and deliverables to better serve department and student needs.

When I developed my proposal a year ago, I had in mind to research and redesign English 12E (Autobiography) with the hope of teaching it in the future since both instructors of this course have retired. However, due to economic constraints, the department voted to offer English 12F (Introduction to Creative Writing) in place of English 12E (Autobiography) for the foreseeable future.

In order to better serve a greater number of students in a broad range of classes, I am proposing to alter part of my project as follows:

**Current Activities I’m Seeking to Alter**

2. Research at least five syllabi from autobiography classes taught at the college level.

**Altered Activities with Rationale for Change:**

1. Develop assignments that incorporate autobiographical writing for each of the following courses: English 255, 100, 1A, 2, 12F as well as DMCP 110 and DMCP 111. **Rationale:** Students at all levels of composition can benefit from assignments that incorporate autobiography. When creative writing courses are limited, it serves student interest to work creative writing assignments into core course offerings. This is more useful to the college than a single syllabus for a course that may not be offered.

2. Instead of gathering syllabi from other colleges, I propose to take English 12F in the spring term and study Barbara’s Bloom’s techniques of teaching multi-genre autobiography so as to be able to teach this course myself should the need arise. **Rationale:** It would be a greater benefit to the college to have an additional instructor able to teach memoir through multiple genres. In developing materials, it would be more useful for me to actually take such a course than simply to gather syllabi for courses on autobiography from other institutions.

3. Take English 12E (Autobiography) at Cabrillo College during fall 2011. **Rationale:** This class is only being offered in the fall.

**Current Deliverable I’m Seeking to Alter:**


**Altered Deliverable:**

1. Create at least one assignment that incorporates autobiographical writing for each of the following courses: English 255, 100, 1A, 2, 12F, DMCP 110, and DMCP 111.

I appreciate your consideration of the above proposed changes and eagerly await your reply.

Sincerely,

Geneffa Jonker
Hi Geneffa,

Renee and I have discussed the changes that you propose. There seems to be significant change in Activity #7. The change on activity #7 is quite different: (original) researching the way 5 other college level autobiography classes are taught by examining the syllabi v. (revised) taking a current class here at Cabrillo, English 12F, which is Creative Writing.

I suppose in light of the department not wanting to teach 12E in the foreseeable future it makes sense, and the outcome based on this activity appears to be changing anyway.

The new activity seems like possibly more work for you. So we want to make sure you are aware.

Additionally, when a new activity is proposed we will want to see an outcome for it: so transcripts showing successful completion of said class.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks,
Eric Carter

On Tue, 15 Nov 2011 22:20:26 -0800 "Geneffa Jonker" <gejonker@cabrillo.edu> wrote:

Hi Eric,

Thank you for your response. To address your observations . . .

Yes, the activity change for #7 is significant (from researching syllabi to taking a creative writing course), but the new activity is still linked to the outcome of producing course materials. As I stated, I feel it would be more useful even though, as you noted, it may entail more work.

Are you and Renee comfortable with my change in outcome #6--that is, to provide multiple autobiographical assignments for various English and ACE courses as opposed to a single syllabus for 12E?

I gather from your email that you are approving my changes, but I just want to make certain. I will be sure to include transcripts for the courses I am taking.

Thanks, Geneffa

Hi Geneffa,

Yes, we are good with all the other changes. Good luck, I hope it all goes well.

Eric
Sabbatical Report
Activities and Outcomes

Cabrillo College
2011 – 2012
The process of developing this extended project in the field of new memoir studies has been one of reacquaintance with concepts and theories I've long neglected, and renegotiation of personal, cultural, and ancestral identity. The project was seeded by my recognition of a dichotomy between popular notions of autobiography and the memoirs being produced, particularly by people from non-dominant and underrepresented communities, over the past few decades. I have long wanted to pen my own memoir of my family's years in England where I was born and raised until the age of ten. I wanted to write down my father’s stories of diaspora—his tales of flight from India to East Africa during WWII and his subsequent escape from Africa to England in the 1950’s. My father, lost to me now, was a master storyteller—unschooled past seventh grade, which he failed three times, he expertly interwove Indian myths and legends with tales of his personal adventures. I wanted to record these before they fled my memory, but I kept encountering colleagues who assured me that I was too young to write a memoir. I realized that this reflected a difference in understanding of the very basis of memoir—the writing process required and the project engendered. I was too familiar with the autobiographical writings of Sandra Cisneros, Michelle Serros, Jamaica Kincaid, Joy Kogawa, and many others to be dissuaded from my task. Rather, I sought to trace the distinction between old and new theories of memoir to create a kind of passport for the creation of my own, and with this mandate, I developed my sabbatical project.

Although the eight areas of my project (as presented in my revised eight activities and six outcomes) loosely fit under the umbrella of autobiographical studies, the actual work and resulting products reflect vastly different activities and processes. For this reason, I have divided my report on the activities of this project into eight sections, each of them including the rationale behind my work in this area, a reflection on the process of its development, and where appropriate, a general chronology of its execution. A more specific timeline that tracks my work in all areas month-by-month appears at the end of this report.

Area 1
Activity Create an annotated bibliography of at least 10 autobiographies from the MEMSA diasporas.
Outcome Annotated Bibliography of at least 10 autobiographies by writers of the MEMSA diasporas.

As my timeline reflects, a major aspect of this activity was the development of criteria for selecting memoirs to read and annotate. It has been my expectation all along that the resulting bibliography will be read by my colleagues, or at least future sabbaticalees, and may

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4 With written approval from the Vice President of Instruction, I revised my sixth outcome to produce multiple course assignments rather than a single syllabus. I also replaced my original activity # 7 (to research syllabi from other colleges) with completion of a college creative writing class (English 12F). Rationale for this alteration and supporting documentation of its approval are attached.
introduce them to lesser known works that could eventually end up in their classrooms. I felt the weight of representation, wanting to be inclusive of as broad a range of subject positions as possible without sacrificing my own interest in creating connections and charting commonalities. As well, I needed to decide which memoirs best demonstrate my construct of a MEMSA\textsuperscript{5} literary community, given that the MEMSA label has thus far been limited to social, legal, and political manifestations. A reflection on this selection process appears in Appendix A of this report.

After taking detailed notes on each of my readings, I wrote brief summaries that I subsequently retooled into fuller reports. No stranger to annotated bibliographies, for I teach them at the freshman composition level, and even introduce them at the basic skills level, I felt dissatisfied with what they do. Especially when applied to underrepresented literary works, annotations, through broad strokes and generalizations, can end up perpetuating stereotypes and simplistic readings of these works. Wanting to avoid this limitation of the form, I decided to expand my annotations to be more comprehensive, and the result is a brief book report on each work that goes beyond context to provide specific instances of thematic patterns. The process of writing these reports was obviously more laborious than what I had set out to do, but infinitely worth the effort.

Area 2
Activity Create a bibliography of at least 20 other autobiographies from a broader range of diasporas.
Outcome Bibliography (non-annotated but categorized) of other multicultural autobiographies.

Initially, I thought this bibliography would contain my castoffs—that is, the memoirs from MEMSA diasporas that I would have liked to read but didn’t due to lack of time. As I began to compile a list, I noticed that I came across many memoirs from Asian diasporas that included themes of cross-cultural assimilation, conflicts between host and home cultures, and internalized racism—all themes that they held in common with memoirs by MEMSA writers. I decided, therefore, to focus my bibliography on memoirs by Asian Americans and Asian Canadians. While Jeanette Wakatsuki Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* and Joy Kagawa’s *Obasan* were already familiar to me, I was interested in locating memoirs from less public Asian diasporic communities. I was delighted to discover memoirs from Canadian and American Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, and Filipino communities. Upon the sudden tragic passing of my colleague, ground-breaking Filipino American poet Jeff Tagami, on June 23, 2012, I felt especially emboldened in my focus, seeing and ultimately declaring this bibliography as an homage to him.

\textsuperscript{5} MEMSA refers to peoples of Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian descent.
Area 3
Activity Read at least 10 works of autobiographical theory and write a 10 page literature review.
Outcome Literature Review (10 pages) of critical frameworks for analyzing and generating autobiography.

This area demanded the most mental devotion and intensity during my sabbatical year. I was dismayed to realize, upon beginning my readings, that 15 years after completing graduate work in this field, I no longer have the ability to perform the kind of mental and linguistic gymnastics evidenced in the writings of the postcolonial theorists I had once so enjoyed.

I had decided upon this literature review in the first place because I wanted to broaden my theoretical dialogue with colleagues and students at Cabrillo College. Reflecting our development and status as a Hispanic Serving Institution, my English department’s focus has been on Latino students and texts, as it should be. However, I presumed that once I refreshed myself on theories and contexts of postcolonialism, I might be able to expand our dialogues as well as my own teachings to include a greater diversity of communities. Memoirs from multi-ethnic communities are increasing in number, and can be most useful for constituting an understanding of the variety of ways in which America is experienced and negotiated. By familiarizing myself with theories that foreground the postcolonial contexts of multi-ethnic memoirs, I believed that I could enrich my own understanding and teaching of these works. I found, however, that I had to re-learn a discourse I had long discarded without realizing it. The frustrating process of decoding works by Sara Suleri, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Homi Bhabha and others proved to be lengthy and laborious. In the end, I had copious notes on about ten theories that might be applied to a reading of the contemporary confessional memoir. I defined these areas as postmodern, feminist, postcolonial, diasporic, counter-ethnographic, New Historicist, matrifocal, confessional, testimonial, and pedagogical. Then I sat down to write a ten page literature review that would focus each of these models around a single text that stood for the rest.

I was humbled to realize that ten theories cannot be done justice in a ten-page literature review. After writing about thirty pages, and covering only five frameworks, I realized I had already reviewed more than the ten texts I had committed to, and decided to limit the scope of my writing. I recognized a possible distinction between the five frameworks I have now included and the last five that I decided to leave for a different project. The frameworks I chose to detail are all concerned in some way with multi-ethnic subjectivities whereas the ones I abandoned, while pertinent to the memoirs of my focus, are more broadly applicable to the confessional memoir. It seems appropriate, therefore, to focus my literature review on the theories that best lend insight into diasporic subjectivities. Appendix B reflects the distribution of my readings along the timeline of my sabbatical year.
This portion of my memoir is the main product of my leave, and the work that most inspired me to take a sabbatical year. I had been planning to write this memoir for the last 15 years. The project, entitled *The End of the Common*, is to be a recollection of memories from my first ten years growing up as a South Asian Ismaili girl in a context of family violence and social oppression in England during the 1970’s. I had planned to spend my first semester reading the memoirs of others from my ethnic community, and brushing up on theories about these writings to see the potential contexts for my own. I then envisioned myself drafting a chapter or two of my memoir during the second semester while taking English 12E (Autobiography) with Professor Barbara Bloom at Cabrillo College. I assumed that my first semester of preparation, and my second semester of class work geared towards developing memoir, would nudge me forward in this intimidating process of writing about difficult episodes from my family’s past.

The year, and the resulting written work, played out quite differently than I’d envisioned, yet I am pleased with the drafts I’ve produced. To begin with, English 12E was moved forward to the fall semester from the spring. This meant I had to dive into this class, and my memoir, with less of a schema for what I was doing and less awareness of the communities and contexts within which my work resonates. Overwhelmed by the scope of the project, now that I was finally approaching it, I had a hard time deciding where to begin. Learning early the distinction between traditional autobiography (of the Augustinian tradition) and contemporary confessional memoir (emerging from the consciousness-raising movements of the 1960’s and ‘70’s), I recognized that a linear development beginning with my birth would not form the best trajectory for the type of memoir I wished to produce.

Unsure of where to start, I was prompted to begin from the imaginative place of the first writing exercise Professor Bloom assigned in English 12E, which was to write the story of your name. Indeed, the story of my name is fraught with the history of my shame at being foreign, my tortured beginnings in the English language, and my movement out of this shame towards a provisional acceptance of myself and my ethnicity. I began to write and write. The problem with this was it was all about me! I hadn’t intended to begin my memoir with my school experiences, even though I knew that movement into the dominant discourse would be a significant thematic of my eventual work. Beginnings for many autobiographers, but especially for the diasporic subject, often go back to the stories of one’s parents or even further back ancestrally. I knew that the story of my parents’ migrations would be much more interesting to a reading public than my own experiences, and for a while, I thought of these first drafts as pre-writing—what I had to get out of the way so that I could begin the real process of...
writing the important stories of my family’s heritage. However, as I began to conduct parallel work on the other areas of my sabbatical project—reading memoirs by other South Asians of the diaspora as well as postcolonial and feminist theory—I started to value my writings as appropriate points of departure (and arrival). I started to consider it a mark of honesty to disclose the narrative self before attempting to portray the stories of others in one’s family since those stories are necessarily filtered through the narrator. I called this section “Learning My Name” and decided to continue writing it, ending up with more than 60 pages.

In the spring semester, I was pleased to move on to the writing I had planned to produce at the outset—the story of my maternal relatives’ expulsion from Uganda and the excitement of their reunion in our one-room flat in Sutton, Surrey. Before commencing this piece of writing, I listened to a taped interview with my maternal aunt, Gulshan Rajabali Ahmed (known simply as Guli), that I had conducted in 1994, a year before her sudden death from stomach cancer. I hadn’t listened to this interview since her death, and it was a powerful experience to hear her voice. I transcribed 18 pages of notes and then set about organizing these notes along with my own recollections and notes from interviews with my mother into a cohesive outline for the chapter I’ve titled “Family Gathering.” Unfortunately, I was unable to write more than the opening scene of this chapter. In the spring, I was enrolled in English 12F: Introduction to Creative Writing, which required us to write fiction and poetry as well as memoir. I ended up switching gears in order to write my father’s story in what I call a piece of “biographical fiction.” This story, though rough and requiring some revision, will serve my memoir project by giving me more raw materials about my family to work into it. In addition to two pieces of fiction, I was able to write several autobiographical poems, which expanded my understanding of memoir not as a genre but a mode. Despite its differences from my initial expectations, I am pleased to present 70 pages of memoir as the official product of my leave, satisfying outcome # 4.

Area 5
Activity Write a 10 page academic essay about my original theory of autogeography.
Outcome Critical essay (10 pages) introducing autogeography.

The idea for this essay emerged in 1996 during my tenure as a graduate student at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. I had been reading extensively in the areas of critical race studies as well as anthologies of multicultural literature, and noticed the ways in which the writings of people of color were often racialized by critics and anthologists, that is taken to be representative of their ethnic community whether or not their texts expressed this intention or possibility. I produced a short article entitled “Autogeographies of the Racialized Body” for the SFU Bulletin, and found my ideas expounded on by a few of my colleagues and mentors.
Revisiting the idea of autogeography during my sabbatical leave, I have reconceived it as a framework for understanding common impulses in the MEMSA memoirs I have studied. Each of these memoirs foregrounds a quest for place, which contrasts the traditional work of memoir as a quest for self. Indeed, self and place are interwoven within most MEMSA memoirs, and a sense of place is inscribed through similar thematic patterns. After reading many theoretical works exploring departures from traditional models of reading autobiography, I saw autogeography as a reading strategy that takes its place alongside autography, autogynography, autobiographics, and biomythography as a movement towards feminist and postcolonial reconceptions of the autobiographical impulse.

I began by reading criticism on Mohandas Gandhi’s autobiography, highlighting his discomfiture with what he considered an undue western privileging of “selfhood” over nation and soul. Wondering if this anxiety might be noted in other autobiographical projects by South Asians, I began to see if such a thematic could be traced in the memoirs I was reading. I found that the idea of writing oneself into place could be traced in several of the memoirs I studied, and I noted that these memoirs achieved this through a common emphasis on language, mythology, embodiment, and estrangement. I arrived at this formulation towards the end of my sabbatical year as much of my work for this area hinged upon my reading of memoirs and theories that I developed for areas 1 and 3. As a result, the essay I present as the product of outcome # 5 did not go through as many drafts as I would have liked. I envision working on this essay further, and developing my theory through more examples and texts so as to possibly present it at a conference on memoir or for publication in this area.

Area 6

ORIGINAL:
Outcome: Syllabus for English 12E (Creative Writing: Autobiography).

REVISED:
Activity: Develop assignments that incorporate autobiographical writing for each of the following courses: English 255, 100, 1A, 2, 12F, DMCP 110 and DMCP 111.
Outcome: At least one assignment that incorporates autobiographical writing for each of the following courses: English 255, 100, 1A, 2, 12F, DMCP 110, and DMCP 111.

The alteration of my original activity and its outcome was approved by the Vice President of Instruction, Renée Kilmer, on November 15, 2011. I had originally planned to develop a syllabus for English 12E (Autobiography) because the veteran teachers in my department, who had taught it for a number of years, were both retiring. It seemed logical to me that as I was spending a year immersed in memoir studies, I should prepare to take over the
teaching of this course. However, in late spring 2011, well after my sabbatical project had been approved, the English department decided to stop offering English 12E after fall 2011, and replace it with English 12F: Introduction to Creative Writing. With a reduction in our creative writing offerings, I realized that I might not have the opportunity after all to teach a memoir writing class; however, I could still include assignments that incorporate autobiography in the composition classes I regularly teach. I also saw opportunities for teaching such assignments in the ACE program’s college success classes: DMCP 110 (Foundation Course) and DMCP 111 (Team Self Management). With the reduction of creative writing classes, it seems more important than ever that we offer narrative writing assignment opportunities in other classes. Narrative writing encourages linear and causal thinking in our students, and helps them to communicate their experiences to others, which may serve them in their personal and work lives. In addition, autobiographical writing requires students to develop skills in self-reflection and metacognition, which will serve them well as they progress through college.

For this activity, I began by studying the course objectives and student learning outcomes for each of our courses to ensure that the assignments I developed would fit within the parameters of the course’s design. I then searched through my computer files as well as my binders to gather any previous autobiographical assignments I might be able to retool for future use. My next step was to comb through creative writing handbooks to see if there were exercises I could adapt. I then wrote seven assignments that fit into the general themes and tasks set for each course.

For English 255, I chose to develop an assignment that would help students focus on their own strengths, particularly their ability to turn misfortune around and use it to their benefit. I offer the story of Louis Braille as an example to inspire them in this. Having taught this level for 14 years, I have noted a similar pattern of low self-confidence and self-efficacy in students who assess or place themselves at this level. This assignment, possibly the first one of the term, is designed to encourage these students to see their lives and struggles more positively.

For English 100, I developed an assignment based on Judith Barrington’s idea of trying to achieve a balance of summary, scene, and musing in one’s memoir writing. Although she doesn’t offer an exercise that combines these, I developed an assignment that requires this of students as a sound preparatory exercise for the next level of English, college composition. Being able to recognize the differences between summarizing and quoting is crucial to the success of their research papers.

For English 1A, I developed a paper assignment that requires students to delve into their ancestries and origins. Either through a real interview with one of their forbearers, or a researched interview with someone from their ancestral group, they are to incorporate actual quotes as well as paraphrased ideas from these sources into the body of their paper that traces some aspect of their history. This is good preparation for further research in the course.
English 2, Critical Thinking and Composition, introduces students to the idea of historical and cultural specificity as it informs our language and identity. For this reason, and others, it often approaches ideas of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability as markers of power and difference in society. I created an autobiographical assignment for English 2 that requires students to reflect upon the ways these identity politics play out in their lives.

English 12F is a relatively new creative writing course created as a hybrid in response to our inability to offer every genre every semester. I took this course myself in spring 2012 to see how it can use multiple genres to incorporate memoir as a possible mode of expression rather than a genre unto itself. Professor Bloom responded to the challenge of incorporating multiple genres by moving from fiction to memoir and ending with poetry. I noticed that there weren’t any assignments for dramatic writing, and decided to develop such an assignment. Although our department offers a very popular screenwriting course, it has relegated playwriting to the Theater Arts department where it is no longer offered every semester. With this in mind, and reflecting my own interest in playwriting, I include an assignment that uses drama as an end unto itself or as a tool in the development of one’s memoir or fiction.

I developed two assignments for the DMCP department—Digital Management and Career Preparation. The first is for DMCP 110, the Foundation Course. This course has long been remiss for not incorporating more meaningful writing exercises. At the same time, it offers rich exercises for self-reflection in other modes of expression. Two such exercises involve art projects whereby students are guided in creative visualization and then go on to produce drawings with oil pastels. The first exercise is a reflection of the student’s educational experience, and the second such exercise, held on the last day of this intensive course, is a reflection on their thoughts and feelings about the Foundation Course experience. My autobiographical assignment for this course is obvious—a compare and contrast paper in which they reflect upon the distinctions between their two different artistic products and the experiences they reflect.

Finally, for DMCP 111, Team Self Management, I rewrote the Family History Paper to be clearer and provide a stronger basis for autobiographical writing. This paper started out as a generic assignment written by the ACE program to be offered by all teachers of Team Self Management. In my semesters teaching this course, between 2009 and 2011, I have reworked the assignment each time to be more reflective of my own teaching style. Here I have retooled it yet again to reflect my new understanding of autobiography and the challenges of writing about one’s family.

Area 7
ORIginal:
Activity Research at least five syllabi from autobiography classes taught at the college level.
Instead of gathering syllabi from other colleges, I propose to take English 12F in the spring term and study Barbara’s Bloom’s techniques of teaching multi-genre autobiography so as to be able to teach this course myself should the need arise.

My alteration to this activity was also approved by the Vice President of Instruction, Renée Kilmer, on November 15, 2011. I decided to change this activity for the following reasons. It would be of greater benefit to the college to have an additional instructor able to teach memoir through multiple genres than simply autobiography by itself. In developing materials, it would be more useful for me to actually take such a course than simply to gather syllabi for courses on autobiography from other institutions.

When I developed my proposal in fall 2010, I had in mind to research and redesign English 12E (Autobiography) with the hope of teaching it in the future since both instructors of this course have retired. However, due to economic constraints, the department voted to offer English 12F (Introduction to Creative Writing) in place of English 12E (Autobiography) for the foreseeable future. When I originally thought of exploring the offerings at other colleges, I neglected to consider two very pertinent points: (1) creative writing offerings have dwindled at all campuses due to budget constraints, making it harder to access current course materials in use; and (2) perusing the syllabi of different college’s courses in autobiography doesn’t necessarily give me insight into how to deliver a course that integrates autobiographical assignments as a way of deepening fiction and poetry. I realized that this is what English 12F has the potential to do. Having taught English 12C (Fiction) before, I know that one of the chief problems in student writing is a lack of authentic story. Students can be told time and again to write what they know, but they will faithfully and prolifically turn in disengaging works with the belief that they know more than they do. Using memoir can authenticate one’s narratives, be they poetry or prose, and render them believable and engaging. This premise lies at the heart of what makes the study of autobiographical techniques useful for the beginning writer.

With all this in mind, it seemed that I could be well served to take English 12F and see how a seasoned teacher of memoir and an accomplished poet (Barbara Bloom) incorporates memoir into a broader context, or perhaps, uses memoir as the foundation upon which to construct and contextualize other modes of storytelling. I recognized that by actually taking the course, though it would require me to generate more writing for my sabbatical project than I’d originally planned, I would best deduce what to do myself when given the opportunity to teach English 12F. The hybrid nature of the course might also give me ideas for incorporating autobiographical assignments into the other courses I teach. As evidence of this activity, I
include excerpts from a journal I kept during English 12F as well as some of the poems I completed for it; these are included as Appendix C.

Area 8

**ORIGINAL:**

Activity  Take English 12E (Autobiography) at Cabrillo College during spring 2012.

**REVISED:**

Activity  Take English 12E (Autobiography) at Cabrillo College during fall 2011.

My experience of Barbara Bloom’s English 12E course was greatly influenced by the fact that I took this class at the beginning of my sabbatical year, and not midway through as I’d originally planned. When designing my sabbatical year, I’d thought to take this course after I’d begun writing my memoir with a body of research in memoir theory and other people’s memoirs at my disposal. Instead, taking this course at the beginning of my sabbatical year changed what I derived from the course, and influenced my research and writing from the outset. On the whole, I think this worked out better for me. I was able to learn a lot from Professor Bloom about important distinctions in the field and I benefitted from her insight and encouragement in outlining and designing my own writing project.

Bloom’s class, and the assigned text *Writing Life Stories*, helped me determine the distinctions I was going to employ for the sake of my project between the oft-conflated terms memoir, autobiography, creative non-fiction, and autobiographical fiction. When a distinction is made, “autobiography” refers to one’s entire life story, from early life to present state of retrospection. On the other hand, “memoir” focuses on a distinct period of one’s life, or a unique experience, centering on a theme. This distinction helped me realize that I’m most interested in generating memoir and encouraging my students to do this as well. One does not need to have lived a requisite number of years to pen a memoir, and in fact, the best time to do so is when one has enough distance from the events to chronicle them with equanimity, but enough proximity to render them clearly in detail and nuance.

This distinction between memoir and autobiography helped validate my project to myself. I was still pondering the message I’d received from two colleagues at Bookshop Santa Cruz during the previous term when they’d told me I’m too young to write a memoir. Now I see that they were laboring under a different definition of memoir—something that comes towards the end of life or at least in one’s senior years. On the contrary, I’m grateful to be able to write my memoir now while I still have some access to my parents’ memories, and my own, and I only wish I’d begun this project sooner.

English 12E helped me decide the nature of my project as well as its scope. The first week of classes, Bloom assigned a topic list that I turned into an outline for my memoir. I was
able to see that only two sections might realistically be written during my sabbatical year, but I now have a plan for how to complete the full-length work. I was able to articulate the vision and set parameters for which memories I would allow into this piece. I decided the memoir would be limited by place—it would cover the period of time I lived in England (birth to age 10), and end with our immigration to Canada. I would be working out the experiences of racism and domestic violence, particularly how they impact each other, through this _bildungsroman_ as my narrator-self comes to terms with the need to develop an individual identity apart from one’s family and various communities, despite pressures to pursue community kinship over individual actualization. This focusing of my own writing project helped me choose which kind of memoirs I might want to explore for my reading and research. I decided that focusing, if possible, on _bildungsroman_ memoirs would allow me to explore the specificities of childhood and identity formation in communities that do not encourage individuation as a rite of passage in the way mainstream American society generally does. My appended term-end commentary for English 12E speaks more to the genesis and development of my own memoir project, and reveals the important place that English 12E held in my development as a writer of memoir. This appears in Appendix D.
TIMELINE

September 2011
- Opened a UCSC McHenry Library account and began to gather potential memoirs and theoretical sources
- Began course work for English 12E
- Developed an outline for my memoir, the book-length project, The End of the Common
- Wrote 10 pages of memoir for the chapter entitled “Learning My Name”

October 2011
- Developed timeline and work plan
- Decided on criteria for selection of MEMSA memoirs for annotated bibliography and wrote a brief essay about this selection process
- Created a file for memoirs not to be included in annotated bibliography
- Interviewed mother and transcribed the interview into rough notes
- Wrote 10 pages of memoir
- Recognized the need to alter the initially approved project based on the English department’s decision to stop offering English 12E (Autobiography) and began to research possible substitutions of activities and outcomes

November 2011
- Requested and received written approval from VP Instruction for alterations
- Reviewed most recent guidelines for MLA style bibliographies
- Created bibliography of multicultural memoirs, deciding to limit these to Asian American and Asian Canadian texts, and writing a reflection on this decision
- Created a timeline and order for the reading of MEMSA memoirs
- Read two memoirs and wrote annotations
- Gathered works of memoir theory / generated bibliography and reading list
- Wrote another 15 pages of memoir (approximately 3 pages / week)
December 2011

- Read a memoir and wrote an annotation
- Read 2 works of memoir theory / took notes / wrote summaries
- Wrote another 10 pages of memoir
- Perused examples of accepted annotated bibliographies in Office of Instruction

January 2012

- Read a memoir / wrote annotation
- Read 2 works of memoir theory / took notes / wrote summaries
- Wrote 10 pages of memoir

February 2012

- Read a memoir / wrote annotation
- Read 2 works of memoir theory / took notes / wrote summaries
- Wrote 10 pages of memoir
- Began to gather materials for assignments
- Began English 12F journal

March 2012

- Read a memoir / wrote annotation
- Read 2 works of memoir theory / took notes / wrote summaries
- Began writing biographical fiction for English 12F, “The Last Whistle,” my father's story of the three times he ran away from home.

April 2012

- Read a memoir / wrote annotation
- Read 2 works of memoir theory / took notes / wrote summaries
- Wrote autobiographical poetry for English 12F
- Transcribed Guli’s taped interview amounting to 18 pages of transcription
- Outlined next installment of memoir based on Guli’s flight from Uganda, entitled “Family Gathering.”
May 2012
  o Read a memoir / wrote annotation
  o Began to outline Literature Review and decide upon which theories to include.
    Came up with ten initial theories, but decided to write about the five most relevant to analysis of MEMSA memoirs
  o Gathered notes and developed ideas for my own critical framework, autogeography
  o Wrote “Family Gathering”

June 2012
  o Read a memoir / wrote annotation
  o First draft of Literature Review
  o Revisions of “Learning My Name”
  o Began draft of essay on Autogeography

July 2012
  o Read a memoir / wrote annotation
  o Revision of Literature Review
  o Revisions of “Family Gathering”
  o Continued draft of essay on Autogeography

August 2012
  o Revised annotated bibliography
  o Developed exercises to append to Literature Review to satisfy outcome of using critical models to generate autobiography
  o Drafted autobiographical assignments for composition classes
  o Completed draft of essay on Autogeography

Fall 2012
  o Drafted and assembled sabbatical report
Appendix A:
Memoir Selection Process

“Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is as if there were a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp enclosed in glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed tree, an Olive not of the East nor of the West” (Surah al Noor, The Holy Qu’ran).

Most writers, especially those who also teach creative writing, stress the importance of reading widely in one’s chosen genre as the best preparation for and deepening of one’s own writing. Although my main personal goal was to generate my own memoir during my sabbatical year, I knew that it would be my reading of choice other examples that would best prepare me and enrich the possibilities for my own writing. The question quickly became what to read, and how to frame my choices. I had the added impetus to choose selections that would be teachable to Cabrillo College students at a variety of levels.

In my sabbatical proposal, I created a preliminary bibliography and framed my choices as memoirs from the MEMSA diaspora. The term MEMSA (Middle Eastern, Muslim, South Asian) is fairly new to me, and comes to me from the legal discourse of immigration attorneys who recognize this grouping as the peoples who have been most profiled and pursued as a result of the 2001 attacks on the United States. Having myself been pulled aside at airports since this event, and seeing those being profiled alongside me, I have been able to observe the emergence of this community as unified by our common experience of being under suspicion.

Of course, the terms South Asian and Muslim include some overlap as two countries of South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh) have more than 90% of their population identify as Muslims. India, also, has had a significant Muslim population, most of whom are currently scattered in the diasporas of Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America. I am one of these Muslims.

Although we’ve always been outsiders in Christian-dominated countries, the MEMSA populations have become ever more estranged since September 11th. This was not the beginning of our negative media portrayals, for Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) had already represented our experiences as subaltern others in a seemingly hegemonic West. However, the events of 2001 and the ensuing “war on terror” created greater commonalities in the typified experiences of racism for Middle Eastern and South Asian peoples. Hindu and Muslim were finally united—not on ancestral lands that were fought over and divided in 1947, but in airports and holding cells, in the media, and in the minds of many Americans who identified common racial features as indicative of common guilt after 2001.

6 Banafsheh Akhlaghi is a San Jose immigration attorney who spoke at the 2nd annual Cabrillo College Social Justice Conference, and it was she who introduced the term MEMSA to me and the Cabrillo community.
For those MEMSA peoples scattered across multiple diasporas, the psychic layers of being othered in their country of residence is complicated by their need to escape or separate themselves from their countries of origin, often due to political unrest, direct persecution, or domestic oppression. The memoirs that emerge from this identity—torn between two evils—simplified perhaps as rejection of the east and rejection from the west, are incredibly rich and poignant. This is what I chose to write during my sabbatical year, and this is what I chose to read.

Even with the MEMSA focus, several other questions of criteria emerged. Did I want to focus solely on women’s writings, which share a common theme of grappling with patriarchal domestic and political issues? Did I want to balance the number of writings by Middle Eastern and South Asian writers? Did I want to focus only on writers of South Asian Muslim descent, such as myself? Then, there were questions of diaspora. Did I want to limit myself to writers currently residing in the United States, or would I include the rich body of writing emerging from Canada and the United Kingdom? What about the “hyphenatoids”—the children of diaspora, such as myself, whose upbringings have been shaped by parental allegiance to a traditional homeland culture, frozen in time, but whose schooling and discourse has been shaped by a western land in which we’ve been outsiders from birth? All of these identities, and the writings emerging from them, are of interest to me.

Within the confines of my sabbatical year and its time constraints, I knew I couldn’t read as widely as I wished. I decided, ultimately, to read the books that most resonate with my own experiences navigating the twinned oppressions of domestic/cultural abuse and racism. The bludgeoning to death of Shaima Alawadi in San Diego in March 2012 has helped me realize the importance of humanizing women of the MEMSA diasporas. While police are still sorting through evidence to determine whether Alawadi’s death was a “hate” crime perpetrated by an outsider, or else murder committed by a family member, I am left acutely aware of how vulnerable MEMSA women are to violence both within the family structure and from the outside culture that sees their differences (coded more explicitly than their male counterparts through their clothing and veils) antagonistically. With this in mind, I decided to lengthen my original reading list by looking for memoirs by women of Afghani origins. In light of America’s long-standing occupation of Afghanistan, and the vilifying of its inhabitants as justification for civilian rights violations, I decided that studying and going on to teach memoirs from this group would be socially useful. I ended up reading *The Storyteller’s Daughter* by Saira Shah, which I have included in my annotated bibliography.

As my own memoir began to take shape around my first ten years, I realized how memoirs that touch upon identity formation in childhood tend to reach the widest audiences. Perhaps this is because children within highly-governed families and cultures need to learn the cultural codes and navigate the norms just like a reader being thrust into a new cultural context. When the narrator is a child, we learn together. There’s also an opportunity for sharp
cultural critique when we see a narrator develop a critical eye towards her home and/or host cultures. The adult’s view may be at odds with the child’s training, and this too can provide rich layers of understanding for an audience. I decided, therefore, to look for memoirs that also fit the bildungsroman genre. Memoirs that explore domestic and cultural complexities through a child narrator, or an adult narrator revisiting the child’s perspective, might be most compelling for our students.

The following criteria thus emerged:

1. The memoir must be written (not co-written) by someone who identifies as Middle-Eastern, Muslim, and/or South Asian.
2. I would not limit my selections by gender.
3. The memoir must cover the writer’s leaving and/or returning to a place of origin, or else, grappling with a MEMSA home culture at odds with a western dominant culture.
4. The memoir must somehow address identity formation in early childhood.
5. The memoir must grapple with topics of social and linguistic displacement, and the perils of translation.

A brief explanation of each of my selections and/or my rationale for inclusion follows.

Selected Memoirs


I was excited to discover this memoir by one of the first South Asian women writers I read during my undergraduate studies. In essays I’ve read, Alexander unflinchingly examines the psychological pain of being “East” Indian in America. This memoir covers her childhood in India and her guilt around her grandfather’s death, her growing up in Sudan, and her challenges as an adult in England and America after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.


This memoir traces several generations of Kamdar’s family’s movements in the Indian diaspora and stands out for showing the family’s time in Burma and their return to India following political unrest. Kamdar’s father was also an early immigrant to the American West Coast, and the memoir presents some of the earliest challenges of the Indo-American experience in California.


Kureishi is an acclaimed Pakistani-English novelist and film-maker. Well acquainted with his films, which are notably raunchy and provocative, I was interested to see what he
could do with deeper, more self-reflective subject matter. I’m interested in the postmodern structuring of this memoir—Kureishi reflecting on his own life through his relationship to his father as he discovers his deceased father’s unpublished memoirs.


Raised in Palo Alto and educated at UCSC, Moaveni might be of interest to students as a fairly local writer. In this memoir, she explores going to Iran as an adult reporter having grown up as an Iranian American. This memoir will possibly show the perils of “going back” to be as complicated as the challenges of leaving one’s homeland.


This is a more personal second memoir for Nafisi—a follow up to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*—about an Iranian exile’s upbringing in Iran, adolescence in England, and establishment in America. It promises to examine both the tyranny of her homeland and home life during her childhood as well as the discomfitures of reconfiguring herself in the United Kingdom and then the United States.


Rachlin’s memoir covers her childhood in Iran and how she narrowly escaped an arranged marriage by attending college in the US. Her sister did not, and died tragically. Rachlin’s memoir takes us through her return to Iran to make sense of her sister’s death and reforge her identity as a woman not of the East, nor of the West.


Shah was born in London to Afghani exiles, and made a trip to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to see first-hand the lives of women and the life her parents left behind. She interviews Afghani women in Pakistani refugee camps and notes that the Afghani storytellers before her have all been men.


How could I resist the only autobiographically-leaning work of this ground-breaking postcolonial critic? From the time I first read “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as a graduate student to my conversations with Spivak at a commonwealth literature conference, I’ve been fascinated with her as a woman and a writer. This is a short memoir that appears in a magazine centered on the contributions of another feminist, but like all of Spivak’s work, it is dense and unwieldy. I imagine this short memoir is worth two full-length manuscripts by almost any other writer.

In 1991, I started my honors thesis as an undergraduate at the University of Calgary. I had just been introduced to feminist literary criticism and decided I wanted to focus on Indian women writers living outside of India. I was discouraged by most faculty—told by one, “There aren’t any;” told by another, “That’s too self-indulgent—you’ll next be wanting to read only writers with big noses.” I persisted, and I was rewarded. After reading several essays, short stories, and poems by women writers of South Asian descent, I abandoned them all and chose to devote my project to plumbing the depths of this tightly packed, lyrical memoir by Sara Suleri, a Pakistani woman teaching and writing in America. She speaks of being caught betwixt and between languages, “damm[ed] by her own discourse” (1), and in her opening pages, she gave me new ways to understand and render the unspeakable failures of translation. Re-reading this book twenty years later, I’ve wanted to see how my reading changes now that I too am a mature woman teaching and writing in America.

Vassanji, M.G. *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*. (2009).

I’ve long been interested in this writer as the only well-published Ismaili novelist I know of. As a member of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim community, I’ve grown up as a minority among minorities, well aware that we must conceal our identity from Muslims even more than from others who don’t know the implications of who we are. Vassanji, also, is secretive about his Ismaili identity, and until now, has eschewed memoir. In this long-awaited book, Vassanji takes us with him as he travels to India, the land of his grandparents, searching as he goes for his identity as an Ismaili Indian. I had to go with him.
Appendix B:
Theory Reading Log

August 2011

September 2011

October 2011
Perreault, Jeanne. *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autography*.

November 2011

December 2011
Buss, Helen M. “A Feminist Revision of New Historicism to Give Fuller Readings of Women’s Private Writing.”
hooks, bell. “writing autobiography.”

January 2012
Miller, Nancy K. “Teaching Autobiography.”
Suleri, Sara. “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition.”

February 2012

March 2012
Lai, Paul. “Autoethnography Otherwise.”

April 2012

May 2012
JOURNAL ENTRIES FROM THE FIRST WEEK OF CLASSES FOLLOWED BY POEMS SUBMITTED AT THE END OF TERM:

Wk. 1  Mon. Feb. 6

This class feels from the start very different from English 12E last semester, and I’m so glad that I decided to take this course. Advertised as an introduction to creative writing, it has drawn more of a variety of students, more representative of our general student body. The first thing I notice is how many younger students are enrolled in this course as opposed to the more middle-aged population of the memoir class. It will be useful for me to observe this younger crowd, especially which writing exercises they respond to best, when thinking about how to integrate memoir assignments into my own comp classes.

This class was mostly spent on introductory business, but one thing I noted was Barbara’s choice to begin fiction, then go to memoir, and end with poetry. She mentioned that she’s beginning with fiction because it gets to the heart of story-telling and involves techniques that may be useful for both memoir writers and poets. I agree with her. It seems that in writing their own story, inexperienced writers may dispense with craft, fearing that the use of artifice might discredit the authenticity of their work. Not so. A well-rendered memoir must tell the truth in an artful manner. We all know this from hearing how people recount anecdotes with varying success. One still needs to craft a story—even if it really happened.

The first reading assignment from Jerome Stern’s Making Shapely Fiction (1991) got straight to the business of craft. Stern begins with the premise that one must begin with some frameworks to fill, and without knowledge of these frames (or shapes), one might flounder and not truly produce a story (which is different from anecdote or explanation). As he puts it, “the shapes show you how they can become fiction” (xiii).

Stern’s shapes read as exercises with a prefatory explanation of how they work, why they work, and some examples to model what the shape may look like. The idea seems to be that if you perform the exercise, you will manufacture the shape, and from there, you can fill in the story. I suppose, this way, the story literally takes shape.

The shape he begins with is Façade. In this example, a character or narrator speaks, and in so doing, reveals certain inconsistencies or questionable points of view so that the reader wonders how trustworthy and self-knowing this narrator or character really is—thus creating immediate tension for the reader. This idea of façade is more popularly termed the unreliable narrator.

This might be useful as an exercise for English students in comp classes when it comes to assessing characters in readings. They can look for moments where the writer reveals an
assumption that the reader questions. A creative way to pursue authorial bias and assumption is to have a quick creative writing exercise where the author is written as a character expounding on a point-of-view but in a fictional context. The reader could then create a second character who responds to the first with the reader’s own point of view, either in accordance or not. This might be especially useful in the case of polarizing writers whose perspectives are difficult for students to entertain.

Of my own experience using this technique, the example that most readily springs to mind is from my play, The Party, in which the character modeled after my father is pricing goods in his grocery store and complaining to himself about the unfair litigation he is about to face:

Abu [muttering to himself as he prices chocolate bars]:
She is going to send her father to fight with me? Huh! All I said was that she should lift her frock up. I didn’t want it to get dirty. Blood everywhere. I didn’t want her to ruin her pretty clothes. I would have said the same thing to my own Mithu. Huh! These English girls. This Pauline. Talking to me like I’m her coolie. She works for me. Of course I asked her to sweep the glass. That’s the second brick that’s come through the window this week. The same window. Those ruffians just wait until I get the window fixed so they can hit it in the same place. I know they are watching right now even. So I ask Pauline to wipe up the glass. Let them see their own English girl cleaning up their mess. But she kneels down on the pieces of broken window—stupid girl. “Move,” I tell her, “Move!” But she just sits there crying. So I stand her up and her legs are bleeding this way and that. Blood is so hard to remove from white things— I know, Shiree complains all the time when she has to wash the clothes. “Lift your dress,” I’m telling Pauline. “Lift your dress!” Huh! She says she will go home and tell her father that I tried to have fun with her. I am left without a window, without a worker, [pause] and now my gun is not working . . . Blasted!
[Abu takes his pricing gun and throws it across the counter].

Wk. 1 Wed. Feb. 8

Now that the class is in full swing, I see a problem in the scheduling and format of the class. Wanting to give a good distribution of discussion, inspiration, and writing to each class meeting, Barbara has taken her standard format for a three-hour course and shrunk it to the hour and twenty minutes. If I were to teach it, I would break the three hour section in half and distribute it over the entire week. The first class, we would do some warm-up writing, discussion of texts, and end with a writing exercise. The second class, we would share our writing exercises, get into small groups and workshop our drafts, and end with a large group discussion of a presenter’s own work or that of another author. I like the idea of teaching this
class down the line. I like that it is multi-genre. I would divide it, however, into Drama, Fiction/Memoir, and Poetry. I think drama is a great vehicle for the development of fiction. 12F is the way to go until more units become available. Eligibility for English 1A remains important, I think. Also, as harsh as this sounds, I don’t think it should be repeatable. Students from here can go on to take Poetry or Fiction etc. to further develop the area they wish. This course should be an entry point, a kind of “Ellis Island” for creative writers, and its mandate should be to welcome as many as possible through its gates.

It was amazing as we did introductions today how many young people feel they have so many unfinished novels in them. I now see that they write prolifically, but little of it is very good. This, I remember, is what bothered me when I used to teach Fiction. These students need careful coaching in craft, but also exposure to great works that model what good writing should look like. Perhaps there’s a collaboration with the Reading department here.

Today’s “shape” that we explored through Stern is called “Iceberg.” It has to do with what’s brewing beneath the surface, which is where the real story resides. He writes, “What is repressed creates tension” (12). The exercise that gives shape to this form asks the writer to draft “an argument where the characters’ real feelings are not fully expressed” (12). But how do we let the reader know that there is more going on than what the character says? Stern explains, “Dialogue is not just quotation” (13). He points out that when people talk, they are also engaging in body language that speaks to what’s really going on for them. The way I see it, the character’s needs lie in all the actions they’re engaged in while talking. Add a description of their thoughts to this—an inner life—and you have immediacy and tension. Stern ends this exploration with “Conversations are like ice bergs—only the very tops are visible. Most of their weight, their mass, their meanings are under the surface. Make your reader feel the tension between what is above and what’s below, and you’ll have a story” (14).

**Tension**

“When tension and immediacy combine, the story begins” (237). There’s an itch that needs to be relieved right now. Stern adds that “In most serious fiction, although the tension is high, the conflicts are psychological and philosophical” (237). I like Stern’s astute observation that the classic conflicts as they are taught—man v. man, v. nature, v. himself—are trite and too simplistic. “Characters don’t merely face their enemies; they face themselves facing their enemies” (238). I agree that the underlying battle with the self is central to complex characters. Joyce’s Eveline must ultimately face her own ambivalence, which is more of an antagonist than her abusive father, just as Hamlet’s chief opposition lies in his own indecision rather than his uncle. In the story I’m going to write about my father, “The Last Whistle,” his central obstacle is not his abusive father but his own tentativeness about running away. He doesn’t want to run away—he wants his father to love him, and then, past a point, he wants to hurt his father and watch him suffer. This requires presence not absence.
Although the above psychological conflicts contribute to character complexity, by themselves, they are not tension. Tension is what happens in the reader. Character development, plot, evocative detail, and thematic development are all crucial to the creation of tension and investment on the part of the reader (238-9).

He ends with a word of caution about the false impulse to resolve tensions by a story’s conclusion when sometimes, it would be artificial to do so. “Some stories spoil themselves by trying to bring closure to that which can only stay open. The tension that lingers can make a story memorable” (239).

**Beginnings**

The important thing to do for the first draft is to just write the whole thing. You’ll probably find that you have more than one story going on, and when you weed out the stories you want to save for later and decide which one to tell this time, the beginning will be easier to shape (93).

I like Stern’s way of putting the need to begin the story right away. “Make readers feel the story has started. Don’t preface—plunge in” (93). I feel especially encouraged when he says that “short stories usually begin somewhere close to their endings” (94). This is true for my first story, “The Last Whistle,” as it will juggle the immediate action of Aziz on the steamer, about to depart for the end of the world, and his memories of all the other unsuccessful attempts at running away—the story begins with the first whistle and ends with the last, which is also the title, which comes first.
Flash

The photo was clearly taken twice,
both copies now stuck
beneath the thin clear plastic of my aging
baby album both of them paper thin and brittle fixed
to the page and ridged with the lines of the yellowing background.

I focus on the first,
the infant just starting to sit up
perched at the foot of her parents’ bed
legs sticking out stiff
a rag doll balanced between them
her squinting eyes glassy moist and fixed upon

At an angle behind her
The mother sits side saddle
paisley plum legs curved around the bed edge
frosted lilac lips bear a smile out of season
with the rest of her face anemic
brows thrown out of alignment
frozen that way as though
she had suffered a stroke.

The father has angled himself
behind the mother twisting
to face the camera he smiles
but only with his mouth
proud perhaps the way their bodies
stack like a staircase from bottom to top.

It was probably he
who wanted the photo retaken
deepening his smile and tightening his arm just so
around the mother’s shoulder.

How many seconds between the first and second flash?

Wanting to get it better, we nonetheless
each deepen what we’ve done:
my father, his false smile—
my mother, her arched brow—
my small self, her squinting eyes—
each of us doing the only thing we know.
Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge on Our Honeymoon

Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge on our honeymoon
I wanted to say, “Wait. Stop talking, Honey.
It’s the Golden Gate Bridge.
I’ve never crossed it before.”
But you were in the middle
of explaining your favorite Harry Chapin song
about the man who stopped singing because he didn’t like
the sound of his own voice,
so I said nothing,
and pulled out my camera
only to realize you can’t
take a picture of a bridge
once you’re on it.

Just past the bridge I turned around in my seat
still thinking to get that picture
but you cried out and I
snapped my head back to see
a mattress bungee corded to the bed
of the truck in front of us
buck its hold  bounce a few times  wrestle with the ropes binding it
then yield to a gust of wind that snatched it off the bed  flinging it through the air
perhaps a thousand crushed down feathers  inside that plastic tomb
winging their way  over the edge  into the bay
the truck keeping steady
bungee cords whipping
at its sides
and us
following
into the tunnel
that would take us
to Sausalito.
Spring Song

last spring
the chirping and chattering
just outside my window
spread to a surround sound
symphony I couldn’t place
until sound became smell

became months of silence and decay
stuffing the wall inside my closet
till a handy man
carved an opening
behind the chiffon
dresses
the polar fleece pajamas
hanging there
and out they spilled
like batteries
from an unscrewed radio
rolls of flesh and fuzz
at least a shovel’s worth
of blinding stench
scooped out

and then
the closet closed off
the roof patched over
to keep next year’s birds at bay
but careless we left
the chimney flue open
to smoke
through winter

I fear spring.
Birds I can’t see.
Their song at eye-level.
Polaroid

Smiling in the crook of Daddy’s arm,  
snug against his vanilla shirt,  
I’m only slightly longer  
than the tie that slinks down from the knot at his neck.

Perhaps I smile to be this close to his scent,  
to feel his hand tight around my thigh,  
his ring digging against the baby fat  
of my leg pressed against his chest,  
the other one wrapped around his waist.

Perhaps he smiles because it’s what one does for a camera,  
but maybe also because he is happy to be holding me smiling,  
tucked in his arm and dressed for the occasion.  
Perhaps he delights in the pressure of my hand  
against his shoulder blade.  
Confident that he can manage me in just one arm,  
he lets the other one hang limp,  
the hand not grasping my thigh  
slack and for once at rest.

Perhaps he smiled when the Polaroid took form before his eyes  
as he fanned the picture back and forth until grey film gave way to  
color, life and testimony.  
Smiled at how his tie matched his trousers, and grazed  
his belt buckle, the perfect length.  
Smiled to note that it was the one happy picture of me that day,  
the only picture of me in his arms.

I could have held that pose for longer,  
much longer than the time it took for my mother to set the flash.  
I could have held that smile for as long as he held me,  
held it because I was looking at her.
After School

*Calgary, Alberta, 1982.*

Set the table for four at six. Four circles in a square.
Sit and make patterns with rice.
Mother dials a number that announces the time and temperature,
reminds me to wear a toque.
The bed sheets stiffen against my legs like sheets of ice.
Perhaps Lisa will notice me tomorrow.

Set the table for four at six. Forks scrape against Pyrex.
Flecks of orange grease skate at the top of each bowl
left to soak in the sink. Drape clothes over bannister
so I won’t be late in the morning.
Curl up and watch the frost creep up the pane.
Perhaps Lisa will notice me tomorrow.

Set the table for four at six. Boil in the bag
Salisbury steak. Be careful with sound of knife
gainst fork tines. Leave no stains on washed dishes
upended on the metal rack.
Sweep up hairs in bathroom so no one will slip.
Perhaps Lisa will notice me tomorrow.

Set the table for four at six. Sweep crumbs of flat bread
into tiny trapezoid pan. Pre-tie my boots.
With a good running start I can slide
across the entire lagoon.
Goose bumps keep watch as I undress in the dark.
Perhaps Lisa will notice me tomorrow.

* * *

Lisa noticed me today.
Snow stuffed down the back of my ski jacket
drips down the pipe of my spine.
Ice packed into the nipple of my red wool toque
soaks my hair. *Put it on, Paki.* I do as I’m told then
run home to blow dry my clothes so no one can tell.

Four of us. At six. Our backs to the slanting
flakes that skirt our window
and melt before they hit the pavement.
Cycles

My grandmother dead since 1949
must have sat with her seven sisters
before they each left for husbands and homes of their own,
must have spoken of how their moons came and went and how to
cut the pain with a tea of black pepper, honey, and turmeric.

Sitting in the room where food was prepared,
I can imagine them biting into paan as they broke their fast
in the early morning, the minty green leaf folded into a triangle
spilling its contents of caraway, star anise, and other seeds
whose names I never learned, their tongues wrapping
around the prize betel nut buried within, to be savored
long after leaf and seed were swallowed.

Perhaps preparing the mid-day meal
they spoke freely of things I’m left to wonder about
in conversations that lasted as long as that betel nut,
its red juice staining their lips, and spraying where they spat
crimson droplets across the clay floor.

As they pulverized mung beans with mortar and pestle,
I wish I could ask them when their moons stopped rising,
if their cycles grew thick and dark like mine, the pain
unceasing. And as she sat alone in that room after each sister
had left for groom or grave, I want to ask my nanima
if bearing children makes the bleeding better or worse. How it all ends.

I don’t want to hear from the medical community, chat rooms, or countless
others I have on hand. I want to ask my own women if they felt
this way—yellow and split like the skin of a lentil
waiting to be empty.
Appendix D
English 12E Reflection

This memoir first took root about 13 years ago when I was auditing a fiction class at the California Institute of the Arts where my husband was pursuing an MFA. I found myself responding to the in-class exercises with memories from my childhood and realized that I couldn’t tell any other stories until I’d cleared my head of my own. The instructor, Janet Sternburg, responded warmly to my writing and urged me to continue with these vignettes, which she thought might follow the style of the very popular House on Mango Street. She also challenged me to consider what my book might be about. What was the real story? Why did it matter? I didn’t know except that it mattered more than anything to me that I tell it.

Some of my most exciting memories from childhood are sitting at the dining room table and hearing my father tell the stories of his life in Africa and how he ran away from home at the age of 17, stowing away on a liner bound for England without a shilling to his name nor a word of English to help him. I felt enraged by the unfairness of the father who beat him savagely, and moved deeply to imagine my father spending four days without food, sleeping on benches in Hyde Park until a sympathetic grocer offered him a stale Scotch pie, which he immediately vomited having (as a Muslim) never tasted pork. I would one day write my father’s autobiography, I promised him.

Fast-forward a decade. I was now a feminist and English major, deeply immersed in identity politics and figuring out who I was in relation to my own past as well as the family histories that had so shaped my sense of self. At that point, I realized that if I told my father’s story, it would have to be framed by my own telling, and my own story would have to figure as prominently as his. I wrote a short story of a scene from my childhood that interpolated the “Draupadi” myth my father had told me over the years, but I still had no overarching idea of how a book could take shape.

After my arrival in America, while auditing Janet Sternburg’s class at CalArts, I wrote a second short story about the death of my beloved baby-sitter, Sylvia Kempe, and an end of innocence. One line, “Sylvia lived beyond the Woodstock at the end of the common,” stood out to me for its rich possibility. I remembered how many things were posited “at the end of the common” when I was growing up on Sutton Common Road. It seemed that all things magical, exciting, and larger than the limited provincial thinking of the bigoted neighborhood I grew up in lay in wait for me “at the end of the common.” I’d found a title for my tome, though Janet insisted that I get rid of the opening preposition. I refused to budge for a decade. Of course, she was right.

I had to wait for a sabbatical year to revisit this memoir project, but I had a feeling as I wrote my proposal that the time to finally embark on this book was at hand. I had a title and a focus—I would tell the story of the first ten years of my life, growing up in Sutton and ending
with our immigration to Canada in 1980. I didn’t know yet, the differences between autobiography and memoir, and wondered if it was reasonable to focus only on my early years, but I thought of Kincaid’s *Annie John*, Jimenez’s *The Circuit*, and many other *bildungsromans*, and saw my book fitting into this genre.

In the semester before my sabbatical began, I attended a reading by Leslie Marmon Silko at Bookshop Santa Cruz promoting her new memoir, *The Turquoise Ledge*. Silko’s novel, *Ceremony*, is a favorite of mine. I was perturbed to hear her say, well into her 60’s and with the white hair to prove it, that she had not approached a memoir until now because she wanted to wait until she was old enough to have something to say. Milling about after the reading, I bumped into two colleagues, also in their 60’s or beyond, who asked about my sabbatical. When I said I was planning to write a memoir, they both started laughing and saying, “but you’re just a baby. You’re too young to write a memoir.”

I still remember the anger mingled with self-doubt that I felt at their words. “But it’s not just about me; it’s about my aging parents and my ancestors—sharing their stories before they’re lost completely.”

“Well, that’s different,” one of my colleagues admitted.

“In fact,” I added, I wish I’d written this when I first thought of it, twenty years ago . . .”

What I didn’t say aloud but added in my head was, *when I still had contact with my father and my mother had memories to help fill in the gaps in mine.*

What I will most certainly share with students when I return to teaching is not to wait to tell their stories but at least to record the details of memory now—they cannot know how precious and irreplaceable those details will be when they have fled from memory.

My sabbatical started soon after, and I would not have made the progress I have without English 12E. The very first day, I learned that memoir is sometimes distinguished from autobiography in that it reflects on a specific period of the author’s life, centered on a particular theme. I now knew what I was writing. As I sat down to outline my book, I was delighted to notice how my range of childhood memories centered around a series of events that fit together in a logical and linear fashion. I also realized the central point the book would move towards. In the end, it’s a book about the immigrant experience, and more specifically, the refugee experience. In England, we applied for visas to Canada three times. We wanted to move there because our families and communities had settled there—we might belong there too. But two of those times, even though my parents had saved £100,000 to invest in the Canadian economy, we were denied. My wealthy uncle tried sponsoring us the second time, but even that didn’t work. We had to show that we were facing some sort of persecution, we were told. We couldn’t. My book will show, without stating so directly, that we indeed faced persecution, but nothing that could “count” towards our rescue. It was only when my parents were able to furnish letters from the Sutton community extolling our virtues and begging us to stay that Canada would have us. The ironies of this will hopefully be apparent.
This will be juxtaposed with the sub-topic of what is now termed “domestic abuse.” A social worker will also decide that my sister and I should be left in our home because there’s insufficient evidence of persecution, despite my showing her signs of physical abuse. She’ll decide that whatever transpires in our home is normal for our culture and leave it at that. The book will end with our jubilant departure from England, never to return, and our hopes for a better life in Canada. This will be rendered ironic by the book that chronicles my next ten years in Canada, *Whittington’s Cat*, but that book is beyond the scope of my current sabbatical project.

For this sabbatical, I hope to produce two sections of *The End of the Common*—the section on my coming into consciousness at school, “Learning My Name”, completed in English 12E, and the section I plan to complete next term, “Family-gathering,” about the year my various maternal relatives arrived at our one-room flat having been expelled from Uganda and scattered in refugee camps across Europe. I admit that I’ve chosen this section specifically because I alluded to it in my sabbatical proposal’s preamble—knowing that the more historical and ethnic appeal of this section will draw greater interest than the musings of an English schoolgirl. I have, indeed, felt some concern about my choice of beginning with my early school experiences. I’d thought I’d write this later on, after I’d earned it, by beginning with stories that went beyond myself. What I’ve learned, however, is that I’ve got to begin with myself and get myself out of the way before I can begin to think about the others in my story. I feel it has been time well spent.

This is not to say that my writing thus far has only developed my own experiences—in doing so, it has also provided an intimate portrayal of my immediate family. In sharing some of my memories with my mother and sister in order to acquire certain details, it turns out that there is no “common,” but that my memories end with me. My mother and sister have different recollections that at times contradict my own. In other cases, my mother no longer remembers her own memories that she shared with me many times when I was growing up, and insists that I have fabricated them.

What I have realized from this has ultimately been a source of bittersweet healing. I have entitled my overall sabbatical project, which includes literary criticism, theory, as well as creative writing, *The Fabric of Memory*, for I have realized that each of our stories is woven with a thread distinctly our own. Each of us dons a life-garment of different moments sewn together to display the fabric of our unique memories of “how things happened.” And just as we will one day be entombed separately, so shall the cloth that enshrouds us be undeniably ours alone. This explains to me why my father does not remember having ever laid a hand on my mother or his daughters. He has woven together many legitimate happy memories that have obliterated the violence and dread that, to me, make up the undergarments of my youth. He didn’t see these then, and he doesn’t see them now. He cannot bear witness to what he doesn’t remember. I can forgive him for that.
Ironically, even as I feel less estranged from my immediate family for not sharing my memories, I am left with a newfound loneliness. There are no shared memories—at least, not from a long time ago. My experience of Sutton Common Road was simply my own, and if there is overlap with the memories of my sister, or the few remaining ones of my mother, they have been colored so differently that they appear unrelated. Who’s to say that anything in my mind ever happened? Every experience that I share with anyone else seems to disappear as soon as it enters “past perfect,” never to be winced at or joked over in shared agony or ecstasy again.

Despite these existential reckonings, I take heart in the following realization. If I alone bear witness to my memories, then my stories—indeed, all of our stories—are more precious for their singularity. In deciding this, I’ve come to accept that all stories based on memories are in fact autobiographical fiction—the fabric, fabrication. This is more freeing than it is distressing. My memories are subjective and indisputable. A sibling may argue that the wallpaper was never yellow, but she can’t discount that I remember yellow wallpaper. I don’t need to ask permission for my memories—and in this ultimate liberation to spin my yarns as my mind delivers them to me, I can begin to fully realize The End of the Common.
APPENDIX E
Cabrillo College Transcripts
Annotated Bibliography

Autobiographies of the MEMSA Diasporas

Cabrillo College
2011 - 2012

Presented as outcome # 1 of Geneffa Jonker’s sabbatical project and presented to the Sabbatical Leave Review Board in fall 2012. A rationale for the selection of these texts appears in Appendix A of the attached sabbatical report.
CONTENTS

The following texts are reviewed for their ethnic and cultural singularities as well as their overall contributions to the growing body of memoirs from the MEMSA\(^7\) diasporas. My annotation for each memoir offers a summary of its content while touching on its sociohistoric context, its cultural specificity, and/or its additions to the larger canon of work through its themes and primary concerns.


Vassanji, M.G. *A Place Within: Rediscovering India.* (2008).

\(^7\) MEMSA refers to peoples of Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian descent.

As much a work of poetry and theory, Alexander’s memoir is a lyrical journey that maps the development of her identity against the backdrop of shifting geographies with their attendant, and vastly discordant, religions, languages, and landscapes. Above all, Alexander traces what it is to be “woman” in a staunchly Christian home while accessing the Indian legends of her homeland, the Muslim ethos of her upbringing in Sudan, and the secular academic worlds of England and America that fracture her sense of self.

The chapters are organized to follow a traditional autobiographical model that traces Alexander’s early childhood, schooling, coming of age, early adulthood, marriage, child-bearing, and home-coming. The memoir is even bookended by familiar themes of an idyllic childhood landscape and a nostalgic bittersweet return; however, beneath the smooth surface simmer the tensions that Alexander must articulate and purge as she identifies herself as the fracture—the fault line at which opposing cultural impulses push up against each other—the stress point of highest pressure. Alexander’s memoir stands out for its self-reflexive tracking of the inarticulable pain of navigating conflicting identities that must be spoken to be lived, and that are lived to be spoken; Alexander renders the chaos of this fractured self through poetic interludes and lyrical departures from the main action.

Naming herself “a woman cracked by multiple migrations” (3), Alexander begins her memoir with the stories of her grandmother’s marriage and her mother’s, which necessitated multiple journeys away from home and into a new region, religious territory, language and culture. For Alexander, at age five, the move across the Indian Ocean to Africa signified the loss of everything she knew. She writes, “My life shattered into little bits and pieces. In my dreams, I am haunted by thoughts of a homeland I will never find” (27). The loss of her early childhood home in Kerala is punctuated by the loss of her faith in the God of her Syrian Christian family, and the understanding that she cannot return to where she was because she can never go back to who she was there.

In “Stone Eating Girl,” Alexander explores her fascination with a young urchin girl who sates her hunger by sucking on muddy rocks. Alexander devotes pages to her obsession with uncovering and manufacturing the girl’s story—the hunger strike that brought her to the streets only to find that unlike in the case of Gandhiji, no one cares if a street urchin girl goes hungry, and even less when the decision to go hungry stops being a choice. Alexander identifies with this girl, suffers a sense of injustice at the silence around her predicament, and finds herself paralyzed by a similar silence when her beloved dying grandfather cries out for a glass of water and she fails to respond. She carries guilt over this for decades, unable to explain that her inaction was a statement of rebellion against an unjust deity who could make her grandfather suffer so long before the release of death. Through this traumatic loss, she is grieving the injustice of being born into bodies that will quicken and die.

The next section that details her time in Khartoum is similarly interlaced with loss, beginning with the horrific story of her friend’s brother who was held and tortured at the Chad border, chili peppers stuffed into every orifice, and suspended under a burning light so that he was practically dead from shock after three weeks this way (91). In Khartoum, Alexander learns to grieve the injustice of being born into not only a frail human body, but that of a woman. She learns that to be a woman is to be clothed in shame, and she comments that she comes from a
strong line of “well-jumped women,” noting that so many women in her village and the surrounding regions would jump to their deaths down the family well to spare their families the dishonor of pregnancies outside of marriage. In “Language and Shame,” she adds that it was in Khartoum that she met and heard about girls who had been subject to clitoridectomy—another burden and betrayal of bearing female flesh.

Alexander’s chapters devoted to her adult years show her ensconced in academic pursuits, commencing post-secondary studies at the age of 13 and commencing doctoral work at 18. She speaks of her dissatisfaction with Romantic Poetry as a vehicle for her self-realization, and the dislocations she felt first in England and then America. She closes with her return to India with her two young children and the confrontations she has with her mother about the pressures on Indian women to marry and find their identities and passports through marriage, acknowledging that she herself fell into this pattern by marrying an American Jewish man and moving to New York. As a postcolonial oddity, whose diasporic journeys have charted a course unique from other South Asian Americans, she tells us (and herself) that she can only cope (and indeed, exist) by writing herself and her multiplicities into existence. Indeed, Alexander’s memoir stands out for its charting of a Christian Indian upbringing in South India as well as Muslim-dominated Sudan, but also for its powerful metanarratives that track and trope the coming-of-age and coming-into-identity of a daughter of the Indian diaspora.


Kamdar’s paternal grandmother, Motiba, sports tattoos that represent a source of mystery as well as embodied ethnicity that Kamdar herself is searching for. This narrative that is not merely a return-to-roots tale but one of validating and inscribing one’s ethnic identity as a person of mixed heritage. Kamdar writes, “My grandmother’s tattoos were one of the great mysteries of my childhood. Etched onto her chin, her cheeks, and her forearms were thin lines, dots, and crosses of a blackish blue-green. The marks were purely abstract. There was no pictorial element to hint at a meaning” (xi). Thus, Kamdar begins her memoir with Motiba as a symbol of not only the unknown but “mute signs of the unknowable world out of which she came” (xi).

Kamdar’s narrative includes maps and family trees, Indian poems as well as Gujarati script—all of these markers of ethnicity that authenticate her ancestry, her quest, and her narrative. She comments on her unusual makeup: “Half Indian, half Scandinavian, I am a product of geographical and cultural extremes, of a bifurcated provenance so unlikely, I often feel I could only have come into existence in twentieth-century America” (xxiii).

Motiba is the unifying force in this memoir, the figure through whom Kamdar is able to forge an Indian identity in the diaspora. Motiba is a writerly as well as written upon presence. It is her unrealized desire to return to her hometown in India before her death that prompts Kamdar to make the odyssey herself, so that Motiba’s death, which ends the narrative, is shown to be the causative force behind its beginning. Like the tattoos that frame her face, Motiba frames the author’s memoir and embodies India as a place-holder until Kamdar can seek it herself. Returning to this remote site in Gujarat, Kamdar retraces her family’s travels from Kathiawar to Rangoon, Burma to Bombay, and finally, to Los Angeles.
In particular, Kamdar’s narrative of her family’s expulsion from Burma resonates with other memoirs from the South Asian diaspora as it parallels a similar coup and expulsion of Indians from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972. This memoir, as it sympathetically traces her father’s relocations, contributes to an American reading public’s understanding of the forces that compel people to leave their homeland physically while staying rooted there psychologically.


For those of us familiar with Kureishi’s touching and humorous films from the 1980’s, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, this memoir is a departure in both form and content. Kureishi frames this memoir as a reflection on the book he wished to write, interrupted by the presence of his father, quite literally, in an unpublished manuscript that marks the father’s own literary failures and complicates Kureishi’s feelings about his own commercial success. The intrusion of parental analogs, psychologically censoring and compromising the autobiographer’s project, is not a new theme; however, in Kureishi’s memoir, this intrusion is material and literal as well as literary.

Kureishi begins with a rumination of the memoir he’d imagined—an assessment of his growth and maturation framed by his re-reading of books that were pivotal to his development as a writer several decades earlier. Interestingly, especially to a postcolonial critic, his choices are all books from the western canon. As is often the case for writers of the diaspora, the East intrudes, this time in the form of his father’s discovered manuscript, *An Indian Adolescence*. Abandoning his previously conceived project, Kureishi begins the more complicated and fraught task of integrating his experience of his late father, deceased for about 11 years by the time Kureishi reads his manuscript, and his father’s inner life—his dreams, disappointments, and frustrated literary efforts—as projected through this found piece of autobiographical fiction. This is further complicated by a second piece, *The Redundant Man*, which Kureishi Sr. had obviously decided not to complete or submit for publication, in which he reveals his bitterness towards his brother Omar, a successful writer, as well as his mixed feelings about his son’s success.

Kureishi Jr.’s memoir is framed by a green folder that lurks in the recesses of his study (and mind) for some time before he is even willing to look at it. Kureishi Jr. opens his memoir with a reference to this delay: “On the floor in a corner of my study, sticking out from under a pile of other papers, is a shabby old green folder containing a manuscript I believe will tell me a lot about my father and my own past. But ever since it was discovered I have been glancing at it, looking away, getting on with something else, thinking about it, doing nothing” (1). Kureishi reads the document quickly, forecasts his fear about where this newfound knowledge of his father will take him, and spends the rest of his memoir tracing his attempts to integrate this new version of his father. He writes, “I am shocked by how much [my father’s writing] seems to tell me, and by how much I will have to struggle with now I have stepped into this labyrinth. Will I be different when I come out? More importantly, will dad be different?” (14) It is a pivotal moment for an adult child when he arrives at the same age as the parent was during the child’s formative years. At that point, the adult child may draw parallels between his life and that of
the parent(s) who raised him. This process can result in feelings of guilt if the child has enjoyed a better life than his parent at the same age, or if the parent sacrificed his needs without receiving the acknowledgment or appreciation that a child is unequipped to provide, but which the adult child is. This is complicated by grief if the parent is no longer available to benefit from the child’s new perception, and the grieving adult child has the choice of integrating the parent into his self-concept or else being plagued by feelings of irresolution. Hanif Kureishi seeks and achieves integration, evident in his memoir’s final lines: “I slip dad’s manuscript into its green folder, place it under a pile of papers, and walk away, out of the room” (198). Kureishi is able to finally walk away from his father’s writings because he has completed the task of integrating his father’s desires and aspirations into his own psyche, and interpolated his father’s writings into his own.


As a second-generation Iranian American, Azadeh Moaveni offers a memoir unique in its narrative grounding in a contemporary Californian perspective. Growing up in Palo Alto, Moaveni’s exposure to Iran is held sacred by the diasporic community that tries to recreate the pre-revolutionary secular Iran through its Persian rituals, foods, and literature. Moaveni’s memories of a trip to Iran in early childhood, with which she begins the book, hearken to a time of belonging and reveling in tranquil gardens, free to roam about as an insider. This contrasts with her strained upbringing by a single mother in California who fears for her immersion in “westernized” culture even as she encourages her daughter to explore the cultural opportunities available to her. Moaveni is acutely aware of her fractured identity, the sense that she cannot be fully American in this country that identifies her as a foreigner, and so, she seeks instead to embrace an Iranian identity—one which she logically concludes she can uncover in the Islamic Republic.

In Iran, Moaveni quickly discovers the obvious—that she is, in fact, part-American, and this distinguishes her as an outsider in every context where she is seen, ironically, as not secular enough by some, and not Islamic enough by others. To have one’s dreams of belonging to a motherland shattered upon a visit to that place is a common, almost predictable, theme that runs through many diasporic memoirs, including this one. However, Moaveni’s memoir offers the unique (and highly entertaining) perspective of someone who is never far removed from her Californian upbringing, acting as a faithful proxy for an American reader who might very well experience similar surprises as American stereotypes about post-revolution Iranian society are challenged and unraveled.

During her time in Tehran as a 24-year-old, Moaveni finds herself less fashionable and “westernized” than the teens she spends time with who take any liberties they can get away with—lipstick, skin-tight clothing, designer labels—to excess while finding ways to evade the morality police hunting them on the streets and in the squares. Moaveni notes that these young people, none of whom identify as activists, bring about their own cultural revolution by acting “as if” it were permissible to turn the veil into an article of seduction, or stand in close proximity to a member of the opposite sex. Observing and recording all this with Californian
eyes, even though it is not until the latter part of the memoir that she recognizes her specifically American gaze, Moaveni registers an Iran that American readers would likely perceive the way she does. This alignment of perspective between narrator and reader creates a specular intimacy that allows for deeper insight into the devastation of Iran and the callous misjudgments of the West.

Moaveni’s memoir is full of seemingly light-hearted, ironic humor, for instance, when she wonders whether she should retrieve the veil that has slipped off her head or avoid a collision as she attempts a U-turn against four lanes of oncoming traffic. An amused Iranian onlooker calls out, “Khanoum (lady), you’ve lost your Islam!” (79), a comic bit that lightens the darker realities of Moaveni’s experience—her bi-weekly interrogations by the thought police, the assault and battery she experiences with a fellow female journalist fleeing a town square where they had gathered with thousands of Iranians (including children) to celebrate a football victory, and the ominous moaning that comes from a neighboring house, said to be a venue for government-sanctioned torture.

Following the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, and the resulting American identification of Iran as part of an Axis of Evil, Moaveni realizes that she is no longer safe in Tehran and returns to America, only to realize that the Iranian identity she sought to acquire in such earnest while in Tehran was only visible upon her return to the United States. Once again applying the discourse that emerges from western identity politics, she notes, “I would perpetually exist in each world feeling the tug of the other. The yearning, which I must embrace and stop assaulting, was a perpetual reminder of the truth, that I was whole, but composed of both” (243).

Caught betwixt two worlds, though perhaps more fully of and from America than other Iranian-American memoirists (most of whom are naturalized, foreign-born Americans), Moaveni joins her compatriots in a common literary device of delving into Persian legends for cultural insight. Moaveni closes her memoir with a re-telling of Farid Ud-din Attar’s The Conference of the Birds. Moaveni explains that a flock of birds were summoned to undertake a perilous journey to reach their mystical king, the Simorgh. At the journey’s end, the guide turns to them and tells them that they themselves are the Simorgh, which in Farsi, translates as “thirty birds,” their number. “The goal of their journey, which they had imagined as a quest for their king, was actually their quest for self” (245). This fresh take on a familiar theme is offered in a moving epiphany where Moaveni realizes not only “that the search for home, for Iran, had taken me not to a place but back to myself,” but that the best of Iran continues in its externally scattered and internally fragmented people.


This is Nafisi’s second memoir, and a follow-up to Reading Lolita in Tehran, her critically acclaimed first memoir about teaching banned western books under cover to ten Iranian college girls who unveiled themselves weekly at her home at great personal risk. Her second memoir is far broader in scope: it begins with her earliest childhood memories in Tehran as the daughter of prominent parents who went on to hold office during the Pahlavi dynasty; from there it traces her evolution as a scholar and reactionary who left
Tehran following her father’s imprisonment and became politically active in America. This sets a context for her return to Tehran as a literature professor who is expelled for not wearing the veil, and her subsequent radical act of sharing banned books with students in her own home. This second memoir helps us understand the reason behind her actions in the first. She was honoring her father’s legacy, and this more intimate memoir shows how she affiliated with her father who was the supreme storyteller and colluded with him against her cold, punitive mother who favored social respect over personal integrity.

As the title of this memoir suggests, Nafisi is interested in breaking long-held silences, but she also theorizes about the signifying space of silence. Her mother, an antagonistic presence in this memoir, claimed to maintain silence about her painful past, but would draw attention to her silence so that it hung in the air with its own oppressive weight. Other times, she would preface repetitive tirades against her husband with a statement that she had never spoken of this before. Thus, Nafisi’s mother claimed to be silent as a rhetorical gesture to lend weight to her speech. This is foregrounded so that, bit by bit, as Nafisi breaks her own silence about sexual abuse as a young girl at the hands of a lecherous family friend, one whom she found repulsive but whom her mother foisted upon her, we see her in sharp contrast to her mother who maintains all the wrong silences.

Nafisi’s father, on the other hand, observed a silence that she grows to see as just as damaging as her mother’s as he sets his daughter up to facilitate and cover up his extra-marital affairs, maintaining the deception of being a happily-married family man who went on to become the mayor of Tehran under the Shah’s regime. At the time, Nafisi saw her father as noble and true, willing to stand up for principles he believed in. For example, he was imprisoned for four years by the Shah for his leniency towards rebel youth and religious protestors. In contrast, the mother, who held a seat in parliament, did not face any prosecutions either from the Shah or from Khomeini after the transfer of power because of her willingness to sell out both sides to the other.

Nafisi’s memoir stands out for its intimate portrayal of the effects of political life on the children within a political family. That the political arena is revolution-torn Iran heightens the drama for those perhaps unaware of the day-to-day tyrannies of that sociohistoric moment. Nafisi candidly reveals details about several executions and disappearances of friends and family members at that time. Nafisi skillfully interweaves the familial and the political, the traditional and the revolutionary, and of particular delight are her father’s teachings about their Zoroastrian roots through his retellings of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*. Filtered through the lens of a father telling his young daughter about her heritage, we gain a singularly intimate glimpse of a people who have fought off foreign invaders for many centuries, and the impact of Islam as a colonial force in Persia.


This memoir of the years leading up to Rachlin’s desperate flight from Iran, and her subsequent loneliness and ultimate success as an American writer, is set against the backdrop of the notorious Iranian regimes of the late 20th century. The work opens with a description of a modernized but still very patriarchal life under the Shah of Iran. Rachlin,
seeing studies abroad as the only way to avoid an arranged marriage, convinces her father to let her join her older brother studying in America, and after her installation at a Christian college for women, joins the rest of America viewing upheavals in the Middle East from the outside. Student radicals, and eventually, even the most conservative members of Rachlin’s Iranian family take to the streets in protest and support the installation of Khomeini as Ayatollah. From that point on, Rachlin’s communication with her family is all but severed as Khomeini institutes an even more despotic and insular regime based on religious extremism in opposition to the Shah’s class-based corruption. Describing her few visits back home, Rachlin renders dialogue with various family members to show the growing hopelessness of their lives, and the common sense of betrayal by Khomeini. This memoir stands out for its intimate portrayal of the negative effects of both Iranian regimes (the Pahlavi dynasty and the Ayatollah’s rule) on the country’s ordinary citizens, especially its women.

As a confessional memoir, this work also explores Rachlin’s ambivalence, bordering on antipathy, towards her mother who gave her away in infancy to Maryam—an elder sister who could not bear children. Rachlin enjoys an idyllic life with the devoutly spiritual Maryam until her father kidnaps her from Tehran when she is nine and takes her to Ahvaz to raise her in his household, presumably to find a suitable match. Rachlin is inconsolably unhappy in her father’s house where she remains estranged from her mother, but she is comforted by her elder sister, Pari, who becomes her constant companion and resource. Together, they dream of life in America where Pari plans to be an actress and Rachlin a writer. Pari, anxious to escape her father’s repressive rules, accepts a promising marriage to a Tehrani businessman who turns out to be psychologically unstable and becomes abusive. Rachlin, after coming to America, hears of Pari’s unhappiness in letters and her few visits home. Pari is bold enough to divorce her husband and move back to Ahvaz, but she must leave behind her beloved infant son, Bijan, never to see him again. About a decade later, Rachlin hears over the phone that Pari is dead having fallen down a flight of stairs, and thus begins the now established American writer’s investigation into her sister’s life, shrouded under a chador, but unveiling at each fold, the common stagnation and hopelessness that Iranian women of all stations and classes felt under Khomeini’s rigid policies.

This book is a study of loss—the author’s loss of her family, her culture, her history, and her identity as a Persian woman after coming to America, and her sister’s loss of creativity, self-expression, and ultimately, hope. Rachlin’s sister’s death cements the author’s realization that present-day Iran is not a place where creative, inventive, ambitious young women can realize their potential. At the same time, she reiterates, and even ends the book, with her growing acceptance that for these women, Iran is the only country they can ever love as home, and so they live in resignation to the circumstances of their smothered lives. In rendering her sister’s life truthfully, Rachlin experiences the loss of her sister a second time, and the book is tinged with this sadness, paradoxically recreating the very loss she seeks to remedy through writing.


This is Saira Shah’s memoir of her first trip to Afghanistan, her parental homeland, in 1986 at the age of 21 as a pseudo-journalist as well as subsequent visits spanning over fifteen years on assignment from major news networks. Although the memoir
resists an historic or didactic focus, it provides a unique glimpse at the evolution of Afghanistan’s current political system, including the long Soviet occupation, the American-funded protests by the corrupt mujahidin, and the Pushtan resistance to the mujahidin that sought to reform the country through fundamentalist Islamic rule.

This memoir is clearly meant to be a story of a place that quickly turns into the story of a people as Shah gives us a view of the long-suffering Afghani refugees in Pakistan, internally displaced people, and the many victims of long-standing war. For an American reader unfamiliar with Afghani history, this memoir offers a panoramic view of the long history of Afghani occupation, military rule, and gender oppression—one that pre-dates the Taliban, the loose ad-hoc student movement that a myopic political view might focus on as the sole source of that country’s suffering.

Although sweeping in its scope, this memoir is not afraid to focus on the individuals caught in the land mines (both literal and figurative) of this war-torn region. With a journalist’s unflinching gaze, Shah does not shy away from describing her visit to the local morgue to identify the swollen, disfigured body of a murdered Swiss female journalist who was vocal in her criticism of the U.S. funded mujahidin, and who refused to submit to Islamic conventions for women. Shah makes much of the mutilated journalist and less of her own plight after she angers the local mujahidin by suggesting that they were selling stingers to Iran.

Similarly, Shah gives us an intimate look at the Taliban’s approach to justice and its disregard for human life. We see an inflamed public applaud the Taliban’s public spectacle during which a veiled woman saws through the throat of the man who allegedly raped her—the act stated as a sign of the Taliban’s intolerance of violence against women. We also see several chapters dedicated to the attempted rescue of three girls whom she finds traumatized and catatonic following the Taliban’s gunning down their mother in their courtyard. The girls’ father, who was away at the time, explains that the Taliban soldiers had breached their home in the middle of winter and asked the mother to leave with her children so that they could adopt the house as their quarters. When she responded by asking them where she could take her seven children in the snow, they gunned her down and proceeded to make slaves of the three eldest girls, aged nine through fifteen. Lest a western audience think that this book only showcases Taliban atrocities, Shah is most graphic in her description of the casualties in Pakistan following an explosion at an ammunition dump in Islamabad—a storage facility for the arms provided by the United States to the Pakistani resistance to distribute among the mujahidin. Shah departs from her standard narrative style at moments in this segment to render disconnected images as though through different camera angles—a snapshot of carnage with people clutching onto their own severed limbs as they bleed to death, a woman being rushed to the makeshift hospital by a news team that stores her severed limbs beneath the passenger’s seat, and a man, still conscious, impaled by an undetonated explosive.

Shah journeys to Afghanistan to find a place—the mythic garden of her father’s stories and a place where she feels she might belong better than London and Kent where she is born and raised. Instead, she almost freezes to death as she sets out to discover that the place of her father’s stories no longer exists, if it ever did, but that in place of her mythic homeland lingers a wandering people who claim her as one of their own—recognizing her perhaps as an Afghan for being in her own way a wanderer.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak laid a foundation for postcolonial studies with her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), arguing that those on the margins are much theorized about but seldom read for their self-inscriptions.

“If Only” is a repetition of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” but with a difference—this time she uses examples—both singular and representative—of her foremothers to illustrate her theories about the ineffectiveness of externally mandated reform. A central figure is her Boronani (mother’s paternal grandmother) who overcame much oppression only to die of shame: she could not bring herself to speak of pain in her genitals, and was diagnosed with uterine cancer only when she could no longer stand. “She was a woman of power and control—a manager of the many details of my grandfathers’ farm. Yet, it was the weight of ideology that killed her. This is why reform is not enough. We must rearrange desires.” In this short memoir, Spivak develops the idea of matrilineal legacy as repetition with a difference that makes each woman singular yet not single. She shares Boronani’s bone structure—her frame—but uses it differently and to different ends.

For Spivak, “rearranging desires” can be seen most clearly in the uses of reading and writing. She points out that in several of her foremothers’ lives, the ability to read and write did not save them from premature and tragic ends. The subaltern, if it is to really speak, must be able, not just to write, but to write herself, and in doing so, to be read in ways that can transform the world. The most compelling example, perhaps, is of her maternal grandmother’s younger sister who killed herself at 17, but waited until she was menstruating to ensure that her suicide would not be read as the typical response to an illicit pregnancy. Her name was Bhubaneshwari. According to Spivak, not only did the family at that time fail to read her radical act, so did the many readers of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where Spivak also tells this story. Playing with the idea of repetition with difference, Spivak likens Bhubaneshwari to the mythical figure of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata*, who is dragged to court by her five husbands while she is menstruating, and publicly shamed and stripped. Draupadi is said to be in her *stridharma* (woman-life), and this is crucial not just to her own shame but that of her five husbands. She is *nathavati anathavat*. Spivak proffers her own definition of this state. “Nathavati anathavat: Lorded, and yet, as if not lorded. In my reading, each time the woman menstruates, lording has misfired in the suspension of reproductive heteronormativity.”

By reading both Draupadi and her own foremother as *nathavati anathavat*, Spivak models her theory of reading women radically, as both representative and replicative. “Singularity is—repetition of difference, repetition and difference, repetition with difference. That is my relationship with these women. I am their repetition, with a difference. We are single, singular and together.” As such, Spivak jokes that this memoir is “hauntological.”

Certainly more so than in her scholarly essays, Spivak allows herself a freedom and playfulness of style in this work. Still, her memoir reads like a theoretical tract with simply more personal and fully illustrated examples than she has allowed herself (or her readers) before. She is bold to claim this style as signature when she notes the following conversation: “My agent had said—don’t make it too theoretical; this is a memoir. And sweet and wonderful Toni [Morrison] said to me—tell her it’s Gayatri Spivak’s memoir.”
This memoir by a Pakistani American Yale professor is one of the earliest published memoirs to provide a Pakistani American perspective of the separation of Pakistan and India, otherwise known as “partition.” Pakistan’s independence is necessarily interwoven with Suleri’s personal history as her father was a prominent Pakistani journalist and political advocate, and her beloved sister, Ifat, was presumably murdered by his enemies.

Each story takes on a central trope, usually of women and domesticity except for the chapter “Papa and Pakistan,” and extends this through a lyric style that interpolates layers of story within story. Suleri’s writing is so steeped in metaphor and unwieldy sentences as she slips from one trope to the next, that it is not an easy book to decode, and this is, perhaps, the point. Hers is an example of postcolonial literature that challenges the colonialist impulse to reframe the subaltern in a text and voice that is more accessible to a mainstream audience. Instead, her sentences seem almost transliterations of elegant Urdu that do not sit well on the American palate, but then, ironically, crafted by a Yale professor who is at the same time comfortably conversant in the idioms and assumptions of American culture. As she states in one of her more accessible sentences, she is “damned by [her] own discourse, and doubly damned” (1) because she begins her book announcing the impossibility of translation—whether it be the secret language of domestic duty among Pakistani women, or the inscrutable patterns of an Islamic landscape.

In addition to tracing the linguistic perils of translation, Suleri joins other feminist writers by finding creative metaphors in women’s domestic lives. For instance, early on she tropes the need to lay her subject down (on the page) and ready it for an audience as the act of chasing after a wayward toddler and attempting to change its clothing. It’s not unorthodox (anymore) to write about women’s chores, but it is still rather unusual to use these as tropes for the universal and the literary.

Perhaps the most radical feature of Suleri’s memoir is its organization. It is organized episodically to read as a series of disconnected stories about the same characters, rendered in the seemingly random order of memory rather than chronology. Her characters’ pivotal moments occur in chapters not dedicated to them. For example, her beloved elder sister, Ifat, dies in the chapter “Papa and Pakistan,” and is dead in our minds by the time we come to her chapter, which centers around her giving birth, so that the chapter about Ifat as a vital presence in young Sara’s life is steeped in loss. This intrusion of characters upon each other’s stories at once references the interconnectedness of their lives as well as the idea that life and death happen while we’re busy doing other things.

This memoir establishes a new identity for a familiar voice in the canon of South Asian Canadian memoir. M.G. Vassanji is the award-winning author of several novels including, *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1996), but until now he has been content to obscure his Khoja identity behind the mask of his two initials. The
Khojas are a highly secretive subset of Shia Muslims from Gujarat, as Vassanji explains in his glossary, “a Gujarati ethnic-religious group with elements of both Ismailism and Vaishnavism” (425). This may be the first Khoja Canadian memoir, and as such, it lays the ground for articulating a Khoja experience that may seed more self-narratives from the Khoja (Ismaili) community in Canada, including my own. Interestingly, Khoja is not the preferred term for our sect, but rather, Ismaili. Khoja is generally considered a pejorative among our group and other Gujaratis. By reclaiming the label Khoja, Vassanji expertly avoids backlash for exposing this deeply private, protective group while illuminating our true roots in Hinduism as well as Islam.

Vassanji’s placement as a Khoja between these two warring religions is no footnote, but rather, informs his experience throughout his journey by train from the southern tip of India to Gujarat, in the north. Following the format of standard travel writing, Vassanji provides descriptions and several photographs of notable shrines and tourist sites, but he also writes a history that he is constantly reading for clues about his own identity as a South Asian Canadian born and raised in East Africa. Increasingly disturbed by the escalating violence between Hindus and Muslims that he reads about in the Bombay newspaper, he begins interpolating these news stories into the text of his memoir, letting the horrific incidents of torture and carnage enter through the voice of external reportage. Acknowledging that (as a Khoja) he has rejected neither Hinduism nor Islam, Vassanji does not personalize the conflicts through religious affiliation, but he expresses deep disappointment to find his ancestral homeland, Gujarat—birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi—to be the breeding ground for the worst atrocities he hears about and encounters during his time there.

The violence is tempered by the small intimacies and kindnesses Indians bestow on him, especially in Gujarat where he is greeted as family. Vassanji finds hope and connection among those who take him in, but even more so, in the myths that permeate each locale. Vassanji uses this memoir to crack open the violent history of India—of the conquering Mughals that conquer Gujarat from Afghanistan and move south from there. In the centuries of treachery and betrayal between the old world Rajas and the conquering Mughals, Vassanji is able to understand if not accept the current climate of violence, and in presenting these myths through the vehicle of his memoir, he attempts to understand the human impulses that prompt the invasions and conquest, perhaps coaxing his readers to approach both the history and current manifestations of violence with the same unbiased curiosities.

Styling his memoir *A Place Within*, Vassanji is by no means immune to the violence, wondering how he would figure within it had his ancestors remained there. He wonders, “If my family had stayed here, what would I have become, a victim or a thug? (38) By the end of his travels, he knows only that he must return to India many more times with these same unanswered questions, holding the questions and answers (and place) within.
GENEFFA POPATIA JONKER

Multicultural Bibliography
Asian North American Autobiographies

Cabrillo College
2011 - 2012

In memory of our colleague, Jeff Tagami,
whose name would surely have graced this list.

Prepared as Outcome # 2 of Geneffa Jonker’s sabbatical project and presented to the Sabbatical Leave Review Board in fall 2012. A rationale for the choice of Asian North American autobiographies appears in the attached sabbatical report.
Asian American Memoir Compilations


Chinese American Memoirs


**Chinese Canadian Memoirs**


Filipino American Memoirs


Japanese American Memoirs


**Japanese Canadian Memoirs**


**Korean American Memoirs**


**Thai American Memoirs**


**Vietnamese American Memoirs**


Literature Review
Critical Frameworks for Contemporary Memoirs

Cabrillo College
2011 – 2012

Prepared as Outcome # 3 of Geneffa Jonker’s sabbatical project and presented to the Sabbatical Leave Review Board in fall 2012.
CONTENTS

Overview

Critical Frameworks

  Postmodern

  Feminist

  Postcolonial

  Diasporic

  Counter-ethnographic

Appendix A: Writing Exercises

Works Cited
Overview

While priding ourselves on being the barnyard cousins of Ivory Tower practitioners, with all the attendant assumptions about accessibility and applicability, those of us who teach English studies at the community college level may find ourselves performing a disservice to our students, and the texts we teach them, by not presenting the most recent theories and critical models available in our discipline. This has certainly been the case with me, particularly in my basic skills classes, and especially in the teaching of reading and writing autobiography where critical models emerging from interdisciplinary and semiotic theories (postmodern, poststructuralist) and identity politics (feminist, postcolonial) could hold much liberatory power for identity formation in the populations we teach.

Apparently, I am not alone in eschewing more recent models for teaching memoir. A perfunctory online search of curricula and texts used to teach this mode of writing to community college students is limited to explorations of craft. Memoir writing classes at the community college level are rare, and decreasing in number in California since sweeping budget cuts have decimated many writing programs. When autobiography is taught, it is most likely as a literature selection in composition classes. While advanced composition classes may include theoretical texts for reframing traditional autobiography vis-à-vis the new confessional memoir, basic literature-based composition classes may be less likely to include such texts and theories.

When I taught Anderson Cooper’s Dispatches From the Edge in both English 255 and English 2, the most preliminary and advanced compositions classes in my English program respectively, I concentrated on thematic readings, borrowing New Critical reading practices that I had acquired in my own high school education during the 1980’s. When I did provide more college-level analysis, I found myself lacking the pedagogy to present complex theoretical material to new readers. One may wonder how important a concern this is since many of our students taking English at the community college level may not go on to further studies that would utilize the language and ideas emerging from social and literary theory. The answer to this lies in the autobiographical subjects.

With the controversies surrounding the recent banning of multi-ethnic literature from the Tuscan Unified School District’s curriculum, it becomes more important than ever that we offer rich opportunities for such studies in California. A great social loss that accompanies the banning of literatures by diverse groups is not so much the loss of literary works that could broaden our canon, but the loss of insight into the life stories of immigrants and others who are under/misrepresented in mainstream cultural production. Writing that reveals the true experiences of such peoples can humanize them to students who are not offered such well-rounded, complex representations in mainstream media. Most movingly, when a student from an underrepresented group sees him or herself for the first time portrayed with a full complexity that comes closer to his or her self-experience, he or she is finally given the
unparalleled experience of really seeing the self, and seeing the self being seen. For many of us, this is when we start to feel our relevance, and begin to enjoy the inestimable value of inclusion.

However, it is not enough merely to teach the writings of marginalized, under misrepresented people, but to do so within critical frameworks that allow the writing to speak with the fullest identity possible, making the greatest cultural impact. Deep damage can be done when outdated reading models are applied to memoirs emerging from recent history—memoirs that present the working class, the postcolonial, the diasporic, displaced or otherwise subaltern subject.8

Memoir theory has been a fast-growing field of study since the latter half of the twentieth century, especially taken up by feminist and postcolonial literary theorists and critics. These literary critics have proposed radical revisionary readings of the life writings of subaltern, displaced, or otherwise marginalized peoples, looking at how such writings have prompted new views of history and types of social analysis. If we could adapt their theories for basic skills and freshman composition students, these texts might lend more precise language and context not only to students’ own complex identities, but the complicated subjectivities demonstrated in the ethnically diverse works we assign them with the intention of increasing global awareness.9

One obvious reason we may be reluctant to introduce complicated reading strategies at the pre-collegiate level is fear of doing disservice to a theory by reducing it to such bare terms that it becomes too porous a structure to be useful. It is indeed a danger to reduce complexity, but perhaps more so to dismiss it. Mightn’t there be a way to enhance students’ awareness of multiple ways of seeing / reading by presenting them with theoretically-grounded reading models that familiarize them with current or recent theories of identity politics? Such models might help them understand the discursive risks taken by subaltern writers, and perhaps, through identification with the struggle to speak one’s subjectivity, (or as is the case with many of our basic skills students, write at all), embolden them to see themselves as writers while making more personal and political connections with the text.

So far, I have used model and framework interchangeably, but we must consider that these metaphors suggest different relationships between reader and text. A model lends itself to mimesis and performs the superior reading to which the student can aspire. A framework

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8 I will not forget the graduate course I took entitled Women of Colour / Colourful Women in the Commonwealth in spring 1994 at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. A particularly problematic reading that stands out in my memory is when the professor argued that an African woman straightening her hair for a beauty pageant in the first story of Ama Ata Aidoo’s No Sweetness Here was doing so to symbolize that she’d made peace with European colonialism.

9 Global awareness is the third competency of the core four student learning outcomes Cabrillo College developed in response to community and accreditation needs. See Cabrillo College website: www.cabrillo.edu
holds the text, supports and scaffolds it, but perhaps always seeks, on some level, to contain it. Given that the subaltern subject may be performing an exodus from oppressive external control or entrapment (what I call, flee-bargaining) through her/his memoir, the idea of an externally-imposed framework may feel too limiting to be liberating. However, a framework can be rendered more flexible by allowing itself to be reconstituted through multiple texts, yet repeated as a unifying principle for students in need of schema-building.

I have designed five such critical frameworks, drawn from contemporary theoretical discourse and criticism, to be adapted for varying levels of college and appetites for critical engagement. In some cases, as with postmodernism, I am borrowing reading strategies whole cloth from a pre-existing critical arena and applying them to contemporary memoir. Other frameworks I construct—feminist, postcolonial, diasporic—draw from social movements that have spawned extensive bodies of literary theory and criticism, and from which I focus the critical lens on concepts most useful for pedagogical purposes of reading and writing memoir. For my final framework, I have coined the term counter-ethnographic to describe reading practices of particular pertinence to memoirs emerging from the most current iterations of identity and self-representation.

I present these models in the section that follows with an eye to organizing them according to their departure from dominant reading traditions though it is with some surprise and irony that I find myself placing postmodernism at the center as the least revolutionary practice. (Perhaps it is my focus on the radical reading act of politicizing the subject that directs this placement). Nonetheless, I proffer these frameworks with the understanding that they are not prescriptive of an order of critical approaches, but rather, an imbricated reading practice that might mix models and intertwine approaches to complicate our readings of recent memoirs. I begin with a postmodern framework because it is the most textually-bound of the reading strategies, and as such, is the simplest to impose. From there, I move to a feminist framework, acknowledging that feminist social and political movements have generated the fertile ground for most of the subsequent reading models that draw upon feminist literary theory’s identification of the complex subject positions that inform and over-write subaltern writers who are largely unrecognized, and un-authorized, within dominant writing traditions.

Emerging from feminist frameworks, models for reading postcolonial as well as diasporic texts complicate our understandings of the ways self-representations by subaltern writers are read, reiterated, and radicalized. My presentation of counter-ethnography, a term I coin from my readings of the resistant critical models proposed in Asian Canadian Writing: Beyond Autoethnography reflects my desire to offer students new ways of identifying the resistant, dis-organizing impulses in memoirs labeled ethnic and assumed representative. While postcolonial theory has lent itself to allegorizing the postcolonial subject, and in so doing, obscuring the very specificities of postcolonial identity that the subject wishes to inscribe as part of the resistant, writing act, diasporic and counter-ethnographic frameworks take us back to the writing subject
as the primary body of study, not to further colonize the writer but to acknowledge how autobiography provides insight into the writing project as historically situated and culturally specific.

I have assembled each critical framework through my reading of texts from multiple disciplines, offering selections here of works that, to my mind, most clearly and economically chart the territory—dense for their incorporation of prior works that inform their views. My choices may not be immediately obvious, but should ultimately communicate an accessible, if sometimes dramatically simplified, theory for and about reading contemporary memoirs. Some of the works are book-length, others are articles developed for conferences or anthologies that will hopefully be expanded into longer works that will add more body to developing areas of criticism. Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, a compilation of such articles by the foremothers of new autobiographical theory, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, provided a rich source for many of my materials.

My overarching line of inquiry has been to see if and how the works I have selected lend themselves to reading and writing instruction by promoting intercultural insight and global awareness among students trained in mainstream reading models. It is my intention that my own organization and classification of these works will be of value to other instructors as well as myself as we strive to read, not only closely, but more carefully, ethnically-diverse memoirs while developing greater confidence to teach these literatures for their power to transform our students’ understanding of both local and global patterns of cultural exchange.

It is with this impulse towards currency that I am limiting my study to theoretical texts published after 1995. It may be argued that I am delving too far back; indeed, much has changed in the ways memoirs are being read, written, and defined since September 11, 2001, especially for the memoirs of my focus; however, I did not want to ignore the valuable prior work done in feminist and postcolonial studies that continues to be of relevance. Since my own memoir production and study has focused on the MEMSA\textsuperscript{10} population, I draw upon these memoirs to scaffold my readers’ understandings of the applicability of the critical frameworks in this literature review. Why then does my subtitle reference contemporary memoirs? It is my hope that the frameworks I suggest will be found applicable to a broader range of memoirs written in the tradition of the new generation of autobiographies that, to quote Leigh Gilmore, “[are] now dominated by the young, or at least youngish, in memoir’s terms, whose private lives are emblematic of a cultural moment” (1). Perhaps my own revisionist project is to

\textsuperscript{10} MEMSA refers to the coalitions formed by and for peoples identifying (and identified) as Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian, especially after September 11, 2001, to address incidents of racial profiling and discrimination levied against them. The term was brought publicly to Cabrillo College by Banafsheh Akhlaghi, founder and president of the National Legal Sanctuary for Community Advancement (NLSCA), formed to protect and advocate for the MEMSA populations; Akhlaghi was the keynote speaker at the college’s 2007 Social Justice Conference.
assume the universal applicability of the ethnic memoir, thus inscribing it with a relevance historically granted primarily to autobiographers situated within dominant groups.

Postmodern

In “The Postmodern Memoir,” his recent article for The Writer’s Chronicle (March/April 2012), Hugh Ryan presents contemporary memoir as the genre most likely to sustain postmodernism’s applicability in the face of its flagging relevance as a reactionary reading strategy. He points out that at its most potent, it was battling Modernism. “Now it has become the dominant force, and with nothing to rage against, it seems useless. A genre designed to take things apart cannot stand alone” (82). As a totalizing discourse, designed of course, to question and dismantle totalizing discourses, postmodernism perhaps never designed itself to be carried forward to a point of consolidation and entrenchment. Nevertheless, Ryan notes three examples of what might be considered postmodern impulses in contemporary memoir, arguing that though it may have been replaced by more grounded exchanges of meaning in literary genres, “postmodernism still has relevance within non-fiction, particularly memoir (82).

The three impulses, or what Ryan calls techniques, he notes as particularly postmodern and practiced in memoir are (1) switching from a first-person point of view to second or third; (2) creating a non-linear structure; and (3) openly using fiction within memoir. He selects different texts to exemplify moments of these techniques, thereby suggesting that these features are hardly intended as criteria for classification but rather, tendencies to be traced. Ryan theorizes that the switching of point of view is driven by “alienation from the self” (76), thus destabilizing modernist priorities of “self” and “individual” with postmodernism’s foregrounding of a flexible, mutable, and often unreliable self. He chooses Joan Wickersham’s The Suicide Index: Putting My Father’s Death in Order, which at a critical juncture employs the second person, and Holy Land, A Suburban Memoir by DJ Waldie that “[t]ells a story through absence” (77).

To exemplify non-linear structure, Ryan explores Ann Marlowe’s How to Stop Time: Heroin from A to Z, which uses the alphabet as an arbitrary organizing tool, and lends her memoir an encyclopedic quality, eschewing the chronological tellings of traditional autobiography. He likens Marlowe’s text to Amy Krouse Rosenthal’s similarly organized, but much more playful, Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life. Finally, he presents the use of fiction, self-consciously, within memoir as a way to create doubt in the reader. Noting that “[u]nreliability is a central part of living” (81), he cites Nick Flynn’s Another Bullshit Night in Suck City, in which “doubt is central to the story” (80). Laren Slater’s Lying is his other, even more obvious, example of this technique, for Slater herself, after describing her severe bouts of epilepsy as a child, adds “that epileptics often have trouble distinguishing truth from fiction, or they use lies as a way of making their truth more expressible” (81). In her afterword, she steps outside her fictional non-fiction to create another, possibly more (or less) reliable, negotiation of truth with
the reader when she states, “In Lying I have written a book in which in some cases I cannot and in other cases I will not say the facts” (81).

Postmodernism then, according to Ryan, is a natural vehicle for memoir’s necessary uncertainties. I would suggest that memoirs written by displaced and diasporic persons might intensify these techniques—finding in them the only discursive tools with which to encode anxieties around the traumas of inter-ethnic violence and war where competing truths seemingly sanction life-or-death events. The pivotal violent experience in Afghani descendent Saira Shah’s The Storyteller’s Daughter utilizes all three of Ryan’s identifying techniques.

Shah writes about how the horror of watching the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 triggering her suppressed traumatic memories of the carnage she materially witnessed an explosion at the Ojri military camp in Pakistan—the site of “many of the weapons that the U.S.A. had given Pakistan to distribute to the Afghan mujahidin” (196). True to the self-reflexive tendencies of both contemporary memoir and postmodernism, Shah foregrounds the slippage between events: “But I am not weeping entirely for the people waving from the window of the World Trade Center, because none of us suffers in a vacuum; because experience comes in cycles. Then images rush into my mind, of things I have spent years trying to forget” (194).

Shah immediately goes into her disjointed, experiential telling:

Smell: cordite and blood. Sound: a rushing noise—maybe blood in my ears—maybe the swooping of shells. Feet running? It is hard not to project, the mind tries to fill in the gaps. Sight: a shell plunges nose down, embeds itself in the road, quivers there like a dart. Tarmac melts, enfolds it like an envelope. Sparks fly out of its nose, a daytime firework. I stand and watch it, numb. Surely it is fizzing, but on my tape it is mute. A woman runs by, and her mouth is moving. She is shouting, but I can’t hear her. (194)

The above departure from traditional narrative demonstrates two of Ryan’s postmodern techniques. First, it presents a movement away from first-person narrative, not to locate perspective in another, but to mimic the dissociation experienced by the person in a crisis. Sights and sounds are present but not owned—too unruly and terrifying to claim. “Feet running?” she asks. It is not clear whose feet are running, nor if there are in fact any. She is volunteering a list of possibilities for the “rushing noise,” and writes herself as an interpreting reader rather than a knowledgeable author and former experiencer of this sensation. In the above section, Shah also demonstrates Ryan’s third technique of destabilizing the truth and insisting upon memoir as fiction when she admits, “It is hard not to project, the mind tries to fill in the gaps” (194).

Shah is arguably moving into a non-linear structure, Ryan’s second technique, when she writes of the fragmented and chaotic nature of her memory of this crisis:
When I see, there is silence; when I smell, I am deaf; when I hear, I am blind. In my memory, the evidence of my senses is stored on different tapes. They contradict each other—random, out-of-sync scenes from a movie. Nothing is connected. (194)

Shah is providing a distinctly postmodern rendering of the chaotic nature of trauma, both as experienced and remembered, couched in psychological terms as the disorganized, dis-(as opposed to re-)membered moment that precedes integration. Her very organs of sensation act out of order and outside of expectation; they are irreconcilable in that the raw data is “stored on different tapes.”

Shah continues the trope of being outside her own experience by imaging it as a camera angle. It is in seeing it, however, that she is able to integrate sight and sound.

Point-of-view shot, looking up. The air is full of spears. Their tips glisten like raindrops. They fall in an arc, towards me, graceful.
The overpowering smell of blood.
It is noisy: firecracker noisy. Somebody, in the darkness, is screaming.
I am standing on a road in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. On the kerb beside me squats an old woman. Shells rain softly down around her” (194).

This section that closes the vignette and moves into narrative proper shows us reintegration, and yet, it still achieves narrative distancing at its most terrifying. She is standing next to a woman, but she writes the shells as raining down around the other woman, not herself, perhaps because in the moment, she sees and experiences it this way.

In these above examples of postmodern techniques, Shah is narrativizing not so much the unknowable, but the untranslatable, but the danger, as Ryan notes in general, lies in “losing all authority and being disregarded” (75). Without a context to establish the logic and truthfulness of rendering trauma as an incoherent experience, thus authenticating it, a text can be destabilized, its authority weakened. Ryan elaborates that “the postmodern memoir experientially creates in the reader a conscious resistance to the narrative which replicates the author’s own ambivalence towards the possibility of orderly narratives in life” (75). This is problematic when reader becomes interlocutor, performing (if not carrying through his or her own dominant subjectivity) the dominant discourse’s dismissal of narratives that challenge its established beliefs and defenses. Postmodern reading strategies can be problematic if depoliticized, but useful for opening up textual practices if coupled with an awareness of how conditions of subalternity or trauma necessitate fragmented tellings of lived experience that the author often writes in order to integrate through the writing process. As such the fragmentation should be viewed as part of the writing and interpretive process, and not indicative of deception or doubt about the reality of experience. This can be artfully achieved when a postmodern critical framework is interlaced with critical discourse from arenas concerned with rendering and recuperating the writing subject.
Feminist

Perhaps no project is more fraught with doubt for the literary critic than one that seeks to find representative feminist texts—either literary or theoretical—given feminist scholarship’s defiance of the limiting assumptions of representation and synecdoche. Indeed, there is seemingly no limit (nor should there be) to the theoretical and critical texts available for broadening our understandings of women’s memoirs. Not all of these texts are useful for readings of MEMSA autobiographies, but many are. When presenting feminist texts within an English class not otherwise focused around feminist scholarship, it is wise to present at least two texts, and to present them diacritically, to foreground for students feminist ontologies of community and epistemologies of difference. To this end, I have selected to build my feminist framework from two texts that together provide a theoretical basis and a critical practice for reading women’s memoirs.

Jeanne Perrault’s seminal work on women’s autobiography, *Writing Selves*, is a robust exploration of the multiple impulses and controls that inform women’s work of writing themselves into place—a liberatory place previously denied within patriarchal structures—and into existence—an identity that can be held up for self-scrutiny, reiterated, and most importantly, revised. Perreault’s work, once explicated with and for the beginning college reader, is particularly useful for its insistence that just as there are multiple reading practices that might be applied to women’s texts, there are multiple subjects (and objections, objectifications) to be identified and allowed to interface in women’s self-writing. This revises the unifying understanding of the traditionally male subject of autobiography and allows female subjects, with all their overdetermined, prescribed, and ultimately chosen disclosures of self to complicate the text.

While it is not possible to address the density and extent of Perreault’s theoretical work in the confines of this brief review, it is nonetheless useful to examine her definition of autography as a simplified and summary explanation of feminist reading strategy that might open up new modes of thinking for our students. Perreault writes:

> In referring to the texts of significant contemporary feminist writers as “autographies,” I am naming a kind of writing that can and should be identified in order to foreground the suggestive and flexible processes of both *autos* and *graphia*. . . . In autography, I find a writing whose effect is to bring into being a “self” that the writer names “I,” but whose parameters and boundaries resist the monadic. (2)

As we read, and especially teach, memoirs from groups that are currently filtered through static and unflattering media representations, this understanding of a selfhood that resists externally-imposed boundaries and singular iterations (are you this or that?) encourages our students (and ourselves) to move away from totalizing discourses and reductionist interpretations of others (and ourselves).
Moreover, Perreault’s emphasis on writing selves provides both metacognitive possibilities for our students (one can reflect upon one’s writing as both process and product) and promotes empowering (revisionary) understandings of women (and subaltern others) as writing rather than written subjects. Her “focus is on the texts that explicitly make the process of being a self contiguous with the inscription of selfhood” (2), and as such, her work foregrounds the precarious work of women writers to proclaim, exclaim, and through this process, claim identity and visibility. Put simply, we know feminism through the “she’s” who make her up, and they know themselves through the process of making “their selves” up—thus knowledge of self and other, not to constrict or stabilize, but to visibilize, is the agenda behind a feminist framework, thus modifying the conclusions of postmodernism’s focus on fragmentation while utilizing its awareness of textual anxieties.

While Perreault spends chapters of analysis on works by Adrienne Rich, Kate Millett, and Patricia Williams, her use of Audre Lorde’s memoir, The Cancer Journals\(^{11}\), to frame her exploration of the embodied, over- and mis-represented speaking self is perhaps most suggestive. Perreault quotes Lorde following her mastectomy: “I am who the world and I have never seen before,” and adds, “In this assertion, Lorde is allied with ‘the world’ as specularizer gazing at the unfamiliar external self, and is simultaneously reconstructing a self who is a recipient of the gaze” (20). Perreault’s language for understanding Lorde’s subjectivity as both spectator and spectacle are useful framings of Lorde’s own articulation of a doubled and dualistic subjectivity. As such, the theoretical work seeks not to displace but dialogue with the autographical one.

We see a similar interplay of theory and autography in the brief but dense memoir essay of renown postcolonial feminist theorist, Gayatri Spivak. In “If Only,” Spivak interweaves and unravels the stories of her foremothers to understand how she adds to their stories as variation on a theme. She explains her relationship with these women: “I am their repetition, with a difference. We are single, singular and together” (S&F Online). For each of the forewomen whose story she narrativizes, Spivak is certain to foreground her reading as well as her writing of them, to ensure that the reader is left with no question as to their significance. In doing this, she slips between autographer and theorist, going so far as to correct her reading public for not granting adequate visibility (that is, denying subjectivity) to the forewoman whose story she first told in her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She also follows up her story of Barahini, her great grandmother’s story as it relates to her own with the question and observation, “Is Barahini representative? Most of us, writing memoirs, looking back to the past,

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11 Lorde’s memoir includes her ground-breaking speech, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” which is quite teachable at the community college level. In fact, I have had success teaching this work to basic skills students in high-risk learning communities who have been very moved and inspired by Lorde’s courage and call to (language as) action.
make them representative. They become evidence in a kind of social record. But is she representative? Is she at least representative of a narrative of class mobility?"

Spivak doesn’t ask, but perhaps implies, the question, is she representative of me or I of her? She further writes and theorizes issues of representation in the story of her mother’s paternal grandmother who overcame much oppression only to die of shame: she could not bring herself to speak of pain in her genitals, and was diagnosed with uterine cancer only when she could no longer stand. “She was a woman of power and control—a manager of the many details of my grandfathers’ farm. Yet, it was the weight of ideology that killed her. This is why reform is not enough. We must rearrange desires.” In this short memoir, Spivak develops the idea of matrilineal legacy as repetition with a difference that makes each woman singular yet not single. She shares Boronani’s bone structure—her frame—but uses it differently and to different ends.

Perreault’s theoretical work on the multiple selves that make up the female writing subject, the interplay of these selves in and upon each other’s writings, and the work of the literary critic (or descendent) to foreground and dialogue with the multiple writing selves evidenced in the text—the theorist, critic, and life-writer—allow us to read the literary critic’s autograph upon the text being studied. This transparency enriches our understanding of the multiple subjectivities that inform any reading praxis.

Being well advised to offer feminist theory as a dialectic rather than a single, monadic dictum, I would like to supplement Perreault’s theory with a reading strategy from Helen Buss, her colleague at the University of Calgary (my alma mater). While she has gone on to publish more comprehensive works on women’s memoir, Buss’s article, “Reading for the Doubled Discourse of American Women’s Autobiography,” as it appears in the anthology Women and Autobiography, provides a unique bifocal lens for looking at the indirect self-representations of women, demonstrating their challenges with the very act of self-representation.

Buss argues that neither formalism nor poststructuralism is adequate for understanding female autobiography. Formalist criticism values and assumes a male, traditional, hierarchical, celebration of self that doesn’t take into account material struggles for selfhood—struggles that are the very markers of coming into selfhood for women. On the other hand, poststructuralism, in dismantling the unified, coherent self, does so outside of history, and undoes the very project of feminism—establishing selfhoods for/as women (97). The inability of both formalist and poststructuralist theories to adequately (and accurately) frame women’s writing can be rectified by allowing formalism and poststructuralism to play against each other in understanding a dialectic between hyperbole and meiosis in women’s autobiography (97). While hyperbolic self-descriptions self-aggrandize, meiotic ones self-deprecate. Buss selects three autobiographies to illustrate hyperbole and meiosis as strategies that cancel each other out to leave the writer a subjectivity rendered in relief—a selfhood left standing after the molds of autobiographical self-importance and traditional female effacement fall away.
Buss selects Maya Angelou’s, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* to juxtapose self-inscribing moments of hyperbole and meiosis. Before moving into these readings, Buss explains her project in Lacanian terms where casting off the imaginary (mother) for the symbolic (father) demarcates the coming into language. Buss argues that this is a more complicated process for women. “Female autobiographers while insisting on their ‘individuality’ by the very fact of writing, cling to the world of the mother, to those qualities we ascribe to the feminine, which seem in direct opposition to those attributes of selfhood traditionally portrayed in the patterns of autobiography” (100).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou revels in images of herself in the church choir dress that will magically conjure her into the blond-haired white girl, but then loses nerve (and control of her bowels) and berates herself for being an exaggerated version of the caricatured “Negro girl” (101). Buss explains that “[t]hese extremes—an inflated self, worshiped, separate, and a self so lacking in substance, so vulnerable that it cannot hold the parts of its being together—illustrate the two versions of subjectivity that contend with one another in these autobiographies” (101).

Buss presents two similar polarized versions of the self in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Brave Orchid, the narrator’s mother, tells her she should grow up to be a wife and slave, “but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (24). The narrator is confused, but ultimately constituted, by these opposing stories. We see her moving between these two roles with some confusion as a girl, indicating that she can’t find a middle ground—the middle being center and consigned to men. For example, in response to a feeble female classmate, Kingston’s narrator takes on all the posturing traditionally ascribed to the dominant male subject-position, creating a caricature who quickly turns into a bully—pinching the girl and pulling her hair. Kingston’s response towards her own guilt for tormenting a girl like herself at school leads her to be a bed-ridden invalid (not even toileting herself) for a year and a half. Buss writes, “[t]his sense of erasure of self as preferable to the painful reality of self-conscious, ego-defined self, presents a meiotic vision of the female child about to enter puberty” (103). I would add that in punishing herself this way by playing out the role of the hyper-feminized and infantilized female subject, Kingston is embodies both traditionally male and female subjectivity—enacting a male punitive control as well as a female putative submission.

Buss shows McCarthy’s text achieving a doubled discourse through an interplay of form and content. The “mythic narrative” of her life is juxtaposed with “essaylike interchapters in which she questions not only her own perceptions of the past but argumentatively confronts the patriarchal world view in which she was raised” (101). This too can be seen as a movement between the poles of hyperbole and meiosis although there is some question as to which style of writing invokes the meiotic.
While not all women’s autobiographies necessarily perform Buss’s doubled discourse, Gayatri Spivak’s “If Only” provides a central figure who fits well into this framework. In her memoir, Spivak writes herself through, and in relation to, her foremothers. This itself might be seen as a dualistic act of hyperbole and meiosis by which the female autobiographer renders herself both more significant (through a hyperbolic inflated sense of connection with other women) and less so (through a failure to see herself standing alone). Spivak herself addresses this apparent duality as the writing of singular women who retain their singularity together: “Singularity is—repetition of difference, repetition and difference, repetition with difference. That is my relationship with these women. I am their repetition, with a difference. We are single, singular and together.”

Spivak focuses most attention on the female ancestors who, like herself, find themselves single (that is, unmarried) and achieve singular responses to this. Her mother’s aunt, Bhubaneshwari, mentioned first in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and now, in this memoir, haunts Spivak (who calls her memoir “hauntological”) for the mysteries behind the enactment of her suicide. In a hyperbolic conceit, Spivak likens Bhubaneshwari to the mythical character of Draupadi, central to the *Mahabharata*. Dragged out from an interior chamber that Indian queens retreated to during menstruation, clothed only in a single white cloth, now stained with women’s blood, Draupadi is humiliated before the court for being visible in her “feminine nature—*stridharma*” (Spivak). She is wagered away by her husbands, and in danger of being publicly stripped until Lord Krishna’s intervention, but Spivak’s text draws attention to this act as a leveling down of a woman, who in her state of *nathavati anathavat*, has brought shame to the court. Spivak defines *nathavati anathavat* as “Lorded, and yet, as if not lorded. In my reading, each time the woman menstruates, lording has misfired in the suspension of reproductive heteronormativity.”

To provide context for the reader unschooled in this Indian epic, Spivak establishes the narrative and cultural significance of Draupadi’s embodiment of *nathavati anathavat*. The entire epic of the *Mahabharata* is about this insult to Queen Draupadi, who had five husbands. And in the beginning of the *Mahabharata*, because it was an oral formulaic epic and each bard had to know the whole story—the entire story is given in the form of a young boy telling it to the blind king.

Having established (and perhaps inflated) the significance of Draupadi and her defiance of heteronormativity, Spivak draws a parallel between this mythic character and her mother’s aunt, Bhubaneshwari, who committed suicide at the age of 17. “[She] waited for her periods to begin, so she could disprove what she knew would be the conclusion drawn from her hanged body—illicit pregnancy.” This radical statement through suicide can be read as a construction of radical selfhood, rendering transparent the limited narrative possibilities historically available to Indian women. What did Bhubaneshwari encode through her death but a declaration of her misery—a state not afforded to Indian brides of her day whose subjectivity was completely
subsumed within patriarchal desires and scripts? A woman taking so much control as to end her own life could only be read as an act of service to the household, saving their name by removing herself as a source of potential shame. By removing this assumed rationale for her suicide, Bhubaneshwari declares in herself a type of resistance to heteronormativity—she will not subjugate herself to male needs nor her society’s narratives.

This reading of Bhubaneshwari’s tragic act as a radical narrative moment assumes a potential for resistance that might not have been there while downplaying the diminishment of self that cannot be erased from any act of suicide. Furthermore, Spivak’s association of Bhubaneshwari with the legendary Queen Draupadi further inflates her subjectivity, shifting focus away from the obvious self-silencing of her resistance—her death. Spivak, as we can expect, is savvy to the many possible resonances of this story, and addresses the meiosis of Bhubaneshwari’s story in the fact that many readers of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” ignored this narrative strand or assumed it to be Spivak’s negative answer to her own question. As she explains, she decided to tell Bhubaneshwari’s story in her academic essay “to show, that whereas the British Indian reform of sati is much celebrated, when a young, single girl attempted to write resistance in her very body, she could not be read.” Hence Spivak may be inflating her ancestor’s story so that it can register more fully in a public consciousness that is as likely to misconstrue or diminish the narrative potential of a girl’s suicide here and now as it was there (in India) and then (almost a century ago).

As Spivak draws her essay to a close, she returns to the overarching project of memoir to conceive herself as joining this foremother in a defiance of heteronormativity:

I repeat in difference, these singular women who are mothers in many different ways, who teach me that reproductive heteronormativity is simply one case among many—like a stopped clock giving the correct time twice a day, rather than a norm that we persistently legitimize by reversal.

Buss’s notion of a dual discourse of hyperbole and meiosis enriches our understanding of the twinned impulses of Spivak’s memoir—the narrative insistence upon inflation so as to grant visibility to a necessarily meiotic act. An overlay of Buss’s discursive apparatus upon Perreault’s theory of autography allows us to further deepen our reading of the dialectics through which women achieve self-constitution as well as self-representation.

Postcolonial

As an obvious follow-up to feminist theory, and sharing the same historical moment as the second wave of feminism, postcolonial theory is rich in connections between a supposed feminine self and what has been termed (to the point of cliché) the postcolonial condition. With “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), Helene Cixous troped “woman” as the “Dark Continent” while just a few years later, Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) argued that the West feminized the East in order to legitimize colonialism. The reduction of postcolonial experiences into one
unifying condition, and its availability as a trope for all subjugations, has certainly threatened if not weakened the specific usefulness of postcolonial analysis in recent years. Additionally, postcolonial scholarship might be further challenged by a shift towards ethnic studies, which focuses more on local histories of racial injustice.

In *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* Rajini Srikanth suggests that this shift may arise from the myth of “American exceptionalism” (33), but more likely, it reflects that “[s]cholars of ethnic studies in the United States have frequently expressed their frustration at the ascendancy of postcolonial studies in academia” (42) and wish to distance themselves from this seemingly elitist arena. Srikanth sees this division as dangerous, pointing out that without a knowledge of postcolonial history and theories, “[n]ot only will people be insufficiently apprised of the position of their country in the world of geopolitics (and that is an ignorance that the people of the United States cannot afford to persist in, given the nation’s long reach in world affairs), but also they will be unable to comprehend the many forces that bear upon domestic policy” (43).

Clearly Srikanth is arguing for the importance of postcolonial studies for raising awareness of sociohistoric issues, but how can postcolonialism figure as a framework in literary criticism where it has slipped into more metaphoric usage? In her essay, “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition,” Sara Suleri articulates a similar concern that postcolonialism as a category has become purely allegorical, but she also scoffs at the idiomatic solutions of “lived experience,” presented by both Trinh T. Minh-ha and bell hooks, as parochializing the term to the point of emptying it of theoretical usefulness.

With Srikanth’s endorsement and Suleri’s warning in mind, perhaps postcolonialism can be useful as a critical framework that acknowledges theoretical possibilities in localized experience without sacrificing either one for the other. In *Mapping the Private Geography: Autobiography, Identity, and America*, Gerri Reaves takes a look at the dual role, both metaphoric and materialist, that geographical displacement plays within American literatures. Reaves focuses her study around the following questions: “(1) Why do we conceive of selfhood in geographical terms? and (2) What is the significance of the pervasive spatial and geographical metaphors used in autobiographical writings and in the criticism and theory of autobiography as well?” (3).

Reaves postulates that metaphors of the spatial are particularly potent in the United States, for ideas of “America and Americanism are inevitably bound up with the right to consume space, to move freely, to set and cross boundaries at will, to command and own space—ultimately, to mark space, to inscribe the landscape” (14). When applied to American memoirs, such metaphors gain momentum for writers often trope the act of autobiography as “a taking of textual space” (14). “[I]n a process Adrienne Rich might call ‘the politics of location’, all writing, especially autobiography, involves placing the textual I in a physical context, whether real or invented” (15). Reaves further explains that “Critical jargon is replete with
words that imply place and space—situate, reside, groundwork, territory, demarcate, field, boundary, margin, position—words that require of the writer and reader not only a sense of agency, but a sense of where that agency emanates from” (15).

Reaves balances this tropic treatment of place with a series of questions that might concretize our exploration of actual experiences and memories of colonialism and multiple migrations:

Scholarship on ethnic autobiography inevitably provokes numerous questions about the interplay of identity and geography, questions that map the directions for autobiography studies. To which landscape and culture does a newly arrived immigrant belong? With which map to we associate a post-colonial writer residing in one country but clearly writing in the tradition of and about the birth country? (15)

Srikanth’s text approaches some of these same questions with observations that necessarily complicate a reader’s understanding of the complexities of place, and especially articulations of home, for Americans who have emigrated from postcolonial countries.

Srikanth argues that Asian American writers are not abandoning the US when they engage with their homelands, but rather, are concerned for their homelands’ developing identity being recently postcolonial (45). I would add that their texts, when taught within a postcolonial framework, might remind the American reader that this too is a postcolonial nation and shares postcolonial indignation along with neocolonial guilt, like many nations from whom more recent immigrants have arrived.

Displacement as both trope and truth for Asian Americans can be seen in their anxieties of unbelonging in both America and a land of origins. The relocation of people of Japanese descent from the West Coast of America and Canada during WWII is an ever present reminder to Asian Americans that they are always at risk of being seen as more Asian than American. Srikanth observes that this is happening right now with South Asian and Arab Americans, who never know when they might be sent back, sometimes to a country they’ve never seen.12 Sadly, the nation of origins may be no more willing than the United States to see these diasporic people as their own nationals (54). The diasporic person may experience a cognitive dissonance between the identity she experiences and the one superimposed by the stereotyping narratives of government and popular culture. Expressed powerfully by Sameer Parekh in Stealing the Ambassador, “[y]our skin will always argue with your passport” (qtd. 95).

12 As a British-born, Canadian-bred woman of South Asian descent, I remember my confusion as a child when strangers would shout at me to go back to where I came from, and having never been to the Indian subcontinent, I didn’t know where they meant.
Srikanth sees a cosmopolitan\(^{13}\) impulse in South Asian autobiographies that might be recognized as a useful lesson for the American reader. This is clearly true of other immigrant and diasporic memoirs as well. She writes,

[t]his dialectic between here and there, between the local and the global, forms the sphere of much South Asian autobiographical writing. The dialectic has the effect of both de-centering the United States in the consciousness of readers and illuminating the ways in which the lives of those who live there are inextricably linked with the lives of those who live elsewhere. (68-9)

*Meatless Days* by Sara Suleri is an example of a South Asian American memoir that enriches our understandings of the fullness of postcolonial subjectivity by rendering both the metaphoric and the material experiences of writing and displacement. An application of a postcolonial critical framework, that recognizes both metaphor and specificity of experience, will guide the reader in a fuller appreciation of these two texts.

In *Meatless Days*, Suleri presents multiple tropes for language, loss and displacement that figure the difficulty of translating a postcolonial reality to an American audience. The sense of being cursed for using a language that has no way of translating her Pakistani life pervades the memoir and leads Suleri to wander from one metaphoric encoding to another in an attempt to approximate her Pakistani life for an American reader. She says, “I try to lay the subject down and change its clothes, but before I know it, it has sprinted off evilly in the direction of ocular evidence” (2). She often tropes language as place and the complications of translation as displacement. She explains, “Speaking two languages may seem a relative affluence, but more often it entails the problems of maintaining a second establishment even though your body can be in only one place at a time” (177). Our postcolonial framework allows us to see Suleri balance this metaphor with a literal revelation about the results of translation:

> When I return to Urdu, I feel shocked at my own neglect of a space so intimate to me: like relearning the proportions of a once-familiar room, it takes me by surprise to recollect that I need not feel grief, I can eat grief; that I need not bury my mother, but instead can offer her into the earth, for I am in Urdu now. (177)

While her mother tongue is troped as a room, the subsequent metaphors are translations of Urdu into English that reveal, for a moment, the re-framing of experience in a different language. In a similar way, she tropes “writing [as] the tricky milk that runs like metaphor through Sheb-e-Miraj” (184), but goes on to explain both the myths around the religious day and the memories of sharing it with her deceased sister who overwrote it with the drama of Mohamed’s first visitation from the angel Gabriel during which he, an illiterate, is commanded to read” (185). This moving back and forth between metaphor and material experience can be

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\(^{13}\) Srikanth explains that cosmopolitanism is an idea originally developed by Buddhists and Stoics that acknowledges interconnections, defies political boundaries, and refuses to see anyone as alien” (10).
elucidated through the dual purposes of postcolonialism—to provide metaphors for displacement while rendering the cultural specificities of postcolonial subjectivities.

**Diasporic**

A diasporic framework seeks to render more truthfully the reality of the postcolonial subject who has often lived in, and been displaced from, several countries, and who may have never visited the ancestral homeland with which she/he is identified. In *Writing Selves in Diaspora*, Sonia Ryang explains that “autobiography of diaspora is a record of humanity which has been stripped of national affiliation—only the memory of culture, the history of families, and an insecure future in a foreign land remain. Hence the importance of reclaiming the self through writing” (xiii – xiv). Ryang, a cultural anthropologist who focuses her work on Korean American women’s autobiography, provides a useful framework for understanding the particularities of diasporic subjectivity as distinct from immigrant and postcolonial positions.

In “Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach,” Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out that the immigrant identity is often super-imposed upon all ethnic writings in America with attendant assumptions about the American Dream and other “new place narratives” that don’t approach the complexities of diasporic experiences. We see this in Wong’s analysis of the pioneering work of William Boelhower, *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States: Four Versions of the Italian American Self*. Wong’s biggest issue with Boelhower’s model is its “conceptually problematic telescoping of first and second generations into a single ‘immigrant experience’” (301). She explains that the actual voyage from home to host country is a codifying experience that shapes immigrant narratives whereas second-generation hyphenated Americans are more concerned with writing about the process of Americanization as they navigate home culture through their parents rather than an ancestral homeland. In Wong’s words, “the American-born do not have direct memoires of the Old World; their understanding of the Old World culture is necessarily mediated by their parents” (301). In my direct experience, observations, and readings of texts by second generation hyphenated North Americans, the parents hold entrenched mythologies about the homeland that do not reflect recent developments and cultural exchanges experienced by its actual residents. The second generation wants the myths to be true, which explains the common theme of disappointment for so many of these writers, and their eventual grounding of ancestral identity in their own racialized bodies.

What framework can we offer the writings of diasporic subjects? Boelhower creates a matrix, summarized by Wong as a diametric between memory of the old world and anticipation of the new one. This matrix is characterized by the following interstices: the subject’s separation from the old world, journey to the new world, contact with the new world, and contrast of new with old (301). However, Wong postulates that the second generation diasporic subject does not fit neatly into this matrix having been born into the foreign new
world and having only mythological contact, perhaps mediated by occasional visits, with the ancestral homeland. Therefore, “second-generation ethnics have to contend with three, not two, systems: ‘ideal’ Old World values as presented (by parents . . .), ‘real’ Old World values as actually mediated (by these same parents . . .), and ‘real’ New World values as seen from the vantage point of Americans by birth (302). From Wong’s revision of Boelhower’s model, we see that a framework for reading the growing body of memoirs from diasporic subjects would need renovation to encompass the focus of diasporic experience—namely, the friction between myths about and realities of the ancestral land, and a renegotiation of identity as racialized outsiders in the new land that nonetheless provides the only real sense of home for these subjects.

A few other distinctions between types of immigrant experiences are worth mentioning for the diasporic second-generation subjectivities they spawn. As explained by Wong, Boelhower’s work on Italian immigrant narratives draws upon a Judeo-Christian mythos that is most likely not at play in the memoirs of Asian Americans. He cites as the first place on his matrix the anticipatory dream of the immigrant that America will be a prelapsarian paradise reclaimed. However, as Wong points out, Chinese American immigrants may be more conflicted or ambivalent about the relocation—not all of them did this out of choice—and they may be less influenced by Judeo-Christian tropes (305). I would argue that this is true for many writers of the MEMSA diasporas who came here to flee political persecution, and have been focused more on what they’re escaping from than escaping to. Another particularity for many diasporic subjects that creates a complexity unmitigated by Boelhower’s matrix is the creation of a multi-geographical diasporic community. That is, America may not be the first or last stop in a pattern of migrations for any diasporic subject, thus the antipodal framing of two worlds simply does not apply, or at least, it severely limits our understanding of the multiple geographies experienced by a diasporic subject. Wong notes that “America is one . . . of many destinations for Chinese emigrants, in a global scattering over a long period that some scholars call the Chinese diaspora” (305). This is particularly true for South Asians—many who migrated from the Indian subcontinent to East Africa during WWII, and who fled west quite suddenly and unwillingly due to Idi Amin’s expulsion of Indians from Uganda in 1972. This resulted in a re-seeding of an Indian diaspora across Europe and the Americas.  

14 My own parents, Indians raised in Uganda and Tanzania, relocated to England where my sister and I were born before relocating again, in 1980, to Canada, and myself in 1998, to the United States. I, then, would fit the category of both immigrant and diasporic subject. My parents participated in two mythologies—the India of their own parents and the Africa of their memories. With little access to Africa—my last visit was shortly before my second birthday and on the brink of Amin’s expulsion—both Africa and India served as dominant mythologies for my sister and me. At the same time, as non-whites in England during what was termed the “colour bar,” and immigrants to Canada with the wrong color and accent, my sister and I have participated in both immigrant and diasporic subjectivities that have further complicated (and sometimes fragmented) our identities.
Wong concedes that as long as the reader-critic “employs a textually grounded rather than a schema-inspired approach, and pays attention to the historical particularities of various ethnic groups, the concept of immigrant autobiography should continue to be a fruitful one for the study of American autobiography” (309). However, my study reveals that diaspora is a broader subject arena within which immigrant experiences and narratives are but one section. I would argue that the framing of MEMSA memoirs by diasporic rather than immigrant thematics would allow these memoirs to be more fully particularized for the reader-student.

Sonia Ryang provides just such a model, drawn from anthropology, for framing the distinct diasporic subject. She contrasts the “politico-classical” model with what she calls the “personal-modern” one, writing that the former is “punctuated by loss of a homeland from whence [immigrants] have been exiled or fled, a desire to regain it or to find a new homeland that parallels it with connections to a community of selves who forge the new homeland or signify as place-holders of the former absent one” (xv). The memoirs from this group that I will call “first immigrants” are marked by “collective memory, myths, nostalgia, a desire to return” (xv). First immigrants refers not necessarily to the group that performs the first exodus from an ancestral homeland, but rather, the generation who has some real contact with the ancestral land prior to immigration. In contrast, the writing subjects who might be placed within Ryang’s personal-modern model are more concerned with ontological insecurity [who am I?] and an ongoing crisis of identity . . . related to the loss of the original homeland or home (real or imaginary). . . . In this model, therefore, the person’s diasporic self-consciousness and his or her self-designation as a homeless, displaced, and dislocated subject become critical in identifying a diasporic form of life. As such, this model relates to ontological conditions, and presupposes an irreducible diasporic emotion or state of mind carried by individuals as a decisive criterion. (xv)

In contrast to the first immigrants, represented by their parents and/or grandparents, writers within Ryang’s personal-modern model may or may not be immigrants within their ethnic diaspora, and for this reason, I choose to call them diasporic as opposed to second generation or immigrant. For example, I would be considered a first-generation or naturalized Canadian or American, given my birth outside North America, but my subjectivity is more second generation since I have never been to the mythical homeland to which my ethnicity has always been ascribed. In all three countries where I’ve lived, my answer to the question, “Where are you from?” has not satisfied my interlocutors until I’ve responded “India” for their comfort and cognitive assonance, all the time knowing that I have never been to India even though I embody its racial markers and carry out its cultural assumptions as translated by my parents. A diasporic model that can guide reader-students through the complexities of this
subject-position as inscribed in diasporic narratives will not only deepen readings but
strengthen understandings of the diverse subjects residing and writing in North America.

Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in North America and American in Iran* is a rich example of the complexities that shape diasporic identity formation. Aware of her outsider-status growing up in Palo Alto, California, Azadeh goes to Egypt, learns Arabic and Farsi, then relocates to Tehran as a journalist with the dualistic agenda to live there like an insider but report upon its culture as an outsider. She learns quickly that the American subjectivity she never fully achieved in California emerged as the foremost feature of her identity once she was ensconced in Iran. She has to grieve the loss, not only of the mythic pre-revolutionary Iran of her parents’ tales, but also of the hope that Iran would accept her as one of its own. She is dismissed for speaking “kitchen Farsi” (89) while at the same time not valorizing media-inspired markers of westernization like the youth of northern Tehran, in their black market bought designer bikini tops and tight jeans that they sported like political dissidents at underground parties. Moaveni must face her estrangement from the one place she had thought she could be embraced as an insider. She comments, “[i]f I felt alienated in America—considered to be from an imagined land of veils, harems, suicide bombers, and wrathful ayatollahs—the only fair compensation was that somewhere else I would be ordinary, just like everyone else” (108). The loss of hope for such compensation marks Moaveni’s journey in this memoir, and her reconstitution as a diasporic subject who does not fit completely in either place, but who fits provisionally in both places, completes the arc. Moaveni ends up inscribing her American Iranian identity in her body rather than the geography she inhabits at any given time; she demonstrates this embodied geography through her use of language—her use of the pronoun “we” when talking to both Iranian neighbors and American journalists—and her choice of when to wear the purdah—not always in Iran but sometimes in New York. A diasporic critical framework could hold the complexities of this identity formation in ways that a limiting immigrant paradigm might reduce it to polarities and choices between east and west.

**Counter-ethnographic**

A diasporic reading of memoirs from MEMSA communities might find itself engaging in much revisionist criticism as it corrects the assumptions engendered by mainstream polarizing approaches towards writings homogenized as immigrant. Rather than overburden a diasporic framework with a revisionist mandate, I propose that we locate a new practice designed particularly for counter discourse. I coin the phrase “counter-ethnographic” to describe a critical framework that challenges other reading models that may impose stultifying and stereotyping mandates casting certain immigrant memoirs as representative of their ethnic groups, or worse, of a totalizing immigrant experience. As such, this critical framework would engage not only with primary texts but also critical works from literary criticism and related disciplines that overburden or misrepresent memoirs by racialized writers.
Essays by Smaro Kamboureli, Paul Lai, and Larissa Lai, from *Asian Canadian Writing: Beyond Autoethnography* provide insights and parameters for how such a framework might be provisionally constructed. Why draw upon works from Canada to theorize about ethnic American memoirs? While there are many critics within multiple disciplines developing and working within counter-hegemonic theories in the United States, there is less focus on the application of such work to memoir studies. With its policy of official multiculturalism, Canada has had a longer history of codifying the ethnic memoir as another installment in its cultural mosaic, and despite the pride, visibility, and cross-cultural understanding this may have engendered, has given literary critics more rope with which to hang (if not themselves) their ethnographic theories. A critique and analysis of multicultural reading strategies has had several decades to develop, primarily from those subjected to (within) ethnographic discourses, subjects who have turned their writing talents towards counter-hegemonic theories, or what I am calling, counter-ethnographic.

In their introduction to *Asian Canadian Writing: Beyond Autoethnography*, editors Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn observe that emerging issues in writings by minority groups have “complicated the assumptions about the ethnic subject and its representation—in particular, its autoethnographic representation” (3). Ty and Verduyn call their volume *Beyond Autoethnicity* to “characterize and highlight texts that refuse to be contained simply by their ethnic markers” (4). Autoethnography is a term coined by French American literary scholar, Francoise Lionnet, in her seminal work, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. While presumably claiming to recognize self-definition in the ethnic subject, Lionnet’s project risks imposing the role of native informant upon the writing subject, thus colonizing the autobiographer’s purpose in service to the reader.

In “The Politics of the Beyond: 43 Theses on Autoethnography and Complicity,” Smaro Kamboureli argues that recognizing autoethnicity has simply been a legitimizing form of ethnography, validating itself by positing agency in an ethnic other who articulates a self, but controlling the features of subjectivity allowable to that self-articulating other. Kamboureli states this as a dominant desire to “articulate . . . otherness for the difference it offers” (35). I think of this as an additive form of criticism. Otherness is taken in and adopted so that it can add to the range of cultural possibilities available to the already accepted national.

An even deeper problem with autoethnography is its assumptions of an easy (to define) immutable relationship between the writer and his/her community. It almost assumes that a non-dominant ethnic community has sanctioned, even commissioned, its favored son or daughter to act as ambassador, conducting the complicated work of cultural exchange. In reality, non-dominant communities may be fearful of being disclosed and judged by the dominant culture and do not wish to have their practices and customs inscribed and made ready for further commentary. Kamboureli adds that this projection of unified impulses upon a writer and her/his ethnic group reifies community, assuming that it “pre-exists the subject’s
formation” (39) rather than being constituted in, inscribed by, but independent from, the subject’s ability to write about it. In short, such assumptions refute the “elasticity of community” (39).

Kamboureli problematizes any project that claims to go beyond autoethnography by pointing out that movement beyond involves “working through,” and necessitates a complicity (perhaps through reification) with the process being overtaken while also assuming that there is a place awaiting on the other side that could be free of the forces that constituted the problem in the first place (42). Kamboureli’s point (and the 43 theses she develops it through) are well taken, and I propose counter-ethnography as a mode of transparency whereby the very complicity that Kamboureli critiques can be foregrounded along with the problematic of ethnography and the desire to find heterogeneous rather than homogenizing methods for reading diasporic memoirs. We can do this by observing the textual moments that might prompt our own ethnographic impulses while paying heed to the autobiographer’s own instances of challenging ethnography as well as the readerly desire to pin ethnographic impulses on the writer. As Kamboureli puts it, “[r]eading autoethnographically translates autoethnography back into ethnography” (46). To avoid this, a counter-ethnographic framework would pay attention to ways in which the writer is often positioned outside of his or her respective community, and as such, should be seen as having special insight into but not mimetic performativity of the community’s other subjects.

In “Autoethnography Otherwise” Paul Lai demonstrates how ethnic stereotypes get codified through literature with assumptions of autoethnography further legitimizing these codes. He argues that “[a]s a practice, North American literary criticism has a decades-long tradition of considering ethnic literatures as autoethnography, legitimizing certain texts over others for their adherence to conceptions of cultural representation” (55). That is, in cultural markets, the teachers, readers, reviewers, and in the first place, the publishers of ethnic autobiographies who determine which texts (and which features of a text) are to be read as representative, hermeneutically limited to the identity markers with which they are already familiar from mainstream representations. “In other words, the autoethnographer is what the native informant became. We invest in autoethnography the ability to tell us something about another culture in a truthful manner” (56), but the truths we accept as dominant-discourse trained readers are mitigated by our own desires inscribed upon the ethnic “other” as well as publishers’ perceptions of our desires.

Hence, a woman’s memoir about life in the Middle East might be read for its references to purdah, sheiks and mullahs, no matter how slight such references may be, rather than to the woman’s immersion in non-stereotypical activities that may be summarily dismissed as (and ascribed to) her “westernization.” As we shall see, Azadeh Moaveni and Nahid Rachlin are Persian women writers who comment upon and friction against such readings. A counter-ethnographic framework would highlight these commentaries in the memoirs themselves. Lai
proposes a model borrowed from Kandice Chuh of reading “autoethnography otherwise,” that is “imagining the Other in different ways than was previously available, especially against the grain of hegemonic discourse” (Lai 57). Lai further explains that this critical practice acknowledges that the autobiographer’s text, though “not about her cultural group, still gives us insight into sociological issues relevant to that group” (58). My framework of counter-ethnography takes this further by focusing more specifically on the autobiographer’s instances of “talking back” to the ethnographer, drawing attention to the ways dominant culture’s expectations play out in her life and upon her writing.

One such expectation that Larissa Lai highlights in “Strategizing the Body of History: Anxious Writing, Absent Subjects, and Marketing the Nation,” is the assumption that autobiography breaks silences, and that this breaking of silence is liberating for the writing subject. On the contrary, Lai notes that autobiography “can produce ambivalent results. In some cases, writing the self can deepen oppression, not just by reiterating it, but by driving deeper underground aspects of marginalized subjectivity that do not fit into... generic conventions combined with racist stereotypes” (87). With this observation, Lai enact an example of counter-ethnography, challenging the reader’s assumptions about the power of speech and disclosure. In addition to privileging certain disclosures over others, and thereby enacting a second silence upon the writing subject, Lai points out that the voicing and consuming of non-dominant narratives “may have the unfortunate effect of retrospectively folding the marginalized subject back into a discourse of national belonging, while actually covering over the violent history of exclusion it was supposed to have expiated” (87). That is, the ethnic writer may be absorbed into a canon of American writers, and even a canon of the marginalized may serve to nationalize that subject in ways that friction with the text’s narratives of displacement and unbelonging. An example of this in Canada would be Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, which is ironically part of the canon of Canadian literature even as it documents the relocation of Kogawa and her family along with other second generation Japanese Canadians during WWII. By reading *Obasan* as part of the canon, it might be possible to dilute the horror of its content, particularly the rejection of the writer and her community by the Canadian government and its peoples.15

My critique of common reading practices is not intended to dismiss them or suggest that they should be thrown out and replaced by counter-ethnography, but rather, that the latter framework might add dimension to our understandings of textual practices. Lai explains that “the work of autobiography, in spite of its apparent power, does metonymic work.

15 During my tenure as a teaching assistant and graduate student at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia from 1993 to 1996, I had the opportunity to both teach and study *Obasan*. In both cases, this text was taught as an immigrant narrative, and an example of historiographic metafiction (which might have produced non-dominant readings) but couched in a postmodernist framework that emphasized interpolated forms and departures from tradition rather than the text’s impulses and anxieties to authenticate its charges of political and public oppression.
Something of experience is articulated, but the articulation of partial experience drives deeper into repression that which is not, or perhaps, cannot, be articulated” (91). Counter-ethnography might be useful at this juncture to suggest that we enter the act of reading with an understanding that we are not seeing the whole, and that we must resist totalizing statements and summary claims about the writing subject and certainly about the communities or cultures she writes herself within. As Rajini Srikanth points out, partial inscriptions lead to partial readings. Srikanth is concerned with “partial reading . . . in both senses of the word—as the biases with which we read, and as the ways in which those biases contribute to gaps in our understanding” (16). Srikanth, whose text I used earlier to chart a postcolonial framework, provides a counter-ethnographic impulse here when she desires “to uncover the possible reasons for partial readings and to suggest ways of recognizing, resisting, and perhaps overcoming them” (16). A counter-ethnographic framework provides both more and less anxiety than Srikanth’s reading practice. It uncovers both the partial readings of the text by the reader and the partial readings of the autobiographical subject by the cultures she inhabits; thus it encodes the anxiety of unknowability but reconciles it by discarding the impulse to correct or transcend.

Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad* and Nahid Rachlin’s *Persian Girls* are both memoirs that lend themselves to counter-ethnographic readings. Moaveni establishes herself as a California girl early in her memoir through a sprinkling of references to ‘80’s popular culture that encode her American values even as she writes about her estrangement by classmates who racialize her. By declaring her affiliation with Madonna, cabbage patch kids, and other cultural products of a particular American time and place, Moaveni doesn’t just shake a reader’s assumptions about Iranian subjectivity but creates an accessible narrator for an American audience to align itself with as it accompanies her to Egypt and then Iran. Because she establishes that she was raised in an environment similar to if not the same as her American reader, we may find ourselves sharing her reactions of surprise at the realities of Iranian life. She inscribes the very images and incidents that challenge American stereotypes about Iranian people and culture, showing us through her surprise that she expects our ethnographic readings to be thwarted.

For instance, she talks about finding a short-lived peace when her mother tried out Hinduism and took her to children’s satsang in Oakland. Moaveni writes, “Everyone was too dippy and preoccupied with vegan curry and their chakras to care that we were Iranian; in fact, they thought it was sort of neat, and we were embraced with the squishy affection of people fond of the exotic” (10). This brief recollection functions counter-ethnographically in a few different ways, but all show the ethnographic impulses of this American Hindu community and challenges the reader to locate similar impulses and discourses in herself. First, there is the free associated discourse of “they though it was sort of neat,” which echoes American well-
intentioned but patronizing approaches to otherness. She makes a point of describing this group as “dippy” and is quite condescending towards their orientalist appropriations, ending with the charge that they see her as exotic. A counter-ethnographic framework would move beyond readings of mutual stereotyping to point out the ethnographic tradition that the writer is challenging, belittling the bearers of that tradition within her text so that the reader is less likely to identify with them or mimic their language and practices.

Playing upon our possible readerly surprise that an Iranian family in Oakland might take up Hinduism, Moaveni further challenges our assumptions when she points out that after her relocation to Iran, she found many Iranian women had a similar path:

Eastern spirituality, with its internally directed, pacifist sensibility, was the ideal antidote to the militant, invasive brand of Shiite Islam imposed by the regime. And that is the story of how Iranian housewives, unadventurous by nature, began turning East, rather than toward Mecca, to nurture their belief in a higher power. (96).

The tone of this observation—the reference to a “higher power,” the acknowledgement of her own stereotype (and ours) that Iranian housewives may be “unadventurous by nature,” and her comment that they turn East, “rather than toward Mecca,” (which is what she and we expect), points out while destabilizing the ethnographic perspective, but she does so in a way that doesn’t alienate or accuse the reader as she locates the same assumptions in herself through her discourse and choice of observations.

Moaveni goes so far as to theorize the shock to our ethnographic senses (hers and ours) upon a visit to the real Iran (as opposed to our imaginary, media-mediated analog):

Ignorance of this culture made you a victim, marooned at home with bad Islamic television. Knowing how to navigate its rules gave you freedom, to choose a lifestyle as sedentary or riotous as you pleased. As newcomers, Daria and I were only familiar with a simple, American sort of freedom. Confronted with an oppressive system, we instinctively viewed the Iranians around us as victims, because armed with only our knowledge of California highways and the mall, we had not the slightest idea how to exercise freedom, Tehran-style. (55)

Comments such as these, locating our stereotypes and assumptions about Iranian culture as an ignorance, abound in Moaveni’s memoir. A counter-ethnographic framework would closely examine the content of these commentaries to locate the assumptions and assess the writer’s attitude towards them, thereby ascribing critical agency to the writer as well as the reader.

Nahid Rachlin’s *Persian Girls* has similar instances where American misrepresentations of Iranians are shown to cause as much despair for the narrator as Iranian restrictions. A case in point is her treatment at a Christian Woman’s College upon her arrival in the American Midwest. The dean insists that she and three other “foreign” students wear their national costumes for Parents’ Day. When Rachlin points out that she has no national costume, the dean
suggests that she wear a chador (Islamic covering). Rachlin responds that she never wore one in Iran and would try to think of something else. She writes, “To me the chador had come to mean a kind of bondage, as religion had. It felt ridiculous to wear it in this American college.” Nonetheless, Rachlin shops for material in a department store and makes a chador to wear for the event. On Parents’ Day, forced to wear the garment she had cast off so quickly in Iran, she thinks, “here I was in this land of freedom and more or less forced to wear it” (145). Her playing out American fantasies of otherness while acknowledging the underlying ironies of expectation, not only defies but disparages ethnography, as does the following dialogue with her Christian roommate:

“My mother asked me to ask you if you’re a Catholic.” Judy Conrad was a pretty blonde who lived on my floor. She had stopped me in the bathroom.
I shook my head no.
“But my mother said you were wearing a habit.”
“That wasn’t a habit, it was a chador. Good Muslims wear them.”
“Are Muslims Catholics?”
“No, it’s a different religion.”
“Are you a good Muslim?”
I just stared at her. When I didn’t answer she put her hand on her hip.
“Well, in this college we’re all Christians,” she said coolly and walked away.

The American student’s apparent ignorance about world religions, not to mention her own, produces silence on the part of the narrator, but the silence is charged with intention and rhetorical purpose. In an American Christian college, having seemingly escaped the confines of Islam, Rachlin is asked if she is a good Muslim. The dialogue between Rachlin and her interlocutor as well as the previous scenes with the dean and at Parents’ Day inscribe layers of irony upon the ethnographic assumptions of the people in her environment. These can be seen as counter-ethnographic inscriptions in the text that can be noted and theorized by a counter-ethnographic framework that teaches us not only to avoid ethnography ourselves, but to notice and challenge its occurrences, and to refrain from ascribing it to the ethnic writer by projecting their participation in autoethnography.

Conclusion

The reader may note that in my presentation of five frameworks, I have moved from established arenas of literary criticism towards constructions based on social theory. This may be read as my deliberate promotion of interdisciplinary scholarship, particularly as an encouragement of the brand of literary criticism that defends unorthodox choices of theoretical texts to broaden the imaginative categories available to us. As I draw to a close, I want to extend this inclusive impulse to suggest that the materials I have chosen to construct my frameworks are obviously flexible and often interchangeable. Spivak can be read as both
memoirist and theorist, often both at the same time. The postcolonial theorists I present can just as easily be foregrounded as feminist, and the theorists I select for my diasporic and counter-ethnographic readings can be interchanged. This essay has failed its purpose if it leaves the reader with a sense of a solid and indisputable connection between the frameworks I develop and the materials that make it up. I am much more interested in the process of framing our critical practices to understand the ways they function within discursive communities and traditions than I am with creating replicable reading models, even though the latter may be a natural result if my essay has indeed so inspired any of my readers. I must caution such a reader against any assumptions that the texts I’ve chosen are representative of or superlative within the fields within which my work has them positioned.

While the texts I’ve selected can be assigned to each other’s categories, so too, the frameworks I propose can be (and have been) constituted by entirely different (and sometimes contradicting) texts. At this point, the house of cards I have labored to construct may seem to be falling down, transparent for what it is, yet the revisionary point at which any radical project of literary criticism begins is the dusting off and realignment of bits and pieces of literary and critical traditions—not so much using the master’s tools to reconstitute the master’s house17 (as Lorde warns us against), but examining the raw materials from which women have built, and continue to construct, their identities. My final suggestion, hopefully more liberatory than cautionary, is that the frameworks themselves be treated as multiple scaffolds that overlay and intertwine to allow multifocal readings of memoirs that set the shattering of traditional molds and formulations as their primary intention. Indeed, to return to the barnyard trope of my introduction, the three little pigs might well have been served by combining resources and constructing a fourth habitat of straw and sticks and bricks. In the same way, by utilizing frameworks in a praxis that allows them to speak to each other, theorist, critic, and memoir are rendered transparent for the set of choices that underscore the autographs of all three.

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Appendix A
Writing Exercises

While the critical frameworks presented in this paper lend themselves more readily to literary criticism than literary production, I have been curious to see how writing exercises based on such models might be a vehicle for introducing writing students to the theories that may inform scholarship about their work. The following exercises, broad enough to be applied to writing classes of multiple levels and genres, seek to increase awareness about a writer’s responsibility to honor authentic perspectives and points of view. Exercises such as these may engender conversations about discourse and community, experience and modes of expression.

1. Write a scene from your life in the third person point of view so that it seems to be happening to another person. Then, re-write it in first person point of view. Finally, re-write it so that you begin with one perspective and then switch to the other at a pivotal moment. As a thought, the shift from first to third person is often occasioned by a moment of trauma while the switch from third to first person indicates an ownership and reclaiming of experience.

2. Write a scene from your life, it need not be dramatic in content, as though it were captured by a video camera. Remember, a camera picks up on all images that register in a scene while a writer may choose to include only those that resonate. A film-maker, however, can make choices about how close or remote a view she/he wants to take, moving between angles and shots. Experiment with long and close shots, panning and angles, to highlight the images that best tell your story. Record only what the camera sees and hears, which means that you cannot project inner life, only what is externally registered.

3. Write an anecdote about one of your characters in which you exaggerate or undermine one of her/his attributes to reflect your narrative attitude towards the character. For example, you may describe a character your narrator adores in regal language, a character that the narrator misses or mourns in mythic language, or a character your narrator despises through description that diminishes or condescends. Especially in the latter case, exaggerate your telling so that it’s clear to the reader that you are aware of your unrealistic representation.

4. Many of us experience an internal argument between the voices of the conflicting roles we play. For instance, a woman who is both a mother and scholar may have an argument within herself about whether she should tend to her overdue academic paper
or first clean out her children’s lunch boxes. A man who is both a philosophy student and a waiter may have an internal dialogue about whether to do his homework or take another shift so that he has enough tip money to photocopy his paper. Write a scene in which you create a dialogue between two roles you play, rendered as two distinct voices.

5. Write a character sketch in which you describe a character as a country. Pay attention not just to geographical and topological features of the region, but also its history. Are you choosing to trope your character as a country that has been multiply colonized or participated in ongoing wars? In the latter case, have they been civil wars or international disputes? Is the land mass rugged or tropical? Temperate or extreme? Consider how your extended metaphor establishes character traits and tendencies.

6. Building on what you know about your ancestors, and perhaps conducting some online research, write an imaginary travel narrative for one of your ancestors. Frame it as a set of dated entries and imagine the ardors of the journey as the days unfold. Through your dated entries, establish where the person is coming from, where she or he is in the writing moment, and where he or she is headed. To deepen your response you may want to include the narrator’s feelings about the place left behind and his or her expectations of the place to come.

7. Describe the first home you remember through sensory details. Go beyond the actual house to include the parameters of what you considered home during your early years, which might have been a house or might have included a neighborhood or a whole landscape. Where was it? Without naming it, give us a sense of where it was located—type of neighborhood, rural or urban, region or state, and country. Because this is a creative piece, describe the place through your experience of it rather than as an onlooker. What did you do there and what made it feel like home? Follow this up with a description of the place you consider to be your home today. If it is the same place, how has it changed since early childhood? If it is different, show us how.

8. Write a scene in which one of your characters behaves in a way that might defy a reader’s expectations and stereotypes. Show another character responding like the reader—with surprise or disbelief—to foreground how your text subverts a reader’s possible assumptions and expectations.
Works Cited

Theoretical Works:


Memoirs:


Memoir

From *The End of the Common*

“Learning My Name”

“Family Gathering”

Prepared as Outcome # 4 of Geneffa Jonker’s sabbatical project and presented to the Sabbatical Leave Review Board in fall 2012.
Mithu is what they called me while they waited for my name to arrive. Probably from day one, or perhaps even the womb. Later, I learned that Mithu means “sweetie pie” for boys only. Mithi would have been the girl version—one they never used.

It took over a month for the name to arrive. Later, I learned it was because my father’s sister in Africa was waiting for the birth of her other niece, due a month after me, so that she could bestow matching names. The father’s sister always chooses, I was told, though I never heard of this in other families. As the only surviving sister among five brothers, she could afford to take her time. After all, her name, Mumtaz, set her apart, beloved among women—the kind one builds palaces for.

And so the name came, six weeks after my birth. Lumina, I think it was, like the Foundation, to rhyme with Roumina, my squalling red-faced, African cousin. It came too late. The registrar of the London Borough of Hammersmith told my parents they must name and register me before the month had lapsed or else they’d have to pay extra.

They thought of another cousin on my mother’s side—sweet and bright as an English rose. Named by a Greek neighbor, not the father’s sister (my mother) because the parents wanted something unusual and exotic, not just Indian. Ginny, they called her. Short for G-e-n-e-f-a pronounced Gin-eh-fah. Or was it Juh-nee-fah? Raised between London and Paris, her name skipped between dialects as daintily as she, and they loved her.

And so, I inherited her name. With my father’s name, Aziz, thrown in after it, so it could always be clear where I belonged. The problem was, no one could agree upon how to pronounce my new name, so in the end it became my paper-only name, one they truly planned
to start using one of these days. When she starts school. The next time we travel. But they always called me Mithu.

And so it was that I started my first day at Glastonbury Infants School in Sutton, Surrey in a new grey pinafore, starched white shirt, royal blue tie that my daddy knotted for me the night before, matching royal blue cardigan, white plimsoles on my feet, and a brand new name.

“How do you say it, again?” I asked Mummy as she pushed me to school in the white pram with the vinyl orange paisley design and peeling teal rain cover.

“Why do you keep asking and asking, Mithu? You know your name,” said Mummy, cross and in a hurry. Daddy had given her exactly an hour to walk me to school and come back in time for deliveries. She wasn’t pushing me exactly. I was five years old, after all. She was pushing Shina who was two and a half and not so fast on her roly-poly legs. Shina also was too big for the pram, so she sat up in it with her feet pushing against the vinyl on the other side. I hung onto the slippery vinyl sides the best I could and rode the little step that ran along the bottom of the frame. And Mummy ran.

I was tremendously excited about the new and novel quality of this day—new clothes, new friends, a pretty new name. But mainly, I was jubilant because I was finally starting real school where my parents said I would find knowledge and new people to love me—well, the latter they didn’t tell me; I just knew. It wouldn’t be like playschool with Mrs. Johnson, or nursery school with Miss Lucas. This was first form with Miss Rye. This would be different because my parents knew her and she was a proper English mum as the customers would say. Although she never came inside the shop, Daddy delivered bacon wrapped up in brown paper
to her house every Monday morning, and she was regular with her order. This made her as good as a friend, Daddy said.

Everyone was already seated when I walked in, and the teacher was talking. She waved at an empty table at the front of the room, and I sat in the miniature chair behind it, marveling at how sweet and small those chairs and tables were. When I looked back to the door, Mummy had already gone. I kept my face forward, but tried to see around the classroom. The windows were on the left and took up the top half of the wall. I was too nervous to check what was outside those tall windows, but I thought I saw a row of horse chestnuts, their conkers ready to pounce. To the right was the door with a large shiny poster on it covered with squares. Each square had a letter of the alphabet on it, but next to each letter was a smaller shape that I didn’t recognize. I tried only to look forward and to think about what Miss Rye was saying. Her voice sounded like the ones of the customers at our shop, only more confusing. She was talking about all the wonderful things we would do together in first form, but she didn’t seem to actually say the names of anything I could understand. She was smiling as she spoke, and I tried to tell the butterflies banging around in my tummy that she must be nice if she is smiling. She was older than my mummy, I decided, and not as pretty. She wore a grey jumper and long grey skirt, and legs in brown stockings with thick ankles disappearing into black shoes. Her hair was short and the same color as her jumper, sitting in tiny ringlets around her head.

“I have a smashing treat for you, boys and girls, for your first day,” she said, sounding excited and sure that we would all be pleased. “Who here likes finger painting?”

“I do, I do,” several voices answered. I noticed the other children were not putting their hands up before speaking. Daddy had warned me not to say anything to the teacher without
putting my hand up in the air first and waiting for her to say my name. He had learned all about English schools from watching The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie on BBC 2. Since I did not want to be the only one with my hand up, I said nothing. Still, I was secretly and silently very excited. I had seen finger painting before. Not on Mummy, of course, whose fingers were usually cracked and sometimes bleeding. But sometimes I’d seen the younger ladies who came into the shop, the ones Daddy called youngsters, wearing finger paint. It covered the nail part and stuck out some, making their fingers look long and scratchy. The most surprising part was how shiny their fingertips looked after being painted. I had tried it myself using the paint box I’d gotten from Father Christmas, but my fingers didn’t look shiny at all. The nails were stained, Mummy said crossly, and they ended up looking yellow and blotchy after she scrubbed them. I’d always hoped to learn how to paint my fingers properly, but I’d never dreamed it would happen in first form, and on the first day.

So that we could share the paints, Miss Rye asked us to push our tables together in groups of four so that we formed a larger square. She had us count out from one to four as we did this. My table was opposite that of a pretty girl with yellow hair that made a zigzag around her face. She was Catherine. Another girl with short light brown hair and a fringe across her forehead sat next to Catherine. Her name was Carol. They seemed to know each other, and I learned their names from hearing them whisper. For a while we sat there in the shape of the letter “L” until Miss Rye came over to us and said, “Paul, why don’t you push your table next to the little brown girl’s?” She helped him do it, and I noticed two things right away. The girls across from me laughed at about the same time I detected a terrible smell coming from the boy who was now seated beside me. “Stinky Cooper, stinky, stinky, Cooper,” one of the girls said—I
couldn’t tell which one. I felt shy and confused. Should I pretend not to notice the smell? Should I move my table over?”

I decided not to think about Stinky Cooper as Miss Rye put a long box of paints in the center of each square of tables. The paints were large pots held in a row, and they looked as though they’d never been touched. “You may start as soon as you get a long sheet of paper,” Miss Rye said, still smiling her pleased smile as if she was enjoying our treat as much as we were. As soon as they got paper, Catherine and Carol did the strangest thing; they dug their fingers in the pots and dripped the paint from their fingers to the blank page. Then, they made snaky patterns by dragging their fingers down the page and smearing paint as they went. When they were done with one color, they went on to another color so that before long, the colors were all mixed up. I couldn’t be sure if Paul was doing the same thing because I’d decided not to look over at him, his table, or his fingers.

My horror at the mess they were making overtook my shyness. “You’re not s’post to,” I hissed, quietly at first, to the two girls. “We have to wait until Miss Rye comes and paints our fingers.”

“Is that how your fingers got brown?” asked Carol. “Did somebody paint them then?” She was smiling a half smile, and I couldn’t decide if she was being friendly or rude.

I looked at my fingers. They did look brown, at least the tops of them did, now that I looked closely, but I knew they weren’t painted. I felt my face grow hot, but I just said, “Well, you’re going to get a smacking and I’m not because I’m not going to touch the paint until the teacher comes over,” and with that, I sat on my hands.

Miss Rye heard the talking at our table, and to my relief, she walked over to us briskly.
“What’s wrong—don’t you like finger painting?” she asked, peering down at me.

“She’s waiting for you,” said Carol with a giggle.

“Very well,” said Miss Rye, with the same cross voice my mother sometimes used. She picked up my wrist, unbuttoned my sleeve, and rolled the stiff white fabric up to just below my elbow. She did the same thing on the other side.

“Any color you like, dear,” she said, as she turned to walk away.

I looked at the pots of paint, the mess on the paper that was now also smeared on the tables below, and the filthy hands of the others at my table. My parents would not want me to get my hands dirty that way. They wanted me to learn to read and write. I looked miserably at my lap so that the other children couldn’t see the tears that were gathering in my eyes.

“What’s wrong now?” I heard Miss Rye’s voice coming from behind my chair. Her voice was higher and sounded a bit more cross.

“I wanted you to paint my fingers,” I blurted out through tears without looking up.

“She thought you meant nail varnish,” said Catherine loudly, and she and Carol tittered. Without looking up, I could tell that children at other tables were now watching as they stopped what they were saying.

“Nail varnish—the absurd—what on earth made you think we’d be using nail varnish at school?” said Miss Rye. She spoke loudly, and looked around at the other children as she spoke to me. It seemed that everyone was looking and laughing.

“I don’t know,” I answered quietly, still looking down, and immediately realized she’d not heard me.

“What was that, dear?” she said, tilting her head down a little.
“I don’t, know,” I said louder this time, looking up into her eyes. The expression I saw there was not unkind but genuinely puzzled.

“What’s your name?” she asked, a small smile on her lips.

This wasn’t how I’d thought it would happen. I thought I’d have more time to think. This was the moment my name would first come into play, but it had fled.

“You have a name, don’t you?” she said, smiling broadly this time.

“Jen-ee-fah” I said quickly, and a bit too loudly.

Miss Rye seemed to stand there thinking for a moment, and then she walked back to a small table in one corner and picked up a piece of paper. She looked at the paper for some time and then said, “Oh dear.” The children all laughed, I wasn’t sure why. I wished I’d laughed with them, but it was too late to do so by the time I realized.

Miss Rye’s voice changed again, and I saw that she had a special voice she used when she was standing next to the chalk board at the front of the room. “Each of us has a name,” she announced. She wrote two words on the board, and then said, “Your Christian name comes first; this is followed by your surname. You can all surely write your Christian names, so do this now, at the top of the paper in front of you. Use your index finger,” she said, holding up the finger closest to her thumb, “and pick any color you like.”

I dipped my finger carefully in the red paint, which was closest to me, and wrote as neatly as I could at the top of the blank page: G-E-N-E-F-A. I liked how easy my name was to remember because “E” and “F” are almost the same. I hadn’t realized that Miss Rye was standing behind me and bending over to look at my page.

“Oh dear,” she said again. “What is that?”
“My Christian name,” I answered quickly. “Jenny-fuh.” I hoped that I’d remembered to say it the same way this time as I’d said it before.

Miss Rye smiled at this, and lowered herself down till she was beside me. “I think your parents didn’t realize how to spell your name when they gave it to you,” she said softly. She took a pencil from her skirt pocket and wrote in large shapes on the page: J-e-n-n-i-f-e-r.

“That’s the English way,” she said as she handed me her pencil. You should practice your name, over and over, until you get it right.”

I started copying the shapes on the page. I didn’t know why most of the shapes in this new spelling of my name didn’t look like the English alphabet at all. As I struggled to copy it, I noticed a knot in my tummy. The butterflies were gone and had left a gobby, thick cocoon in their place. I copied my name while the other children finished finger painting. I copied my name when they went out to play.

“Is that all you’ve done?” Miss Rye had said to me before play time when she saw what I’d written. She turned the page over, so not knowing what to do, I copied my name over again on the other side. I had learned something that I knew even then that I’d never forget. The knot would not go away. School was about unraveling what the teacher means, and I would never work it out.

After what seemed like hours of copying my name that first morning, I do recall going to the gymnasium though I can’t be sure we called it that. We simply referred to the place by the name of the activity held there—lunch or assembly—and so it was in that large place of gathering that I experienced the best and the worst of my early school experience—food and prayer.
When lunchtime came, we were asked to queue up at the door. “Single-file,” Miss Rye called out. I didn’t know what that meant, so I stayed seated at my desk. I was in the middle of my name and had almost filled the back page, but had only written J-e-n-n-i when she called us to line up. Should I finish my name? Should I leave it? I stayed seated and kept writing. I saw the other children scramble to be at the front of the line, and form a queue behind each other. How was that single-file? I wondered if they were doing something I couldn’t see—something English and invisible.

“You too, Jenny, come on!” Miss Rye called in a voice that sounded fed up.

I left my pencil, paper, and name behind and went to the back of the queue. We started walking down a long corridor. The corridor smelled like the Dettol Mummy sometimes dabbed on my wounds. High windows with white brackets divided each pane into small squares. There were a lot of squares at this school, I noticed; I wondered if I’d notice other shapes to tell Mummy and Daddy about later. I gulped at the sudden thought of Mummy and Daddy, so proud of their little girl starting English school. They would want to know everything. What would I tell them I learned? They wouldn’t care about the shapes in the windows, I knew that much. I’ll tell them we all practiced learning how to write our Christian names—all through the morning—I decided. I was vaguely aware that I was coming up with a fib—the first one I’d be telling them about school. A deep sadness about this overwhelmed me, but they could not know the truth about my name and their mistake.

We were at a set of double doors now, swung open. Long rows of tables stretched out in lines across the length of the auditorium. Children from various classes sat together in front of
shiny white plates with silver forks placed on a cloth to the left and silver knives to the right. I craned my head to notice all of this and heard Miss Rye’s voice call out, “Pay attention, Jenny.”

The child in front of me had already danced ahead and I followed hurriedly towards the oblong hole in the wall at the front of the room. The oblong space was actually an opening to a back room filled with light and ladies wearing aprons and shower caps who slapped shiny plates full of food on a counter that emerged from the little opening. Each child took a plate, proceeded along the nearest empty table and took a seat before the waiting forks and knives. I did the same.

I’d never used a fork and knife before. I felt frightened and excited. Would I know what to do with them? We always used spoons at home. Forks and knives were for the English, and Mummy and Daddy had told me I’d need to learn to use them one day, but I’d not imagined it would be so soon.

The voices that had filled the long hall now hushed at the same time, as though responding to an invisible summons from the front that I’d not detected. A woman with glasses, a small tight mouth, and curly reddish hair in a mane around her face, said “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen.” I looked around as she spoke and noticed the other children clasped their hands before them and bowed their heads down so that their noses touched their fingertips. I’d not known to do this. How did they all know? I marveled. As my neck turned this way and that, wondering if surely one other child, like me, did not know what to do, I caught Miss Rye staring at me. I was startled to note that her face looked stony and pinched as she stood against the wall, her face fixed upon me. As she noticed
my glance, she didn’t unclench her face, and I quickly looked down at my plate, startled by my own thought that perhaps she didn’t like me.

As I looked down at my plate, I wondered what I would do with it. There were three articles of food swimming about on it: a slab of what might be beef, a ball of mashed potatoes, and two whole peeled tomatoes from a can, their juices bleeding into the potatoes creating a pink goop that made my tummy heave when I looked at it. I noticed the clinking of forks around me, and picked up my utensils. I would do this the English way. I began to scoop at the potatoes with my fork. Just then, a woman with dark brown curls and a blue kitchen apron, whom I’d later learn was named Mrs. Chester, smacked my right forearm. My elbow buckled and the knife I held went clattering to the floor. “Elbows off the table,” intoned Mrs. Chester, dragging the “f” so that it almost sounded as if she were singing. I heard a few children laugh as I dove down under the table to retrieve the knife. My eyes stung, but I would not cry, would not spoil my face.

My elbows were rapped twice more that lunch hour, not always by Mrs. Chester. Another lunch lady, Mrs. Terry, nicer than Mrs. Chester would mostly remind me with words. It just seemed, though, that the fork and knife got heavier as lunchtime went on, and I could only balance them between bites with my elbows as a prop.

I’d made it through one bite of beef, one whole tomato, and half of the mashed potatoes when the sound of a bell cued Miss Rye to collect us from our table and march us back to class. Most of the other plates were empty, or emptier than mine, and as Miss Rye marched to the front of the line at the head of the table, she stopped by me to remark, “Is that all you’ve ate? We can’t go wasting food that is wanted elsewhere, can we Jenny?”
I looked down at my shoes but didn’t say anything. I hoped she’d not realize that I didn’t know what she meant. Who wanted my food? I would never find out because we were briskly marched back to class where we went on to learn many things I don’t remember until it was time for end-of-the-day assembly.

I did not know what assembly was, and hoped it would not be like lunch. It was not. There were no tables this time, but rather, the woman with red curly hair stood on a small platform at the front with gongs and cymbals and other shiny instruments. The students stood in rows facing her, and I saw that they were arranged by class so that the tallest children, the seven-year-olds, sat toward the back, and the littlest ones toward the front. The teachers stood propped against the wall closest to their classes.

I thought that the woman with the red curly hair was the headmistress that Daddy had warned me to be careful of, but it was not. This lady was Mrs. Smeeton, and the other girls whispered that she was mean and unfair. She taught music and manners. After speaking words I don’t remember, Mrs. Smeeton left the stage and was replaced by the headmistress, Miss Palmer. She looked a lot like Miss Rye, and later Daddy said, “Yes, both of them unmarried,” but would not explain why this made them look the same.

Miss Palmer was talking about a man. She called him Jesus. Was this the same baby Jesus that gets born to Father Christmas every year and sleeps in a manger at the bottom of a chimney? Having never seen either a manger or a chimney, baby Jesus was just another fairy tale to me, as invisible as Father Christmas, who at least left real presents. All I’d known until then was that Father Christmas came for the English, and we were Ismailies. We had Hazar Imam instead whom we sometimes called Mowla Bapa. He didn’t give presents but was a real
live person who had saved our lives, I had heard. We prayed to him, and I was learning those
prayers from the sweetest navy blue book, tiny, tiny, with strange-sounding words inside it.
These words were Arabic, Mummy said, which is why I couldn’t know what they meant, but
they were what Indians said, and we were Indian not English, even though we spoke English
and not Indian. This made my head hurt and I would stop asking, which is why I hadn’t yet got
around to the question of Jesus.

I did know that we hadn’t started off with presents at Christmas time. But very early on,
soon after Daddy got the shop, the customers started bringing wrapped parcels every
December.

“For the wee ones,” they would say. “Every child has to have presents at Christmas, and
your little girls are so good and sweet.” Mrs. Dursley was my favorite; she had made us little
woolen dresses, jumpers, and even knickers for our Sindy dolls one Christmas. Daddy had told
Mummy, I later learned, that he would not stand to have our customers buy more presents for
his own children than he did, so he and Mummy had spent a day shopping at Cash N’ Carry a
few weeks before Christmas. There was a lot of whispering and hiding and telling us not to
open cupboards, and then, on Christmas morning, our settee had been covered with wrapped
boxes. They were all from Father Christmas, Daddy said proudly, happy at last to be on good
terms with an Englishman. Later, though, he made me say thank you to Mrs. Shawl, and Mrs.
Dursley, Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. Budd, so that I wondered if Father Christmas had befriended
Daddy at their bidding.

It was through such angelic intervention that I first heard of Baby Jesus and his
connection to Christmas. One of my presents had been a Play Away book with different
activities for different holidays. Unable to read, I’d gravitated towards activities with the prettiest pictures, and what caught my imagination the most was a nativity project that had me making shepherds and angels from pipe cleaners, one for each day of the month of December. The nativity never manifested once the pack of pipe cleaners from the shop ran out and I didn’t want to ask for a new one, but my fascination with the activity book remained. The last scene involved creating a little box-like cradle and placing inside it a pink piece of plasticine stuck on a blob of cotton wool. I loved how the last and most important piece of the nativity was the smallest—the sweet little baby lying in the box. I never learned what else the baby did, and until that first day at school, I hadn’t wondered.

It was these very musings about Baby Jesus that led to a small sharp whack at the back of my head, just at the point of where the ponytail rubber band knotted my hair. I felt the knot slip a little to one side, and I knew at once that it must look crooked and that Mummy would be sad.

It was Miss Rye. Her right hand closed around my left wrist and she began pulling me towards the door as Miss Palmer spoke. I quickly noticed that she had another girl whom she dragged with her other hand, but the other girl wriggled and fought her. Miss Rye was muttering under her breath, mostly at the other girl whose scruffy brown hair stuck out all over her head like the ruffled feathers of a bird. She didn’t wear a tie, her shirt was unbuttoned at the top, and her cardigan, I noted, was missing some buttons so that her grey pinafore gaped through beneath it. As the girl twisted under Miss Rye’s grip, Miss Rye would tighten her grip on my wrist or twist it to propel me in a different direction so that I almost cried out in pain.
It was not a long walk to the double doors I’d entered just a short time before. Miss Rye left us standing there. “You are a heathen, Susanna, and not worthy of our Lord’s Prayer,” Miss Rye said with quiet emotion to the other girl who turned around and thrust out her bottom towards Miss Rye. Ignoring her, Miss Rye gripped my shoulder tightly and said, “I will not close the doors, but I don’t want a peep out of you until it’s time to go.”

I glanced at the girl beside me, bottom still thrust. She saw me looking and stuck out her tongue, darting it back quickly when she saw Miss Rye’s disapproving frown. I saw what Miss Rye saw—the saucy expression, wild hair and eyes, ill-fitted clothing, and I shrank from it, crying “Don’t go away” to Miss Rye, for a moment less afraid of her than of this strange, rude girl.

No one in the assembly seemed to notice as Miss Rye lifted her hand and with a swift sideways motion, struck my cheek with her fingertips. It happened so quickly that it was over before my cheek could even register the sting I was so familiar with at home, the skin’s slowly releasing from the pressure of a palm to leave a warm itchy feeling that lingered. My eyes could not stop themselves this time. Silent tears spilled down my cheeks, messing up the layer of white powder Mummy had slapped upon my face that morning to make me look fresh. I knew my face streaked brown and white would be ghastly, and Mummy would have to know. Daddy might hit me for making the teacher cross. I just wanted to go home but the impulse to hide away and never go home was just as strong. For what felt like a long time, I stood there, facing the open door but with my gaze fixed on my shoes, my head bobbing up and down as I gasped to catch my breath and slow it down. I tried to fill my chest with as much air as possible, a trick I’d practiced often because my sobbing annoyed Daddy so much, and finally, the gasps
subsided. As my own breath grew quiet, a rush of voices, hushed yet rising and falling like the wind washed over me.

“Our Father

Which art in Heaven

Hallow-ed be thy name. . . .”

As if uttered by one speaker, these words filled the assembly room and spilled over into the little corridor that held me and the other heathen girl. I inhaled these words deeply and shuddered on the exhalation. I had no idea what most of it meant, but for the first time that day, it didn’t matter. I felt free. I only understood the first line, and that was enough for me.

Our father—one that we all shared. Our real father—he was in Heaven. Perhaps he was Mowla Bapa. Perhaps he was Baby Jesus’s daddy or Father Christmas. I just knew that whoever and wherever he was, he had seen Miss Rye slap me, and he knew I wasn’t a naughty girl, the kind who should be slapped.

“Forever and ever amen.”

More wonderful still, a woman’s voice, Mrs. Smeeton’s I thought it was, went on to speak of Baby Jesus grown up.

“He careth not for colour, nor creed, nor station nor wealth . . . .”

Again, I heard and understood only the beginning, but it was all I needed. He cared not for color,¹⁸ which told me he was different from these people filling the room with their voices.

I didn’t even feel Miss Rye’s hand on my wrist as Susanna and I were marched back in for hymn

¹⁸ I am as yet unsure of whether to use English or American spellings. My preference would be to use the English spelling “colour,” but since I am writing in America for an American audience, I may need to opt for “color.”
practice. My heart soared as they sang, “Morning Has Broken,” and I marveled to myself, mine is the sunlight! A small bubble of joy leapt within me as they sang “All things Bright and Beautiful.” I didn’t stop to wonder how they all knew the words and I did not. I was a creature not great, but small. Too small to know about knives and forks and English prayers, but comforted by the thought that away in a manger at the bottom of my future chimney, Baby Jesus awaited my stroke upon his face.

***

“Jennifer can now proceed to lunch,” a voice would announce. I marveled that I was the only Jennifer in the school when it was such a common name, but no other girl entered the double doors at precisely 15 minutes before lunch. I would walk briskly to the lunch counter, occasionally with the lunch mistress’s hand on my shoulder, collect my plate, and be marched to the table where I would begin eating before the rest of my class. The result was the same. They would almost always be finished their meals before I’d really made a dent in mine. It happened with roast beef and barley. It happened with mashed tomatoes and stew. I could not stomach the lunches though I tried, and managing forks and knives became a balancing act of clinking silver and diving under tables to retrieve lost pieces.

“Good grief!” the lunch mistress would often exclaim. “You started well before the others and they’re all finished. Stop daydreaming for goodness sake and make a move on.” Eventually, I’d be able to depart with my class, my stomach and plate a mess of unidentifiable food stuffs. It wasn’t half as bad as milk time though. For as long as I could remember, I didn’t do well with milk. Doodh we called it at home, the Gujarati word always preceding the English one in my mind. Doodh was different from dhoo dhoo though I feared them equally.
“Look, look, Mithu, I’ve got a dhoo dhoo in my hand,” Daddy would fib. “Quick, quick, open your mouth, open your mouth I say, right now, and eat it.” His hand would be empty, of course, and when it did contain a fly, he would only pretend to deposit it in my mouth. Still, the rapid fire of his voice scared me to obedient running, afraid more of his hand than its contents. Later, when I’d grown accustomed to cleaning dead flies out of window frames, I stopped fearing flies completely and it was only bare hands that made me quake.

Doodh, unfortunately, was a different matter, never to be overcome. Within minutes of drinking it, a white film would coat my throat and I would start retching. Then, my nasal passages would fill with fluid and I’d sneeze violently, head bobbing spasmodically, sometimes uncontrollably for minutes at a time. My eyes would run along with my nose, and Mummy would put me to bed with a hankie. “Mithu doesn’t like her milk,” she would shake her head sadly, but she wouldn’t stop feeding it to me.

I don’t blame her for believing my adverse reaction was a sham. After all, I had gone on a Devon Double Cream diet when she went to the hospital to deliver Shina, and it was all I would eat at my Daddy’s hands. “Let her,” Dr. Pammier had said. “She’s too skinny.”

This had been followed by my indulgence in the cream that skimmed the necks of the tall glass bottles the milkman delivered to our shop on Monday mornings. I would sneak to the front step while Daddy or Mummy was arranging the morning goods, and I’d stick my thumb through the silver foiled caps, making just big enough a hole to drink the cream from each bottle. Most of it’s still there, I reasoned to myself. The customers won’t mind. My parents caught on almost immediately. I waited for Daddy to explode, but instead he looked thoughtful, then said,
“Never mind, Mithu Betha. Just don’t drink the cream anymore, and I’ll return these bottles as defective.

“We’ll get our money’s worth and more!” he added jubilantly, reciting a popular television advert to my mother who smiled at the shared joke.

So when I stopped being able to stomach the lighter, thinner, whiter stuff that came further down in the bottle, it’s understandable that my mother doubted my credibility. “You like to sneeze so that I can give you more dawa,” she would accuse.

Dawa did seem to help. I was prescribed Triaminic cough syrup most of the time, but the doctor seemed to suggest a new remedy each month so that, in the end, I called all of it dawa, the Gujarati or Swahili word for medicine. I knew some words we used were Gujarati, the language of our family and culture, and others were Swahili, the words Mummy and Daddy grew up with in Africa. “Swahili was to us what English is to you,” Daddy would say proudly, but he never did tell me which words were which, so that I only learned to differentiate between what really mattered—what was English and what was Gujrathili, as I came to think of it. Years later, when I’d not used the word dawa in a while, I asked my mother which it was—Gujarati or Swahili. It bothered me at first that as a further indication of her failing memory, she couldn’t tell me, but then I realized it didn’t matter in the end what brown language dawa drew from. What mattered was that it wasn’t English. Sooner or later, I’d utter such a word at school and glean from the puzzled faces of my teachers and peers that it didn’t belong there.

Some words, like dizzy, meant something different in English than in Gujrathili, I learned before long. “I don’t like dizzy” made no sense to the teacher who repeated, “No Jenny, we’re discussing what kinds of foods we like and dislike.”
“Banana” Daddy roared back at home. “Don’t you know banana, *Kadus baherneh*?”

There were many such instances of untangling sentences, and it took me several years to realize that three unique languages were at play. Rather, I thought of them as home language and school language—each one distinct with some overlap and some secret vocabulary.

The *dawa* incident stands out because it brought me Mrs. Crane, my first ally. Mummy had not given me my *dawa* that morning, and when I explained this to Miss Rye, she had sent me out into the corridor to finish my milk in silence.

“What are you doing here?” asked Mrs. Crane, walking up to where I stood in the corridor outside Miss Rye’s classroom, nose dripping as I slurped my milk from a bottle with a thin red straw.

“I couldn’t finish my milk fast enough,” I replied, not looking up at first. Then I did, and I saw the kindest blue eyes glittering back at me from a finely boned face framed with honey brown waves.

“You’re Aziz’s daughter aren’t you?” she asked, in a friendly voice.

I nodded, my throat gummed up with white stuff.

“I know your Daddy,” she said with a satisfied smile. “He’s a nice man and a good grocer, you know. He brings me my deliveries on time every Monday, and I know he wouldn’t want his daughter in the corridor. Come.” She took the milk from me with one hand and clasped my small brown hand in her other neatly manicured one—the pale pink nail varnish gleaming on each finger. She dropped me off at the nurse’s office where I was given Ribena black currant juice to drink and a bed to rest upon. I was allowed to lie through lunch, and when
I returned to class afterwards, I felt like things had imperceptibly but most definitely changed. Miss Rye still called me “slow coach,” and the other children still chortled as they chanted at me:

- Half a pound of tuppeny rice
- Half a pound of plastic
- Put it in the washing machine
- Out comes a spastic!

It didn’t matter. I had an ally.

I needed one or so it seemed. Mrs. Crane couldn’t help me with my biggest challenge, but knowing she was there gave me the sense of a secret weapon. Nothing could shelter me, really, from my shame at not being able to remember the alphabet. For one thing, it had to be memorized in order. I only truly mastered this after visiting Canada where they had a song to make it simple. Until then, p’s and q’s perplexed me. Which came first and which way did it face? I always had to guess. Then there was the matter of remembering how each letter was shaped. I learned during my first week that the squiggly shape next to each letter of the alphabet on the poster I’d seen on the classroom wall was called its lower-case. My parents hadn’t known to teach me these.

“*Baap re baap!*” Daddy exclaimed. “Here we thought we were making you advanced and it learns out that we taught you the wrong way. You must catch up, quick, quick and learn this secondary alphabet, right *betha*?”

I tried but it was so much to remember, and it took so long to copy the squiggles neatly in my composition book. Miss Rye would let me miss playtime but not lunch to do my copying.
“Slow coach at it again,” she would exclaim to the other teachers as she walked me down the corridor towards the lunch room. I would smile shyly and politely, unsure of whether I was supposed to nod or look away. The other teachers, whom I did not yet know, would smile, laugh, or shake their heads. Miss Rye seemed pleased with their responses regardless.

“I’m afraid she’s a backwards child,” Miss Rye said to Mummy and Daddy one afternoon when she stopped by the shop on her way back from school. Daddy had been slicing meats and hurriedly wiped his hands on his blue apron, then removed it hastily, stuffing it under the counter. He heartily shook her hand with both of his: “Good afternoon, Miss Rye. So good of you to come in. Good afternoon. This is my wife, Shirin.”

Mummy was behind the front counter serving customers in a pink apron that matched Daddy’s in design. “Thank you, Mrs. Budd,” she said in her serving-customers voice and came out from the counter to join Daddy, smoothing the hairs of her bun and tucking them in behind one of her black zig zag hairpins.

“Miss Rye is telling us about Mithu—uh, Geneffa’s progress” Daddy told Mummy, smiling the way he did when English people were around. I observed all of this from the cave I’d created for myself under the cheese counter. I liked the ripe smell down there and the way Shina and I could fit perfectly, pretending it was by turns, cave or boat or baby’s crib. Now I wondered whether I should come forward and greet my teacher or stay hidden. I stayed put while I wondered the right thing to do.

“I beg your pardon,” Mummy said politely.

“I hate to be the one to say it,” Miss Rye said with a kind smile full of pity as she looked down at my mother who stood a full head shorter than she. “I’m afraid your Jenny is a
backwards child, and she’s such a slow coach at her lessons, you’ll have to work with her at home.”

“Of course, of course,” Daddy assured her. “We’ve been teaching her the proper alphabet now that we know, and she is practicing her writing.”

“Oh dear,” Mummy spoke with a sigh. “I was hoping for Nonsuch Grammar School for her. My nephews both went there after their 11 plus you know.”

Miss Rye’s smile widened. “There’ll be no Nonsuch Grammar School for Jenny, I’m afraid. Still, you can work on her reading and her English pronunciation at home. We’re doing everything we can at school.”

That evening, after the plates had been cleared away from dinner and Daddy had gone over his accounts, he called for me to bring my school book to him. It was a thin manila volume stapled together at its binding, and it had a hand-drawn picture of an English girl and boy on the cover. Daddy opened to the first page and said,

“Start reading, go on. We will show them who is a backwards child.”

The letters gathered and separated, seemingly at random, before my eyes. Any linguistic pattern that caused them to cluster into words was beyond me. I began faithfully sounding them out.

“Oh-en-suh uh-puh-on,” a swift smack on the side of my head stopped me short.

“You are asking for tamachos, aren’t you?” Daddy threatened through clenched teeth.

“Do we send you to English schools for you to make mockery of their tongue? Huh? Read again.”
Sometimes, a tamacho would explode like a spit, a smack, and a slap—all three at once in one blow, and there was no English word I knew that could come close. In this way each evening proceeded from dinner until bedtime. If Daddy had lots of work to do, I was lucky. Mummy would come over as I struggled over the groupings of letters and would offer a phrase here or there. I would quickly remember it to spout off to Daddy when he got back to me.

“See. See. You know how to read. Backwards child, huh!” But more tamachos would ensue if I couldn’t follow up on the memorized phrases with fluent reading of the passage that came next. I remember loving and then hating a book about a beautiful princess who sang to the moon. “Be,” slap, “uh,” slap, “ootiful” Daddy would roar, and I came to hate that sneaky word that never looked the way it was supposed to.

That was until I saw the beautiful book in the window display of the Sweet Shop next door to ours. We were still Tates Self Selection Store at the time, and the Sweet Shop was as deceptively named as we were as it contained far more than just sweets. The book was poised on a glass stand that held nothing else so that it seemed to be suspended in mid-air with lollipops and licorice ropes swirling around it. It was ice cream pink in color, and in gold letters, it said, Toyland Tales by Enid Blyton, or at least Mummy said so. Enid Blyton was written in a fancy way that Mummy said was the author’s signature.

“Is it a grownup book for children? Is it about a land of toys that are real?” I asked with excitement, rushing my words together.

“Of course, Mithu,” Mummy said with approval, but then shaking her head, “Too bad Mithu doesn’t like reading.”
“This is different,” I exclaimed, giddy with excitement. I had chanced upon my way out of Glastonbury Infants School, out of Sutton with its grey rooftops and rivulets of rain dripping constantly from them, out of even the sitting room with its oval dining room table that took up all the space and the matching curved armchairs with the orange paisley pattern that I liked to get lost in. If I could only learn to read fast enough to jump into a story, it could cover me up, all of me, my shame and everything.

I vowed to read right there and then. By Christmas. I would have that book as my reward.

After that, school took on a different feeling for me. I would show them who was a backwards child. At playtime, I copied the alphabet faithfully. I tried joining words together and making sounds. On the bus with Mummy on the way to dancing lessons I would study the little manila book, memorize what the words looked like on the page and then reprint them across my mind as I looked away. Slowly, the strange couplings of letters and sounds began to form a language that sounded a bit like the one I spoke. I was still a slow coach, but I found a defiance had replaced the shame I’d once felt. I found myself thinking that I might actually hate Miss Rye as much as I feared her.

I wanted her to share in my excitement—certainly all the customers had responded with enthusiasm when I showed them the announcement in the Sutton Guardian: “Twinkling Stars at Wimbledon Theater.” I was going to be in a tap dance called “The Mini Minstrels” with five other girls, and we were going to do a real show on stage on a Friday in December. We were also in another song at the beginning and one at the end called the Grand Finale. I would sing a part of the opening act to anyone who would listen: “Another opening, another show, at
Wimbledon where we always go, a chance for stage folk to say ‘hello,’ another opening of another show.” I sang it to Mrs. Crane when I saw her in the corridor after playtime. She was, after all, as sweet as a customer.

She smiled widely and said, “I know. I’m planning to come and bring my twins as well.” That’s when Miss Rye came down the corridor about to start the afternoon’s lesson and asked me what I was doing. I knew I must tell her. Daddy had assured me that it would show her I’m not a backwards child. “Tell her that you have won medals you know. Tell her how you will dance on stage for all the English at the famous Wimbledon Theater.”

“I’m going to dance on stage,” I told her shyly.

“What’s that?” she asked, clearly not expecting my response.

The words came out altogether, a jumble of pride and persuasion. “I’m going to do a tap dance called the Mini Minstrels and it’s going to be on stage, and it’s going to be at Wimbledon Theater, and I can get you tickets my Daddy says.”

Miss Rye laughed a thin, cold laugh that lasted longer than any I’d heard from her before.

“Are you a dancer then, Jenny?” she asked, tilting her head backwards as she laughed.

“I’m surprised you’re able to keep up with the other dancers. Are you five steps behind the others, or do they let you start early?” With that she did a little waltz step but pretended to stumble over her feet as she grasped the air in front of her as though lurching after an imaginary partner who had danced on ahead.
My face felt hot and itchy despite the usual layer of powder. “It’s not like that,” I muttered, quietly at first. Then louder, “It’s tap dancing. Without partners. I’m good at it too.” I dared myself not to cry.

“I’m looking forward to it, dear,” Mrs. Crane said, her hand gently brushing my shoulder as she turned towards the nursery school.

“Well, perhaps I’ll just have to get a ticket and come and see for myself,” Miss Rye said with an amused smile. “Get along now.”

That afternoon, I couldn’t concentrate until assembly. I made a mistake copying out in my composition book and had to start it over. I didn’t go out for afternoon playtime. It was report back day. Each of my classmates showed how much writing they had copied.

“One side only?” Miss Rye said when it was my turn. “You’ve had twice as much time as everyone else. Really Jenny.”

At assembly, Mrs. Smeeton began by asking teachers to report back from report back day. “Let’s hear the good work that each class is doing,” she invited.

A teacher I didn’t know shared about her class first as she was sitting closest to Mrs. Smeeton. Another teacher shared about her class’s nature walk. Miss Rye was next. “We’ve been copying out the harvest poem and drawing pictures for it,” she said; “well, most of my pupils have. You-know-who is still not finished copying.”

“Ahhh,” said the first teacher with an exaggerated nod.

“Oh dear,” said the second teacher, looking out at the sea of first formers, searching me out I was sure.
Did the whole school know that I was a slow coach? It dawned on me—of course they did. They saw me at lunch line up. They saw me stay inside working during play time. They all knew. Never more than at that instance, I wanted to disappear, to be invisible, to be swallowed up by the brown wooden floor.

It was Mrs. Smeeton who spoke next. “I don’t know who or what you mean,” she said in a cold voice.

“Oh, it’s just our slow coach, never you bother,” said Miss Rye, ready to move attention away from her it now seemed.

“Hmmm,” said Mrs. Smeeton without much interest. “Well, we’ll move right along than shan’t we,” and in that moment, I knew I had found a teacher who would give me a chance. Someone who went beyond ally to advocate—someone else who was out of step with Miss Rye.

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When Catherine and Carol played Charlie’s Angels in the playground, I’d hoped they’d let me be Sabrina Duncan because I liked her name. But Sarah Davis, the new girl, quickly got chosen to be the third angel, and I had to choose something else. I asked if they could let me be the dog—there had to be a dog, I convinced them. All Americans have dogs. So they reluctantly let me play a collie for one episode. I enjoyed that part the best, chasing after the girl-detectives and lapping at their hands, but they said it made them sticky, and they wouldn’t let me be the dog after that. They said I could play Bosley, and I had to quickly watch the television show on ITV that evening so that I could find out who they meant. It turned out that Bosley was a man—a fat and ugly man—and I didn’t like the way he talked. So then they let me be Charlie,
except he was just a voice on a tape recorder, so I spent most of playtime when I was Charlie, standing on the metal fence that divided our school from Glastonbury Junior School.

I wasn’t always on the fence. One day, seeing that I was standing apart from the others, the playground mistress suggested, “Why don’t you play Cowboys and Indians? That was very popular when I was a child.” Immediately, the group of first formers around her went running off in different directions—some of them pulling pretend guns from their hips and making shooting noises while the others crouched down and ran with their hands slapping against their mouths making loud humming noises. I hesitated by the playground mistress.

“What should I do? Who should I be?” I asked shyly.

“What would you like to be?” she asked, smiling.

“Well, I am Indian,” I said, with some hesitation.

She laughed. “You’re not that kind of Indian, dear. These are Red Indians. Ask one of the children to show you.”

I loved Sarah Davis, the pretty new girl who was as small and dainty as a doll, with fair curls framing her pink and white face. “Can you show me how to be an Indian,” I called to her as she whizzed by me on her haunches.

She showed me how to vibrate my hand against my mouth quickly while humming to make Indian noises, and convinced me that all I had to do was run around and avoid the cowboys while making that noise. It was quite simple once I got the hang of it, and I was excited for playtime the next day because I would know what to do.

But the next day the children pulled out their pretend guns and shouted, “Bobbies and Darkies.” This was the same game with a twist. Instead of guns, the bobbies wielded
truncheons. Nicholas pretended to hit me on the shoulder with his. “You better run, Darkie, better run,” he called out. I ran, but I was unhappy.

“I had to be a darkie at playtime today,” I told Daddy after dinner. He was in a good mood, but his voice grew thunderous as he exclaimed, “Darkie? Darkie—my foot! You tell them that my Daddy was a Bobbie before they were born.”

“Really, Daddy—were you a real London Bobbie with a uniform and bell-shaped hat and truncheon and everything?” I asked with excitement. Of course, I knew the story, and knew that it was a safe one to ask, and that because he was in a good mood, Daddy would be happy to recollect it.

“You don’t know,” he always began. “But when you were newly-born, when we lived in Shepherd’s Bush. Before we bought this good-for-nothing shop . . .”

“You were a real-life Bobbie!” I would exclaim quickly, to remind him of a happier time.

“I was a Bobbie—yes—a London District Traffic Warden. I would get on my motorcycle every morning, and drive to the headquarters where I would put on my badge. And then, I would direct traffic at busy junctions.”

“And give tickets,” I’d say, breathlessly.

“And give tickets to any car parked outside the law,” he would finish.

“And you almost gave a ticket to the Queen!” Shina would chime in so Daddy wouldn’t forget her favorite part.

Daddy’s smile full of mischief, he would add, “Yes, I gave tickets to everybody, everybody. The cars are all equal, you know. No caste or color bar with cars. I gave a ticket even to Sean Connery,” he added excitedly. “James Bond!
“I saw a topless car at Piccadilly, and I’d been told by my superior to make sure and ticket these ones, but as I was writing, a handsome man leapt into the car from the passenger side, bounced into the driver’s seat, said ‘Thank you, officer,’ as he started the car, and drove off before I could tell him, ‘I sewed a suit for you once!’”

Shina and I would collapse over our curry in a fit of giggles, and Mummy would glare at us and our half-eaten plates before beginning to clear the table.

“You sewed him a suit!” I’d exclaim with glee.

“Yes, yes,” Daddy would remember. “When I first had some money after I came to England. After I’d slept under the settees at Heathrow Airport for many months, shoveling snow off the runway. I got promoted to cabin cleaner for Air India. Then, I had enough money to telegram my father in Tanzania to tell him I am alive, and what did he tell me?”

“Get a trade!” Shina and I would recite together.

“Become a tailor. Learn textiles,” Daddy specified. “Then you can come back to Mwanza and work in one of our businesses.

“So there I was, learning to sew at the London School of Fashion, working on a suit for Sean Connery to wear in his next film. My job was to sew the shoulders, you know. He had a drop shoulder that we had to design special pads for. This was years before I became a bobbie, of course.

“I wanted to shout at him, ‘Mr. Connery, I made your pads,’ but it was too late. He drove off.”

“And then there was Dracula,” I would offer to prolong the story.

“Ah yes, Peter Cushing,” and Daddy’s voice would drop with awe.
“He wore dark sunglasses over a white, white face, and while I was busy writing the
ticket, he walked up to me and stood so quietly that I didn’t know he was there. When I looked
up, I almost shrieked out of my skin. He lifted up his dark, dark, sunglasses and smiled, and I
said ‘Have a good day, Sir,’ and my ticket book and I went running.”

“And what about the Queen?” Shina would pipe in through our shared laughter.

“Oh, oh, I must tell you about the Queen!” Daddy would chortle.

“I was outside of Harrods in Knightsbridge. Brompton Road was blocked off, and my
partner told me, ‘No cars allowed here today—ticket the lot of them,’ but he didn’t tell me why.
I knew that it was good luck to ticket a Rolls Royce, so when I saw a line of them outside
Harrods, I pulled out my pad. I was about to place a ticket on the windshield when a gentleman
in a suit came to me and said ‘Woy! What are you doing? Don’t you know this is Her Majesty’s
Rolls Royce?’

“I made a bow and said ‘So sorry, I did not know,’ but he took the ticket from my hand
all the same.”

The story ended here, but it lent mirth to the whole evening, and Shina and I would
burst with pride at our Daddy being so brave and important.

I had other reasons to burst with pride even though I still had to play a darkie at school
because the other children didn’t care if my daddy had once been a bobbie. I was to be in a tap
dance called the Mini Minstrels. I had been dancing at The Doris Holford Stage School for one
year now, and Miss Doris herself had hand-picked me with four other girls to be part of this
special tap dance. Our costume was a pink gingham dress with a multi-colored patchwork
design, white raffia trim, and stiff pink tulle petticoats to make the skirt stand out around our
waists. We were to wear long white knee socks over black tights to look like real darkies, white tap shoes and gloves, and black golliwog wigs over our hair. The wigs were short and fuzzy with a white bow on the right side. One of the mums would tuck our long hair under the tight wig with the head of a crochet needle, and this hurt my head, especially the puffy bruises on my neck.

My pride came when one of the mums took me in to see Miss Doris at the dress rehearsal. “She doesn’t need black makeup, does she?” she asked. “After all, she’s almost as dark as a darkie.”

My feelings were mixed up at this. I didn’t want to wear the makeup because it was a thick dark brown paint that covered your whole face and neck, except for a ring of white paint that circled each eye and the mouth.

“How do you breathe?” I wanted to know.

“It won’t affect your breathing, silly girl,” one of the mums had told me, but I still was nervous.

At the same time, I didn’t want to be the only one without paint. That would mean I was a real darkie, and I knew I wasn’t. Mummy and Daddy had lived in Africa, and I knew from the photos that real darkies had much darker skin and much whiter teeth than we did.

Kristine Ketchell and I were paraded in front of Miss Doris that day, and Miss Doris had said, “No, she’s going to have to wear makeup as well, I’m afraid. She’s not dark enough.”

At home, Daddy was jubilant. “See! See! I told you all—Miss Doris is a true gem—she knows we are not real darkies, and you should tell them at school, Mithu.”

But before I had a chance to tell them at school, Miss Doris died.
Daddy came to fetch us from school that day instead of Mummy. “Mummy has read about it in the paper, and the customers are all filling in the gaps,” he said gravely. Miss Doris was about her business at home when she had a heart attack, tumbled over the bannister, and fell to her death, my father explained. It was sudden and unexpected, everyone said, as though each of those words meant something different and solemn. We would still have dancing classes, and the school would continue in her honor, under the direction of Miss Ann.

“Miss Ann is very business-minded,” Daddy had pointed out. Now that we had won a gold medal for the Mini Minstrels at the latest dance contest, Miss Ann decided to book us to perform at Old Folks’ Homes all over London. “The old folks really enjoy this one,” she explained to the parents. “It makes them think of the good old days when they were growing up.”

“London isn’t what it used to be,” she added with gravity. I knew we lived in Sutton, which was south of London, and when we sang the words of the title, “Stay out of the South,” it made grownups smile. In fact, the older they were, the more they seemed to smile at the song.

“Is the song really about London?” I asked Aunty Josie while she was driving us to the show.

“Well, of course it’s about London!” said Aunty Jo, who had never in her life been farther north than Manchester. I knew I was born in London and lived there until I was two, so the song made me proud. The old folks clapped louder than anyone ever had at the end, and those who could stand up to clap, did so. We followed up the Mini Minstrels’ song with “Rule, Britannia!” and some of the old folks even wiped their eyes with big white hankies. I was eager
to share this with my classmates. I hoped that singing “Rule, Britannia!” for old folks would convince everyone that I was not a Russian spy.

It had happened suddenly and unexpectedly one afternoon. In the morning, everything had been as usual. Then, in the playground after lunch, one by one, the girls would whisper together, looking at me, and whoever got whispered to would start to look a bit frightened of me and ignore me when I asked them why.

I was almost in tears and wanting to know what I had done when Sarah Davis finally told me: “Carol said that you’re a Russian spy, not an English darkie at all.”

“But I am an English darkie,” I insisted. “Don’t you remember?” I sang the song to the television advertisement in which an Indian man starts singing in the middle of London traffic—“Cadbury’s made me and they covered me with chocolate!” My altered lyrics usually made Sarah laugh.

Sarah laughed a bit, but then stopped abruptly as Carol glared at her.

“I’m not a Russian spy,” I insisted. “I would know if I was, and I don’t even know what a Russian spy is, so I’m not.”

“No,” Carol retorted. “A lot of spies are hippotised so that they don’t know that they’re bad—I saw it on Charlie’s Angels.”

By now I was crying. “But I’m not. I’m not!”

“Look at your hands,” Sarah explained, after Janice had come up and whispered to her while looking at me from the corner of one eye.
“They’re brown on the top but pink on the bottom.” I flipped my hands over to see if this was the case. Sarah was right. Why had I not noticed this before? How could I not know my own hands?

“We can’t play with you anymore,” said Carol in a serious voice. “The Russians painted you to be a spy, but it didn’t work because they forgot the bottom of your hands.”

I watched in disbelief as the children continued their games a safe distance from me. I looked forward to dancing school where I could at least be a Mini Minstrel with the other girls, but Natalie, who usually sat next to me in the car when Auntie Josie drove us to dancing lessons wouldn’t talk to me either. “Paki,” she whispered, and turned to look out of the window.

Aunty Josie saw my quivering chin when we all got out of the car. “What on earth?” she began as my face crumpled, and I fell into her arms to hide my face in her large waist.

“Natalie called me a Paki,” I gasped.

Aunty Josie grabbed me by both arms and unwrapped them from around her waist, holding me out from her as she spoke.

“Now listen here—”

She noticed that Natalie had walked away, swinging her black tap shoe bag as she walked. Swiftly, Auntie Josie pulled me over to Natalie by one hand and grabbed Natalie by the arm and spun her around.

“Listen here, young lady,” she told Natalie. “Jennifer may look like a darkie, but she was born here just like you were. South. South of London—just like you were. She’s an English girl—through and through, and she deserves the same treatment as any of you.”
I loved Auntie Jo with her dyed black curly short hair, humped nose, pale skin, cigarette-stained teeth, and large lumpy frame. She was one of my parents’ best friends, even though her first husband was in prison and her second husband—Lorna and Janet’s daddy, Uncle Dom—well, she hadn’t actually married him yet, spoke “fluent Cockney,” Daddy said.

“You tell them,” she encouraged me as Natalie turned to go on ahead. “At school. Let them know you’re a Mini Minstrel, and you have to wear dark makeup just like all the other English girls.”

Of course, Daddy had wanted me to tell them from the beginning, but once Aunty Josie had said it, I felt more certain that it was a good idea. The next day, before school started, I went to Miss Rye’s desk and said, “If there’s time today, can I do my song and dance for the Mini Minstrels?”

“How long is that going to take?” she said with an amused air, and my face grew hot as I remembered her previous remark about my not keeping time with the others.

“I can just do part of the song and the dance that goes with it,” I mumbled, and supposed that she’d forget. But later that afternoon, before the bell went for assembly, Miss Rye said, “We have a few moments now, and Jenny would like to do a dance for us.”

“I don’t have my tap shoes, but I can pretend,” I said excitedly. I stood in front of the rows of tables and chairs, my back to Miss Rye at her front table, and I began bouncing in time to the imaginary music. On cue, I began my shuffle-hop-step, tap-step, ball change, and began singing:

If you don’t like milk and honey,

Where the skies are always sunny,
If you don’t like brown-eyed beautiful girls,

Stay out of the South!

From there, I jumped straight to the part of the dance that had no singing and hummed the music aloud as I danced. To my astonishment, Miss Rye was tapping her toe against the floor in time to my steps. As I did my tap springs in a circle, I caught sight of her and she was bobbing her head along to my humming, and humming along with me. The children were sitting quietly, and they seemed to be actually watching and listening. I ended with a repeat of the verse I had sung, and to my surprise, Miss Rye’s voice rang out from behind me, singing along, but singing different words when she got to the end:

If you want to miss a heaven on earth,

Stay out of the South!

As I ended the song, Miss Rye came up and put her arm around my shoulder. “Thank you, Jennifer,” she said hugging my shoulder as she did so. “That was lovely, and reminded me of when I was a girl.” I wasn’t sure why she sang different words, but I was just so happy that I’d found a way to please her. I was too happy to say anything back, and I didn’t want to spoil the moment by saying the wrong thing, so I just smiled back at her and returned to my little table.

At assembly that afternoon, things got even better. Mrs. Smeeton was talking about how English children used to not have clean water. “Think about it!” she exclaimed. “Clean water—the kind that you waste every day!” She talked about how much more those thirsty children loved the queen than we did. She wanted us to start singing the national anthem at the end of each assembly. She asked us to stand, and she began playing the piano. Only a few of us sang when the song started.
Mrs. Smeeton was aghast. “What are your parents teaching you?” she cried, incredulous and visibly upset. “Everyone who doesn’t know the words to England’s most important song—sit down!” About six students were left standing. One by one, she had each student start singing to her.

“God save our gracious Queen . . .”

One by one, they were inaudible, or audibly wrong, and she coldly asked them to take a seat. I was the last student standing, but strangely, I wasn’t afraid.

“Jennifer, is it?” Mrs. Smeeton asked as she sat down at the piano.

I started singing as soon as the piano started,

God save the gracious Queen
Long live the noble Queen,
God save the Queen.

“And she’s not even English,” Mrs. Smeeton marveled as she abruptly stopped playing the piano and turned to look at me. I stopped singing but kept standing, unsure of what was transpiring.

“Do you hear that boys and girls? Jenny, come up here, come to the front.” I walked up to her and stood beside the piano where Mrs. Smeeton had stood to address the assembly.

“This girl has got it right,” she said, placing her thin hand on my shoulder. “Queen Elizabeth the Second is not only our queen—she is the queen. The only queen—ruling beyond the seas, to the colonies and throughout the Commonwealth. Each of you except for this little girl has stood there and sung about your queen as though she belonged to you alone. But this
little girl knows the correct form—the Queen of England is the only queen, and from now on, we will sing it correctly—God Save the Queen!”

I returned to my place quietly, trying not to show how proud I was feeling inside. But that night, as I lay in my lower bunk, sinking into sleep, I thought about how I really was an English girl, through and through, and I sang quietly to myself: “If you don’t like brown-eyed, beautiful girls, stay out of the South.”

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I was sad after Christmas when the Mini Minstrels was over, for just as I’d formed a safe camaraderie with the other children at playtime, especially with Sarah Davis, Susanna began tormenting me in the toilets. I hadn’t really noticed she was gone until she came back. The teachers were more tight-lipped and on guard, almost anticipating her antics, while the children delighted in her angry outbursts that would usually end in her being dragged from class, spitting and hollering, by the elbow of her threadbare cardigan. I never did learn why she left and what prompted her return. I just remember that after Susanna returned to Glastonbury Infants School, I started double-wiping my bottom even when there was no trace of brown. I wanted to be sure there was no smell left on me. Susanna didn’t like playing with the other girls, but she did like to follow me into the cloakroom and corner me when I exited a stall.

“Oh look, you forgot to wipe your poo! Oh, wait a minute, you got it all over your hands. Naughty girl—you’ve gone and rubbed it all over your face!”

If I tried to rush past her, like I did the first time, she would grab me by the shoulders of my cardigan and throw me back against the stall door. The first time that happened, she knocked my ponytail right off my head, and the blue satin ribbon that held it slid down my back,
then fluttered to the urine-spattered cement. I left it there and hoped I wouldn’t get in trouble for losing it.

After that, I would stand very quietly in the stall, waiting to hear the sounds of her plimsoles leaving the cloakroom before I would allow myself to flush. This didn’t always work. One day, after about a month of hiding from Susanna, I’d thought I was free of her and was taking time on the toilet, letting everything slide slowly from my body. I hadn’t been paying attention to the sounds of other girls entering the room. Suddenly, I heard a shout of incomprehensible Cockney, and Susanna’s head of greasy dark hair bobbed up from under the bottom of the stall’s door, her brown eyes glittering up at me.

“Miss Rye sent me,” she said with a naughty smile that frightened me. “She wants me to make sure you wipe all the poo-poo off.”

“I’m all finished,” I lied. “Go away!” I clutched the plastic toilet seat, one hand beside each shivering thigh. I felt an instinct to brace myself. Would she really try to flush me down the toilet?

“No, you’re not,” she insisted, heaving herself through the rectangular opening and jumping up so that she stood just inches from me, her upper body towering over me as she pressed a rough palm on each of my shoulders and held me fast.

“Go on. Wipe your bottom. I want to see your little brown bottom,” and she giggled at this. I realized in that moment that she couldn’t really see me. My pinafore hung like a protective curtain around my hips, and I’d just hiked it up in the back, which she couldn’t see. I could not let her see me. With one hand still holding up my pinafore, I tugged at my woolen white tights at the waistline where they rested against my white underpants and pulled them
up. There! I had lifted the top part to cover my tummy, so I stood up and quickly pulled up the back of my tights, dropping the back of my pinafore down as I did so.

“Ewww,” shrieked Susanna, looking past me to the tell-tale contents of the toilet bowl.

It was enough time for me to push past her and rush out of the stall and cloakroom, not stopping to wash my hands. I heard Susanna calling obscenities after me, but these were obscured by the sound of my heavy breaths and snifflies as I cried quietly. I was furious at myself for making Susanna right—now she had proof that I was a stinky child who didn’t wipe her bottom or wash her hands.

In the classroom, I sat down at my table next to Sarah Davis who was coloring in her nature book. I wouldn’t look at her, couldn’t talk to her. I felt so ashamed. A ripe odor hung around me, and I spent most of the time until lunch avoiding contact with anyone. As we lined up for lunch, which I now took with the rest of the class, Sarah turned to me and asked, “What happened?” My face felt like it was on fire.

“Susanna found me in the cloakroom and told me I smell like poo,” I said meekly.

“Well don’t listen to her—she’s schewpid!” Sarah exclaimed, spitting the “chew” as though to expel a foul taste.

As we filed out of the classroom and into the corridor, I caught up with Sarah so that we walked side by side, and I whispered in a shaky voice, “But she’s right—can’t you smell it?”

Sarah sniffed the air around her with interest. “No,” she said cheerfully, “I can’t.”

“I can smell it, and it’s coming from me,” I said miserably.
“My mum says I can’t believe anything Susanna says,” said Sarah, decisively, and
grabbed my hand, squeezed it, and pulled me forward so that we could catch up with the rest
of the lunch line.

After dinner that night, I slipped into my parent’s room while Mummy was clearing the
dishes and Daddy was downstairs packing up the shop. I wanted to see if it was still there, and
sure enough, the brown stain on the patterned bedspread was proof that Sarah was wrong and
Susanna was right. My parents had used the same bedspread for as long as I’d been alive if not
longer. It lay crisp and without wrinkle upon the firm mattress as it always did, for I had never
once seen the bed unmade and could not speak to the colors and textures of what lay beneath
it. That bedspread was the largest piece of fabric I’d ever seen, and as such, was the emblem of
my parents. It hung in cream-colored pleats that fell to the floor, and the top panel, stretched
taut like a rectangular sea before my eyes, was cream also but speckled with large, plate-sized
leaves of different shades of orange, each outlined in gold—leaves I later learned were maple.
But there, on the bottom right corner, was a brown smudge that extended from a reddish leaf,
across the cream, to an amber-colored one just below it. I couldn’t pretend it was anything
else—it was from me.

I rubbed at the stain with my fingers, and then the heel of my hand, as I’d done so many
times before to see if I could make it fade, but it would not rub out nor rub in, but stayed the
same shade and shape. I sniffed at it to see if it betrayed its cause, but it was the same moldy
odor of all our laundry left too long to dry on the line. I slid out of my pink slippers and climbed
on the bed, laying my face against the stain and remembering how it got there. Mummy would
come barging in at any moment, I knew, and want to know what I was doing and why. But for
now, the cool bedspread against my cheek allowed me to remember.

I was much younger but not a baby anymore. I see Mummy is pinning my shoulders
down onto the bed, and I am screaming, “No, please don’t, not this time, not this time,” as my
father slides his fist under my knees so that both of them lie hinged upon his stiff forearm.

“Come on, betha, we’re not hurting you,” Mummy implores as Daddy flips my legs back and
sticks a cold marble-like piece of plastic into my bottom. It doesn’t go in, but slips out, and I
squirm. Daddy slaps my face and shouts, “Be still, or you will get the smacking of your life,” and
he tries again, jamming at my bottom harder each time until the capsule explodes inside of me
and my parents back away, panting from the exertion.

That first time, I felt a rumbling inside of me, and if I’d known what a bomb was, I’d have
thought it had gone off. Instead, I felt a deep burning that seemed to sear through me, and
suddenly, I felt hot fluid pour out of me and wet the bedspread that lay underneath my bottom.

“Sannahs, juldi, juldi, sannahs nikreche!” my father yelled to my mother.

She rolled me onto my side, and wedged a white towel that my father handed her
between me and the bedspread, but it was too late. She scrubbed at that bedspread, then
laundered the whole thing in the bathtub, laying it out to dry on the sitting room carpet for
several days. But it returned to the bed to stay there forever, a brown stain to remind them and
me for the next ten years. As for Dr. Pammier’s suppositories, they were administered on the
beige carpet after that, a stained towel always beneath me.

I didn’t like Dr. Pammier because one day, not long after I’d started school, she listened
to my chest and said, “Well, Mrs. Popatia, it’s just a common case of catarrh.”
“But what am I to do?” my mother exclaimed in distress. “Mr. Popatia is so fed up with her constant coughing that he hits her every time she does it in front of him, which is all the time, even when he is driving her to dancing lessons, and I am worried he will get into an accident.”

“Hmmm,” said Dr. Pammier, and looked down at me through spectacles that seemed to cover most of her face. She looked like she did not believe I needed to cough all the time, and I looked away ashamed of myself. “Is the Triaminic not helping?” she asked my mother, looking up at her again.

“Not Triaminic, not Disprin . . .” my mother rattled off a list of the medicines she had given me over the years, but Dr. Pammier cut her off.

“You could try to manually loosen the catarrh,” she said impatiently. “Like this.”

She grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me closer to where she stood, then placed a forearm at my waist while her other hand pushed at my back so that I was doubled over her outstretched arm.

“It’s called The Hitting and Beating Exercise.” She tapped at my back in circles using the heel of her palm, and a foul-tasting fluid came up my throat and into my mouth. I swallowed it back hard.

“Don’t swallow,” she rebuked, hitting at my back harder and lowering me onto her knee. She continued to tell my mother that she should do this often, whenever I seemed bunged up. “Get Aziz to do it if he has a firmer hand,” she added.
I did not want my father doing any hitting and beating exercise on me, and fortunately, he didn’t. He snorted when my mother explained it to him. “We don’t have time to be playing with her catarrh—one good smacking should teach her.”

“It’s all for attention,” my mother agreed. “Now that we have Shina, she is trying to steal attention,” and her face tightened as though steeling itself against something hard and bitter.

Eventually, the coughing gave way to sneezing, and the Triaminic continued. I was using the toilet regularly each morning, and that was the trouble because mornings were often when Daddy’s shoutings were the loudest.

“Your good-for-nothing daughters are spoiled, I tell you, if I had sons there would be no question!” I heard my father’s voice mount one Saturday morning as I lay in my bunk underneath Shina’s. I didn’t hear what my mother said in response, but my father’s got louder still and took on a shrill tone. “A boy I could put to work, he would be tough, and not all soft-soft like you have made these girls. I can’t tell them anything without they start crying and going on.” He is talking in Gujarati, spitting syllables as he goes.

I crept out of the bedroom, glad that the door was already open, and tiptoe down the short hallway, past the sitting/dining room, to the toilet that stood at the opposite end. I didn’t dare shut the door in case they heard that I was awake and it make them angrier. “The girls are sleeping,” I heard my mother say, and then an angry stream of sentences all jumbled together from my father. I finished wiping myself and pulled up my underpants and lowered my nightie.

What to do now? If I flushed, surely they’d hear me. Perhaps Daddy would drag me into the sitting room and hit me for not being a boy. He was talking loudly to Mummy right now, telling
her how Indian girls my age should be making 50 rotlis a day to feed the whole family. He seemed in a bit of a better mood, as he always did when speaking of things Indian, and even though his voice was loud, the volume was steady.

My mind made up, I crept out of the door without flushing and tiptoed back into the hallway, glad that I’d not put on slippers that made more noise than my bare feet against the thin carpet. I froze halfway back to the bedroom. My father’s voice had exploded like a bomb from the sitting room.

“See what I mean? She can’t even bother to flush the toilet! The lazy, good-for-nothing, doh-dokra-ni-dikree! Not even a human being!” The Gujarati words were flung like china plates against ceramic tiles. I flinched against them but did not move. “Go back to bed, right now!” Mummy called out to me as she popped her head into the hallway. Her hair was messed up and her face was red, the eyes wild-looking as they often got when Daddy frightened her.

I ran back to the bedroom and shaking, climbed back under my bedcovers. I felt Shina’s weight shift in the bunk above me, and knew that she had sat up to listen, and that she was as scared as I was. I wondered how much she’d already heard. Not even a human being, I thought to myself miserably. A human being would be brave enough to flush.

I made sure to flush the toilet at school every time after that. I sensed that if a teacher ever told my father that I’d forgotten to do so, he would hit me harder than he had that Saturday morning—“the smacking of your life,” he had warned would come if I ever did this foul thing again. Fortunately, Susanna had disappeared from school again, so I didn’t need to creep out from the toilets quietly. Like the last time, I didn’t know why she left nor if or when she would return. Then, in early spring, when the playground was a joy of blossoms carpeting
the ground around the row of apple and cherry blossom trees that separated the cement from
the vast field where we had PE, I was caught. The girls had mostly been sitting around the trees,
scooping up blossoms with the cups of their pink and white hands and pouring them over each
other’s heads to make fairy queens and princesses. I’d not wanted to leave for the toilet, but
the smell came and I knew I had to go.

No one seemed to notice my slipping away, and I was almost finished when I heard a
familiar voice with two others float into the cloakroom. It was Susanna and her one friend
Stephanie. As soon as I heard them, I pulled up my tights, flushed the toilet, and unlatched the
door of the stall, ready to dash to towards the cloakroom’s entryway. Before I could do so,
Susanna pushed me back into the stall with a flat, outstretched palm, and I wobbled so as not
to fall back onto the toilet seat. Stephanie crowded in with her.

“See! See! I told you brown girls don’t need to wipe their bottoms!” Susanna said with
delight.

“Yes we do!” I hissed back at her. I panicked at the thought of the whole class, maybe
the whole school, knowing my shame.

“Show us then,” challenged Susanna. “Let me check your bottom to see if you got all the
poo.”

Stephanie stretched herself across the door of the stall, gripping the metal on both sides
so that there was no way around or through.

Susanna reached down and pulled up part of my pinafore, reaching towards my tights.

“I’ll do it,” I snapped, and pulled down my tights, the pinafore falling over my nakedness
so that I still felt covered.
“Well, pull it up then,” said Susanna, yanking up my pinafore once more. Holding its folds tightly at my waist, she pulled a square of toilet paper from its metal container and handed it to me. “Wipe.”

I heard both girls giggling as I did as they bid. “Don’t forget to get all the brown poo off your bottom,” Susanna said in a pretend grown-up voice.

“You can’t wipe away the poo-poo color can you?” said Stephanie with satisfaction.

“Go on then,” said Susanna, dropping my pinafore, and I quickly bent down to pull up my tights. I was crying a little, but from rage rather than fear.

“It’s not my fault,” I sobbed. “It’s not poo. God spilled a bucket of brown paint, and it fell on my family and nobody else. That’s why we’re all brown.” This explanation that worked so well for Sarah Davis did nothing for them, and they were giggling as they exited the stall and headed towards the cloakroom exit.

“Don’t you mean, ‘Cadbury’s made you and they covered you with chocolate!’” Stephanie sang in a Paki accent, looking back at me over her shoulder as she did so before Susanna dragged her out into the sun.

“No!” I shouted. “God did this to me. Father God!”

I took a long time washing my hands before I headed out into the sunshine where groups of girls still gathered around the springtime trees, their blossoms gathering in velvet bunches and fluttering to the brown soil that awaited them.

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It wasn’t my fault that I didn’t’ want to be her friend. The little black girl that peeped out at me from where she hid behind her mother was not frightening, but her mother most
certainly was. The mother stood tall and dark, her hair a frizzy orb around her head that made her look like a golliwog. When I asked Mummy later why the lady had golliwog hair, she answered “Yes, betha, African hair. Hair I grew up with.” I knew then she was remembering back to her days as a Girl Guide in Kampala when she went camping with African girls and learned to sing their songs. Mummy made the African girls sound so friendly and playful, but there weren’t any at my school, and I somehow knew that if there were, they would not be liked.

“She’s not even coming to your school, silly!” Mummy scolded later, “She only wanted you to be friends with her during half-term holidays while you are at home with nothing to do. It was a kindness. How could you be so rude? Telling the woman to her face, ‘I can’t be your little girl’s friend because I already have a friend.’ What makes you think you can’t have more than one friend? Huh?”

“But I need all my time for Caroline Birch,” I protested. Caroline did not spend time with me at school, but her father was the barber in the line of shops along Sutton Common Road on the other side of Forest Road. Daddy sometimes went to Mr. Birch to get his hair cut. His barber shop was almost next door to the butcher’s where I liked to wait for Daddy and dig my heels into the sawdust that covered the ground, making pretty patterns in the fine yellow dust.

Caroline told me that the sawdust was there to cover up the blood from all the carved-up animals that the butcher sold. Seeing the soggy outsides of the paper he wrapped the meats in, I could only believe her. Caroline had shiny soft brown hair that hung straight to her shoulders with a long straight fringe across her forehead, almost to her blue eyes. She had the pinkest face of any girl I had ever seen, and she was best friends with Janice Gear who was not
nice at all. I had a plan for half-term holidays. Get Caroline to be my friend. Then, when school started again, maybe she would play with me and I would not be alone at playtime when Catherine, Carol, and Sarah were playing Charlie’s Angels. I prayed really hard to Father God to make Caroline my friend, but that’s when he sent the little African-haired girl.

“I’m ashamed of you,” Mummy said as she brushed my hair the evening I’d declined the girl’s friendship. I felt confused and not quite ready to embrace her shame. “I just didn’t want anyone to see me with her and think that I’m a darkie too,” I protested.

“Darkie?” Mummy’s eyes flashed. “Of course you’re a darkie! What do you think you are? You are no different from her! Just because you were born here means nothing. Don’t forget you are Indian through and through, and Mummy and Daddy come from Africa.”

I sometimes thought I remembered Africa when I looked at the photos in the album my parents had put together after we’d come back from what would be our last visit. I remember the Aya who took my gold ring, her hair hidden away in a red cloth wrapped around her head, and I remember standing stock still in the middle of a road while a herd of elephants stampeded towards me. Daddy scooped me up and ran off the road just in time. I don’t really remember this, of course, but I have a film that plays out the drama in my head. What I think I really remember is how warm the air felt against my face, how bright the sun looked during the day, and the many sounds of animals both day and night. I remember through the photos that there were so many people counted among our family and friends for us to visit, and each one of them made a fuss of me as the newest little girl. The Africans in the photos were Ugandans, with skin much darker and teeth much whiter than the girl I met outside our shop. Those
Africans were smiling in the photos, and seemed happy to be who and where they were. I knew, however, that they didn’t belong at Glastonbury Infants School the way I did.

Didn’t I? “Do you mean I’m really a darkie, then?” I asked Mummy in a small voice. I held my hand up to check the color both in front of me and as reflected back by the mirror. The same shade of brown from both angles. Not as dark as the Africans in Uganda, nor even as dark as the little girl with a short stubby ponytail on each side of her head that I’d met that morning. Surely, I was the darkest of whities, but not really a darkie, I persuaded my mother.

“Indian. African. It doesn’t matter,” Mummy pronounced as she finished plaighting my hair, and I knew the conversation was over, but I lay thinking about it in bed that night. I thought about the stubby-haired girl and about Caroline Birch with her smooth straight fringe. I so wanted to be more like Caroline than the other girl. I just had to be. But the more I tried to convince myself that I was more like Caroline, the more I realized the truth that had been lurking in a closed-off corner of my mind since I’d started school. The children who were mean to me were not just doing it because I smelled bad or was a slow coach at lessons. And they weren’t just calling me a darkie to hurt my feelings or be rude—they were saying it because it was true—I really was a darkie! They had been right all along. How could I ever get Caroline to be my friend now?

I had been in love with Caroline since Mrs. Johnson’s Play School when I had even stuck black-eyed peas up my nose to look like her. It was as ridiculous a proposition then as it sounds now, but I truly believed I was making myself more lovable when I did it. We were both perhaps three, and had started play school at the same time, which is why I’d assumed that we’d be best friends. Mrs. Johnson was especially gentle with Caroline, and would even hold her hand
for no reason. Sometimes she would stroke Caroline’s straight hair and smile. I wanted to be Caroline more than anything. When Mrs. Johnson went outside to check the letterbox, she would take Caroline with her, and they would hold hands, Caroline skipping along happily beside her the short distance and back.

I’d asked politely every day if I could be the one to walk with Mrs. Johnson to the letterbox. I was always told, “Not today.”

One fated day, I protested, “But I really want to, and I’ve been waiting and waiting. It’ll never be my turn!” I added with a wail. “I just want to hold hands!”

Mrs. Johnson’s face stiffened at my outburst. Other children who sat playing with blocks on the stringy maroon carpet looked up with curiosity, and Mrs. Johnson’s helper placed firm hands on my shoulders and said, “That will be enough.”

I stopped my wailing abruptly, unsure of what would happen next. Mrs. Johnson opened the front door and grabbed my wrist with another. “You want to hold my hand?” she said as she squeezed my wrist and pulled me down the front step with her onto the concrete pathway.

“There now. Stop complaining!” She pulled me along beside her, and I could feel her thumb and forefinger pinching my wrist.

“Stoppit! You’re hurting me,” I whined, but she had turned her face to the wind and was hastening to the letterbox, which she opened with her left hand, her right one still clamped around my wrist.

When we got back into the house, she had let go of my wrist as suddenly as she grabbed it so that I stumbled backwards a few steps. She leaned over Caroline who had stopped to show her something, and it was as though the whole incident hadn’t happened.
As I surveyed the scene before me, even at such an age, I knew Mrs. Johnson wasn’t at fault for favoring Caroline over me. As I watched Caroline fall asleep on her mat next to mine at rest time, I saw how sweet and peaceful she looked. She sucked on her thumb, making slow, slurping noises. Her fingers were wrapped around her nose, to which she held a tiny white tissue, and it looked as though the tissue was stuffed up her nose and dangling gently from it to graze against her pink curled fingers. I studied her carefully. I took a square of white tissue from the toilet and tried to stuff it up my nose, but it fell out, wrinkled and limp.

After I got home that day, I spent a long time with Mummy in the kitchen where she bustled around cooking many curries for her cousins who were to have dinner at our house. Amidst the fragrance of frying okra and boiling chana lentils, I inched towards an open lower cupboard with many shiny jars of multi-colored beans and dusky grains. One jar was full of what looked like squashed white beads with little black dots on each one. I reached into the opened jar while Mummy was out of the kitchen and took out a handful. They were hard and cold in my hand. I stuffed one up my nose and it fell out like the toilet tissue. I tried again but this time I stuffed the whole handful up my nose where the beans immediately expanded and filled my nostrils. It didn’t take me long to realize that I didn’t look anything like Caroline Birch at naptime with a tissue dangling from her nose. My nose had nothing dangling and felt like it was on fire.

I sounded stuffy for the rest of the evening and wouldn’t eat my food or drink my milk at supper. I didn’t even go running up to Azam Uncle when he arrived with the cousins, even though he was one of my favorites. As I sat on high chair next to Mummy and fussed while she fed Shina baby food, someone said, “What’s up her nose?” They said this in Gujarati of course.
Mummy tipped my head back with the heel of her hand pressing against my chin and took a good look.

I don’t remember what she said, but much incredulous dialogue ensued about what was stuck up there while I stammered stuffily that I didn’t know. One of the aunts said to put a plate of pepper under my nose and I would surely sneeze it out. This was after Mummy had tried to pry the offensive material out with her fingers to no avail.

I remember feeling happy because Daddy joined the relations in going to Jamatkhana for prayers, and Mummy stayed home with me and Shina even though we were supposed to go out with them. In two’s and three’s, the black-eyed peas came shooting from my nostrils onto the saucer of black pepper Mummy held under my nose as I sneezed them out, and in the end, my eyes and nose were streaming but clear of foreign objects. Satisfied that the last offender had made its exit, Mummy fired a string of questions my way, the chief being, “What were you thinking?”

When I could speak, I explained that I wanted to look like Caroline Birch.

Mummy really wasn’t impressed when I mentioned Caroline Birch after that, and I myself decided that rather than emulate her, I would simply try to gather her to me as what Daddy called a “fast friend.” I waited through play school and half of first form for a chance to get Caroline’s attention.

The opportunity came during half-term holiday. Now that I was a bigger girl, Mummy or Daddy let me cross Forest Road with them to the other side of Sutton Common Road. First came the green grocers, then the newspaper shop, then a couple of shops I don’t remember until the butchers; perhaps next door or a few shops down was the barber, and then, delight of
all delights, the fish n’ chips take-away where Daddy would sometimes buy cod ‘n chips wrapped up in old newspaper, the vinegar soaking through the newsprint, and sardines swimming in tomato juice. Beyond that was the Woodstock—Dr. Pammier’s office and the Boots drugstore. I loved skipping along holding onto my Daddy’s hand, counting the colored awnings that rolled in and out from the different store fronts. They were usually striped—white with some other color like red or blue or yellow. The awnings didn’t match each other in length—some extended but a foot beyond the front door, others several feet, so that the multi-colored, zig-zagging stretch of stripes along the store fronts of Sutton Common Road became an emblem to me of the different adventures to be had at each store.

One of the nicest parts of my trip along Sutton Common Road was when Daddy would stop at the barber’s to say hello, and I would see Caroline and talk to her briefly. She had never been to our shop, so anxious to attract her friendship, I made up lots of stories about what she might behold on my side of Forest Road.

“Fairies live there,” I declared, gaining confidence in my fib as I watched her eyes widen with interest. “In fact, our side shed has a glass roof, and if I go there without any grownups, I can hear them dancing on the roof.

“If you come and visit me at the shop, I’ll show you,” I promised.

“My Mummy says I can’t visit your shop because I’m not allowed to talk to strangers,” Caroline asserted in a definite tone.

“But we’re not strangers,” I retorted. “Your Daddy cuts my Daddy’s hair!”

“I’ll ask Mummy,” Caroline replied doubtfully, “but I don’t think she’ll let me.”
Then, one afternoon, Mr. Birch walked into the shop holding Caroline’s hand. I noticed right away and popped my head out from under the cheese counter where I’d been reading *The Magic Faraway Tree*, my latest Enid Blyton book.

“I can see your shed,” she whispered to me while her Daddy stood looking at the biscuits.

I grabbed her by the hand and dragged her running with me to the back of the shop. We crossed the small hallway that held the tiny office to the left and the even tinier toilet to the right. Then, we headed down the seven red stone steps to the back stocking area where I spent much of my time. A high step on the left would put me on the wooden pallets on which were piled huge canvas bags of sugar and flour and all kinds of heavy goods. When these bags and boxes were stacked atop each other, they allowed a little crawl space behind them that ran the length of the room along the left wall. On the prow of this lookout, I could perch and read while big bags of sugar got tossed up or taken down so that my wall was forever changing heights—sometimes hiding me completely, other times revealing my face avidly buried in a book. More than once, Daddy’s worker Sylvia had to say, “Crikey but you gave me the willies hiding there like that!”

Opposite my lookout, a little door let us into a side shed that I’d not truly visited more than a few times. It had a thin ceiling of rippled green glass through which I could look up and see the tops of the row of flats that extended to the left of ours. I don’t remember this side shed storing anything important though it must have. Tools and dirty things seemed to pile up there. I had never heard fairies though I’d imagined them, in truth, as I imagined them everywhere.
I opened the door with confidence and pulled Caroline over its threshold. She looked up immediately and was silent for a moment, seemingly impressed by the unusual ceiling.

“I don’t hear fairies,” she finally remarked.

“Well you have to wait,” I told her. “I have to let them know that you’re my friend and that it’s safe for them to come out and dance for you. I have to tell them that you won’t laugh at them or call them names,” I added.

Caroline looked away from the ceiling and into my eyes, her own big blue ones wide and seemingly frightened. “Don’t tell them,” she implored. “I don’t want to see fairies—not at this place.”

“Well why not?” I wailed after her, but she had pivoted around and was gone in an instant.

I didn’t see Caroline for the rest of half-term holiday, and when we returned to school, I made sure not to meet her eye. This was not difficult as she ignored me the way she’d always done. It didn’t matter. I was finding that I enjoyed being at school, which was more interesting than home, and I reveled in the praise I now received during hymn practice and assembly. Mrs. Smeeton would often use me as an example because I sang loudly and with conviction. One day I remember in particular, she called me to stand next to the piano and sing a chorus by myself so that the other students could learn how not to mumble:

God who made the earth,

The air, the sky, the sea,

Who gave the light its birth

Careth for me.
I closed my eyes as I sang and felt the love and care of Father God wash over me like air, like sky, like sea.

“Susanna!” I heard Miss Rye’s voice and opened my eyes quickly to see Susanna dragged to the front of the auditorium by the wrist. I vaguely registered, with some satisfaction, that she had returned to school and I’d not even noticed. Perhaps my months of torture in the toilets were truly at an end. Miss Rye let go of Susanna with a shove so that she was centered in front of us, and Miss Palmer walked over and spun her around so that her back was all we could see.

“You promised to come back as a good girl!” Miss Palmer admonished.

“I’m trying!” Susanna exhorted, her face and tone sullen.

“Well, try harder, dear!” Miss Palmer shot back, and in a quick series of gestures, she placed a hand on Susanna’s back, bent her over, lifted the back of her pinafore up with her other hand, exposing Susanna’s blotchy white panties, and gave her a swift, smart smack on the bottom. Susanna said not a word, but when she was spun back around and marched back into place, I saw that her face was very still. She was biting one side of her lower lip so that the other side of the lip jutted out with what might have been defiance, but just as easily, could have been shame.

From my favored place at the piano, I could see the faces of my classmates very clearly. I saw Caroline lean over to Janice and whisper something, and both of them tittered quietly. Catherine, Carol, Zoe, Nicholas, Gary, even Sarah, swiveled their heads around to get a look at Susanna’s face, smiling at each other with satisfaction as well as excitement at what had transpired—we’d not yet seen a public smacking, nor had a chance to laugh at Susanna’s dirty knickers.
“One more time, Jenny,” Mrs. Smeeton directed, and began the introductory bars to “Careth for Me,” but I took no pleasure in repeating it. I didn’t know why, but I felt guilty singing about a god who cared for me but clearly not Susanna. I hadn’t seen her do anything wrong—she was actually being less naughty than usual; she was just being Susanna. I thought about Susanna’s dirty knickers and felt bad. I thought about the stubby-haired, African-skinned girl and felt worse. And when I next thought about Caroline and Janice, giggling over Susanna’s humiliation, I felt color rise to my face and the back of my neck grew hot. I pulled at my tie to loosen it a little as I resumed my place with my class, and I made sure not to look at anyone for the rest of assembly.

That night after dinner, I told Daddy what had happened. “Don’t you get a smacking now, eh!” he warned. “I will have to repeat it twice at home, just like my Daddy did with me.”

“But she didn’t do anything wrong,” I explained to Daddy. “I think it’s because she’s a gypsy.”

“Indians,” Daddy agreed. “They don’t like Indians!”

“But Susanna’s not an Indian,” I corrected him. “She’s a gypsy girl.”

“And where do you think gypsies come from,” Daddy insisted. “They are from India a long time ago. The Romani Race,” he added. “They were kicked out of India the way we were kicked out of Africa. Refugees both.”

“You mean Susanna is like us?” I asked, incredulous.

“More like us than the dhorias,” Daddy said, using the Gujarati word for white people, which he used in general to describe the English.
I wasn’t thinking about this specifically the next day at school when we were given free
time to paint on long pieces of butcher paper. But when Susanna came around to the table I
was sharing with Stinky Cooper, and tried to share our paints, I didn’t send her away like they
had at all the other tables. Each time Miss Rye had sat her at a table, the other children would
cover the paints with their hands and not let Susanna dip her brush in any of them. She would
go to Miss Rye and say, “I don’t have a place to paint.” Miss Rye would sit her down at a new
table where the scene would repeat itself. Although Susanna must have returned to Miss Rye
three times, claiming she didn’t have a table, for some reason, Miss Rye would sit her down at a
different one without comment, behaving as though each time were the first.

I didn’t feel bad when she finally joined us. She proceeded to dip her brush first in the
black paint and then in the yellow so that it was quickly the color of mud. Stinky Cooper was
almost finished with his painting, so it didn’t matter to him. I had just started, and was trying to
decide what color to make the roof of our house. Susanna stuck her tongue out at me and
pulled the paint tray over to her so that only the untouched black tray was within my reach. I
noticed how shiny and smooth the black circle of paint looked. It reminded me of the slick
asphalt on Sutton Common Road when it was newly laid; it reminded me of the wings of
Mummy’s glossy black hair that fell to both sides of her head as she brushed it out each night. I
dipped my brush and began to paint.

With long smooth strokes, I ran my blackened brush along the length of the off-white
paper, leaving a thin smudge on the table where I’d gone a little bit over the edge. A quarter, a
third, and finally, almost all of the page was painted black—wet and inviting, it shone up at me
like a cinder block. One of the other children must have called Miss Rye over to witness this, for
I suddenly heard her voice from over my shoulder,

“Jenny, what on Earth? What a waste of paint and paper! How can I possibly put that up
on the wall?”

Before I could answer, she added, “You’ll have to take it home, that’s all. We’ll see what
your father thinks when he sees what you’ve been up to!” She smiled grimly at that, and her
face wore an air of satisfaction, as if she were enjoying imagining my father’s response.

I’d hoped she’d forget, but she handed it to Mummy when she came to fetch me at the
end of the day. “Wasting her time as usual!” Miss Rye said to Mummy who hurried me out of
the classroom.

As we walked back to the shop, I asked Mummy if we had to show the painting to
Daddy.

“Yes, we will,” said Mummy.

“Will he hit me?” I asked fearfully.

“Perhaps” was Mummy’s short reply.

After Mummy had cleared away the dishes that evening, she told me to show Daddy the
painting I’d finished at school that day. Daddy was in a surprisingly good mood that evening,
and I feared what my revelation would do.

“Oh, let me see, Mithul!” Daddy said with overdone enthusiasm. His jovial mood and
warmth made me feel all the worse for laying the black page before him. I studied his face
carefully as he looked down thoughtfully at the dark expanse. His prolonged silence was more
than I could bear.
Finally he said, “Oh Mithu—it’s beautiful—a beautiful painting!”

Tears welled up in my eyes as I said in a meek voice, “but it’s only one thing—all black—I got in trouble . . .” My voice trailed off as I bit my lip to keep from crying.

“No, no,” Daddy assured me. “Not at all. It is many things. You tell the teacher. It is a painting of your house, your family, your whole street in fact.”

“At night time,” he added noticing my puzzled expression.

“But . . . can you really see all that?” I asked doubtfully.

“Yes,” said my father. “I can. But where is your name? I don’t see your name on this painting.”

“It’s on the back,” I said exultant that the blow-up I’d feared was clearly no longer a threat. “We always write our Christian names on the back of the page before we start painting.”

Daddy handed me a pencil, saying, “That’s no good. Put it on the front where it can be seen.”

“But it won’t show up in pencil on the front,” I said, surprising myself with a giggle. “Perhaps I need white chalk.”

“No, no. No white chalk,” Daddy insisted. “Use pencil and know that it is there. Even if you can’t see it, you know it is always there. On the front you know, Mithu. Your name is your pride after all.”

I took the pencil and carefully spelled: G-e-n-e-f-a.

“That’s better,” Daddy said, smiling broadly as he held the painting at arm’s length as though to appreciate a panoramic view of it. I could see him seeing it all—our family, our little
flat on top of the shop, Sutton Common Road all the way to the Woodstock—shrouded in
darkness but there all the same.

“It doesn’t matter about your Miss Rye,” he was saying to me. “Let her say names on
the back. From now on, I want to see your name on the front. Your name is your work.”
Family Gathering

The day Guli Aunty arrived, Mummy couldn’t decide whether to wait for her upstairs or downstairs. Upstairs, we could keep the flat ready. Mummy had run the Hoover over the striped brown carpet in the hallway, the sitting room, and the big bedroom. She did not run the Hoover over the carpet in my old room because Makuba was sleeping there. Mummy had sat Shina down in her high chair at the kitchen table, and me down next to her, saying “Don’t make crumbs.” I remember this well because we weren’t eating anything at the time. What she meant was, make it seem as though the flat is untouched, untrodden, fresh and new for Guli Aunty to fill with her own fingerprints and footsteps.

Guli Aunty was my masi—my mother’s sister. Although I was just three and a half, Mummy would tell me Gujarati sayings in English: “Your mother might die, but your masi will never die.” I had met Guli Aunty when Mummy took me to Kampala as a newborn, and once again as a toddler, but I couldn’t remember her. I sat next to Shina at the square kitchen table that was pushed up against a wall with four chairs around the exposed sides. I sat with the photo album from our African visit open on the table in front of me, and Mummy helped me turn the pages, pointing out different brown-skinned people and saying their names. Guli Aunty had a rounder face and lighter skin than her younger sister, my mother. Guli Aunty had hair that was short, and hung in a curtain that ended at her shoulders and curved outwards in a pretty wave. “That’s called a flip,” Mummy had said when I pointed. “It was very smart a few years ago. I had one too till Daddy made me grow my hair long.”

Mummy said all kinds of things I didn’t fully understand at the time, but kept stored for later. I didn’t understand but I believed everything she told me when I was that young. Later, I
understood more and believed less. Why does your *masi* outlive your mother—who said? Is it because she never had a husband to shorten her years, I wondered. Then, when my own *masi*, Guli Aunty, died two months after her stomach cancer diagnosis, when I was twenty-five, and my mother outlived her by more decades than she could ultimately keep track of, I knew that my mother’s sayings from my childhood were just that—sayings rather than happenings.

That day, back in May 1974, a lot was happening, and my mother got tired of trying to tell me what to expect, so she woke Makuba up, and led her groggy with me in tow, carrying Shina bundled up in a white blanket, down the long, narrow concrete steps that took us from upstairs to downstairs. There was no railing, so Makuba kept one hand on Mummy’s shoulder, and with her other hand, held up her green flowered cotton dress so that the hem flapped above her ankles. Makuba was older than I could imagine—her hair revealing streaks of white that would gleam through the shiny black braid down her back, her face brown and leathery, and lined to look always unhappy.

At some point over the years, I had wanted to know why we called Bapuji’s wife Makuba and not Mamaji. Mummy had explained that Makuba was not her real mother. Her own mother had died giving birth to her eighth child, a still-born male, when Mummy was not yet eleven. Bapuji had needed a mother for his six living children and finally found a widow from a neighboring town who bore the same name as his dead wife, Jena. Her brothers had been desperate to marry this second Jena off, my mother told me, so Bapuji took her, but they were never happy together. She would cry and cry, lock the door to their room so he had nowhere to sleep. Mummy would say, “Bapa, come sleep in my room—I don’t mind.” She did not like the new Jena, and none of them would call her Mummy, but reluctantly called her Ma. Then, when
the Africans referred to her as Mama Kuba, which meant Big Mama in Swahili, or what Europeans might think of as Madam, her step children began to call her Makuba, and she stayed Makuba for the rest of her life.

Guiding Makuba up and down the stairs, I could tell Mummy didn’t like her much. “Juldi, Makuba, Juldi,” Mummy would snap, which meant, “Hurry, hurry.” We didn’t want to miss Guli Aunty’s arrival. Makuba would stumble down the stairs, and heave herself back up the stairs—a hand on Mummy’s shoulder, trying to keep up. I, too, would scramble up and down next to my swift marching mother, sometimes missing a step or two but still not falling, my feet trying to tread the air as she held me aloft.

We must have descended and re-ascended that long, narrow row of steep steps at least twice before settling downstairs, in front of the shop’s front doors. The shop was closed because it was a Monday, and Daddy and Bapuji were out making deliveries. Daddy always came back from these bad-tempered, having to unload and stock the goods that his customers changed their minds about. He would expect Mummy waiting downstairs to help him the way she always did. But we must be upstairs to receive Guli, she lamented, and considered leaving Shina and me upstairs with Makuba, but she didn’t trust Makuba alone with us—she didn’t know much English, and had done some strange things since coming back from the refugee camps—splitting open each of Mummy’s Tetley tea bags and spilling the grounds into a pile in the center of the table, to save time brewing she had explained to my puzzled mother.

Makuba had finally been entrusted to stand at the shop’s front door, right in front of the “closed” sign, while Mummy unlocked the shop. Shina still slept against her as she turned some lights on and prepared for Daddy’s return. “I hope Bapa makes it before Guli,” she muttered
under her breath before leaving us. Makuba had laughed, as she’d taken to laughing at odd
moments. Looking up at Makuba’s grey, down-turned lips, I couldn’t tell if she was excited
about Guli’s arrival or not. I did sense how important this reunion was to Mummy. Everything
hinged upon it.

For months, no one had known where Bapuji and Makuba were. The last anyone had
heard was that the two of them were bound for Kenya—“until things settle down over here,”
Bapuji had told his African partners, handing over the keys to the bakery and restaurant.
Houses didn’t have locks in those days, Mummy had explained. They had sat a plane for
Nairobi, hoping to gain entrance for a few months under the strength of their daughter-in-law’s
Kenyan citizenship. But Kenya wanted nothing to do with Asians from Uganda, so Bapuji and
Makuba remained on board while Noorali Uncle, Zaibun Aunty, and Ghalib, just four years old,
were allowed to deplane.

They were the last of our family to leave Uganda, and no one else had taken anything
with them because they always expected Bapuji to keep things safe until they returned. Sadru
Uncle had fled the country at the time of the coup because he was a public figure, and a known
supporter of Milton Oboté. Words like coup, Idi Amin, and Milton Oboté sounded terribly
strange and ominous even then. They were words Mummy and Daddy tried to use when I
wasn’t around, even though I wouldn’t have understood them. Perhaps it was because of the
trembling look on Mummy’s face whenever she uttered them. She would disappear to the post
office, and when I asked Daddy where my Mummy was, he’d say, “She’s gone back to Kampala”
with a mischievous glint in his eye. When I’d ask her about this upon her return, she would
stroke my cheek and say, “Don’t worry, betha. I came back.”
Guli Aunty had left just a short while after Sadru. One week she was a graduate of Macrere University with a Bachelor’s degree in Education, the next week she received a job offer from the Institute of Education, inviting her to be a faculty lecturer—she was that smart. Mummy had put together a parcel to send her sister full of carefully gathered gifts of congratulations. Then, she’d heard perhaps her sister would come to England for awhile until the political unrest died down. Mummy had been jubilant and decided not to mail the parcel. It stayed in a corner of the bedroom, its brown paper growing wrinkled and leathery as the weeks went by. Above it, a pile of newspapers grew—newspapers whose front pages showed people lined up at Entebbe airport, citizens of Uganda begging to become refugees anywhere else. She prayed for her sister to come back from Kampala, before it was too late to leave and impossible to stay. And then, she’d received the hurried wire from her brother Noorali: he and his family, Bapa and Makuba were going to Kenya—Asians were being shot by the thousands in the night. People they knew—Hindus, Goans, and even some Ismailies. Guli had already left weeks before they told Mummy; sorry they couldn’t tell her but phone lines weren’t safe. She was somewhere in Canada.

Mummy had been beside herself for a year. This is how she had explained it to me when I asked. When she spoke to me after that, I would look at the space next to her to see if I could catch a glimpse of my real Mummy—the one I remembered before this trembling, lip-biting woman had taken her place—but, beside her I saw only empty air above a dark, spindly shadow.

Then came two telephone calls that brought Mummy back out from the shadow beside her. The first one from the Red Cross had my mother weeping with joy; Bapa and Makuba had
been located and wished to go to Canada to join family. As British subjects, they would be held in England until papers could be finalized for their transfer to Canada—would she take them? Mummy cried yes in every language she knew. Then came the second phone call from her brother in Canada and the even better news that Guli would be coming to visit us and to fetch her parents. And so my mother began preparations to gather her family to her—the Hoover, the wrapping and re-wrapping of gifts, the ironing of clothes and curtains, and now, in just an hour or two, she would have them altogether and the magic would be complete. It was no small feat after all. They were creating the only Kampala they had left—in the kitchen.
Autogeography
A New Place for the Diasporic Memoir

Cabrillo College
2011 - 2012

Prepared as Outcome # 5 of Geneffa Jonker’s sabbatical project and presented to the Sabbatical Leave Review Board in fall 2012.
I still remember that day in May 1974 when my mother made preparations to gather her family in our small flat on top of our shop in Sutton, Surrey, England. I was only a toddler, yet I recall the excitement and frenzy. My mother’s family had fled Uganda following Idi Amin’s expulsion of all Asians in 1972, and for over a year, my mother had been unable to locate her parents or siblings. After a year of waiting and wondering, they had been retrieved or summoned from their various refugee camps and places of amnesty, and they were gathering in our one-bedroom flat to come home to each other in a foreign geography, family becoming place holders for the homes they would never see again.

I write about this in the chapter of my memoir entitled “Family Gathering,” my intention with that title to foreground the verb form of gathering rather than the expected noun. I end the first movement of that chapter as follows:

And so my mother began preparations to gather her family to her—running the Hoover, wrapping and re-wrapping gifts, ironing clothes and curtains—and now, in just an hour or two, she would have them altogether and the magic would be complete. It was no small feat after all. They were creating the only Kampala they had left—in the kitchen.

Since writing this piece, I’ve often thought about this idea of Kampala in the kitchen and how I experienced it as a three-year-old. There were sights and smells, cups of steaming chai and saucers of crumbling ghattia as well as other nasto—our word for any kind of snack. There were suddenly more brown people in one room than I had ever seen, but mostly, I remember their voices, rising and falling upon each other with exclamations I knew to be distinctly their own. They were Indians who had never been to India, exiled from an African country to which they would never return. Inhabiting in this moment a provisional space they created together and embodied through their presence, they were conjuring a place that was otherwise lost to them. They were enacting a cultural form of a literary practice I have termed autogeography.

Many immigrant and travel narratives could be described as autogeographical, and indeed, women’s self-writing has been usefully interpreted through metaphors of colonization and claiming of space. However, I am coining the term to describe the specific memoirs of the diasporic subject’s writing of self and / as / in space. The term diaspora is a better fit than
immigrant to describe the experiences of those of us who have made multiple migrations from an ancestral homeland with which we still identify or are identified. The diasporic subject, unlike the immigrant, does not necessarily experience physical relocation, but the memoirs produced by writers of diaspora suggest that they commonly feel some form of psychological displacement, manifested through the destabilization of language, body, and identity.

In *Writing Selves in Diaspora*, a study of the writings of Korean American women, Sonia Ryang explains,

> Dispersed and displaced, uprooted and homeless, people in diaspora have lost their links with their homelands, the homelands where their ancestors were born, where their parents grew up, and where they and their offspring would have raised their families. The lost homeland symbolizes the loss of, say, meaningful life or, indeed, humanity. (xiii)

According to the above definition, the second generation of an immigrant family faces a loss of a place to which he or she may never have visited. How is this possible? It is important to recognize that the loss is absorbed through stories and recollections passed down from the parents’ generation so that the loss is punctuated by story and myth rather than experience. This creates a tension when the diasporic subject gains experience of his or her ancestral land and must decide if this new experience substantiates or subverts the stories passed down.

In “Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach,” Sau-ling Cynthia Wong explains how this can occur: “To begin with, the American-born do not have direct memoires of the Old World; their understanding of the Old World culture is necessarily mediated by their parents” (301). In my experience, the parents often hold entrenched mythologies about the original culture. The second generation wants the myth to be true, which explains a common theme of disappointment and the reconstitution of ancestral place in the self for so many of these writers.

Literary criticism abounds with metaphors that represent autobiographical writings in geographic terms. As Gerri Reaves points out, “Critical jargon is replete with words that imply place and space—situate, reside, groundwork, territory, demarcate, field, boundary, margin, position—words that require of the writer and reader not only a sense of agency, but a sense of
where that agency emanates from” (15). Often these metaphors are imposed upon a literary work, but why? Reaves suggests that it speaks to the “impossibility of mapping” that is a pervasive sense of loss in personal autobiography. The very fact of remembering emphasizes that we are inscribing something we cannot retrieve outside language and memory; “[we] can never retrieve what is lost” (2).

Reaves extends this idea to address the particular anxiety displacement causes for the American identity. “America and Americanism are inevitably bound up with the right to consume space, to move freely, to set and cross boundaries at will, to command and own space—ultimately, to mark space, to inscribe the landscape” (14). If Reaves is correct, then it would appear natural that both the American autobiographer, and the American critic, trope the act of writing as pinning down place, in this case, places formerly inhabited. At the same time, Reaves points out that we can think of autobiography as “a seizing of territory, a taking of textual space” (14). What happens, however, to the diasporic subject who is writing not from a place of rich metaphor, but the real experience of needing to find a provisional place within text to hold an identity forged by several disparate locations?

As a way of allowing such memoirs to move beyond metaphors of dislocation, it is helpful to see them as autogeographies—a category of memoir that foregrounds the writing of place as a priority (of prime importance and occurring prior) in the writing of self and the forging of personal identity. Those in diaspora are marked by a failure to be recognized as belonging in their country of residence. The diasporic subject can be identified as someone who is asked “Where are you from?” instead of “What do you do?” by the dominant group—someone whose answer will not satisfy until he or she names a country to which he or she has already been racially associated by the questioner. I, myself, have experienced the awkwardness of this question when my interlocutor keeps pursuing it through my answers—Los Angeles, Canada, England—unsatisfied until I answer “India.” The irony is that I’ve never been to India, yet I am identified with a geography to which I have no claim. In my case, and for other diasporic subjects, the autobiographical project is not simply to valorize a childhood
home or celebrate the place of one’s established, uncontested identity, but to negotiate a self connected to multiple places and an identity complicated by multiple ethnic possibilities.

My development of the concept of autogeography to understand the project of diasporic memoirs owes itself to the work of my mentor from the University of Calgary, Jeanne Perreault, who developed the idea of autography to understand the impulses of women’s writing. In her early work, *Writing Selves*, Perreault explains that “contemporary self writing does not fall within the parameters of familiar modes of “I” writing (autobiography, life writing, memoirs, etc.), and various feminist theorists and critics have been grappling with unwieldy generic terminology that does not seem to fit women’s texts” (2). It is Perreault’s redefinition of women’s autobiography that led me to develop a theory for the reading of diasporic texts. My studies of multicultural literature in Canada showed me that there is often a conflation of first and second generation immigrants under one immigrant category that doesn’t take into account the specificities of the diasporic subject.

Immigrant and diasporic subjects diverge in a number of ways. For one thing, the immigrant experience of the present place is filtered through *memory* of the former place whereas the diasporic experience of both present and ancestral places are filtered through *myths* of the former. While memory is grounded in experience, myths are grounded in stories, which are often embellished or skewed to serve the agenda of the storyteller. Sooner or later we see the diasporic subject set out to corroborate the stories of youth with experiences of the actual place of story. Often, the subject is disappointed—what reality can live up to a myth? However, in debunking the myth of one’s parents’ geographies, the diasporic writer is free to renegotiate his or her identity with the actual place of her forebears, locating a provisional home in both ancestral and current residences, and writing herself/ himself as the map or matrix for the meeting of disparate lands and peoples. As Perreault’s “focus is on the texts that explicitly make the process of being a self contiguous with the inscription of selfhood” (2), so my project is to design autogeography as a category that is useful for looking at texts that “make the process of [claiming space and locating a place] contiguous with the inscription of [placement]” (2).
Autogeography is a reading model that foregrounds diasporic memoirs’ focus on defining the self through place rather than life cycle. Writers of diaspora write themselves into place and reclaim a lost geography by subsuming it into themselves. In this equivocation of self and place, self becomes a place-holder and place becomes a self-holder. We can see a common set of techniques by which the writer as diasporic subject achieves and marks this process. The project of autogeography is at its most powerful when the writer sets the stage for recuperating loss by foregrounding the pain associated with a feature of personalized geography. These writers, therefore, often explore complications of identity around language, mythology/history, and racialization (or racial embodiment). They go on to recuperate language—learning to use it as a passport between locales. They create a personalized mythology to revise history and replace memory, and they accept their own embodiment of place/race, recognizing it as a habitat marked as / carried by the body in its absence. The diasporic subject is finally liberated from an overdetermined, externally imposed identity when the body no longer has to be the place-holder but can recreate place as a separate spatial entity. Saira Shah’s, The Storyteller’s Daughter, Azadeh Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad, Meena Alexander’s Fault Lines, and M.G. Vassanji’s A Place Within are four memoirs from the MEMSA19 diasporas that exemplify autogeography through their explorations of language, mythology, and embodied geography.

For the diasporic person whose home language is at odds with the language of school and society, language as a means of expression also codifies confusion and contradiction. Meena Alexander describes this lyrically in her 1993 memoir, Fault Lines. Alexander, born into a devout Christian family in Kerala, India, moves to Khartoum, Sudan at the age of five where she is wrenched out of Malayam, her mother tongue, and immersed in Arabic and African English. Once she leaves Sudan, she must re-learn Indian English in Hyderabad, and American English, first in the Mid-West, and then in New York. She describes the English language, as she comes to experience it through multiple dialects, as a covering that smothers and obscures her identity: “Sometimes I think of the English language as a pale skin that has covered up my flesh.

19 MEMSA refers to the diasporic peoples of Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian descent.
the broken parts of my world. In order to free my face, in order to appear, I have had to use my teeth and nails, I have had to tear that fine skin, to speak out my discrepant otherness” (73)

As she begins to write poetry in English, Alexander finds liberation, the ability to express dissident thoughts, and “Yet even as these liberating thoughts came to me in English, I was well aware that the language itself had to be pierced and punctured lest the thickness of the white skin cover over my atmosphere, my very self. The language I used had to be supple enough to reveal the intricate mesh of otherness in which I lived and moved” (118). Memoir is a suitable vehicle for her to puncture the totalizing impulses of academic English, for it gives her a place to comment upon the dominant language’s hold on those who think and dream in more than one tongue.

Alexander’s memoir also addresses the pain of living in a place where one doesn’t share a history, where one feels rootless and transplanted. She writes, “[i]n Manhattan, I am a fissured thing, a body crossed by fault lines. Where is my past? What is my past to me, here, now at the edge of Broadway? Is America a place without memory?” (182) She finds that the focus in America on navigating the present and negotiating the future leaves no place for reconciling the past, and she finds herself having to write her own history to fill in the gaps of her personal history, “cracked by multiple migrations” (3).

Saira Shah, born in the United Kingdom to an Afghani family, and Azadeh Moaveni, born in the United States to an Iranian family, express not a loss but a lack of personal history that is replaced by ancestral myths about their parents’ homelands. Both of them become journalists and venture to their ancestral lands, purporting to track down the truth about the stories passed down to them, but each admitting that she entered the project as storyteller rather than reporter, hoping to find experiences that would support the myths and validate the identities created from these myths. Both of them experience a betrayal when the ancestral place cannot live up to the hyperbolic mythologies that abound in diasporic communities.

Shah acknowledges, “Even as I chafed against the storyteller’s version of reality, it was the fairytale I sought. Even as I demanded truth, I was chasing a myth” (79). Memoir is the ideal forum for her to express this twinned impulse to debunk and defend the myths she was raised with. By voicing her dualistic impulse, she creates a new ontological category—that of the
conflicted diasporic subject who must negotiate deeper contradictions than those outside the culture can imagine.

Shah explains the complicated agenda of her project.

In particular, I hoped the myth of the romantic Afghan resistance would stand up to the rigours of my journalistic enquiry. I hoped my family’s map of tales might be my guide without having to sacrifice Western method. And above all I hoped that, by resolving these contradictions, I could reconcile my incompatible worlds of East and West (79).

Shah, like Moaveni as we shall soon see, confronts her Middle Eastern past with the rigor of a truth-seeking journalist, but she is far more ambivalent about what she may find than her work as a journalist would suggest; the debunking of family myths is not an exercise in personal triumph for the diasporic subject because there is not necessarily a new identity and set of identifiers to put in place of the old. In the end, it is not the journalist’s news reports, but her autogeography that most deftly and comprehensively explains the values underlying the actions of those “third world people” who “make the news.”

In Lipstick Jihad, Azadeh Moaveni reveals a deep need to integrate her identity that underwrites her desire to substantiate the myths of a homeland. This creates tension before she even reaches Tehran, and is carried through her experiences and encounters there. As Rajini Srikanth, author of The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America, explains, “A fundamental issue to consider is the extent to which a diasporic ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ is viewed as an insider or outsider by those in the ancestral homeland and the extent to which such ‘returning’ individuals are welcomed or trusted” (76).

Moaveni quickly finds upon her arrival in Tehran that she is not embraced by her Iranian family, absurdly because she is neither Iranian enough, nor “westernized” enough for their tastes. Moaveni is clear about her sense of betrayal of the expectations she brought on her journey: “If I felt alienated in America—considered to be from an imagined land of veils, harems, suicide bombers, and wrathful ayatollahs—the only fair compensation was that somewhere else I would be ordinary, just like everyone else” (108). Instead, and with clear understanding of the ironies involved, Moaveni writes that it is in Iran that she first notices her
decidedly American mentality—one that had been under wraps in America just as her Iranian self, so obvious in California, disappeared under a purdah of insecurity in Tehran.

Perhaps the most potent inscription of the divided self occurs in the lyrical inscriptions of fragmentation on the diasporic subject’s body—a trope much explored and theorized by feminist theorists in describing female subjugation to patriarchal scripts, but emphasized in an autogeographical reading as a theme particular to the diasporic subject. Noting the psychological dislocation she experienced after her literal relocation from Hyderabad to New York City, Alexander notes, “My two worlds, present and past, were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation” (15). She cites (and sites) the conflict between these two worlds in her own body where the difference is most apparent. This is a continuation of the obliteration she associates with border crossings. Speaking of leaving India, at age 5, for Khartoum, she writes, “That first ocean crossing obsesses me. I think of it as a figuration of death. Losing sense, being blotted out, irretrievably across a border” (65). If one such crossing involves a death, then several crossings must constitute multiple deaths, an unscriptable logic for her text to carry, hence her inability to articulate it clearly.

She speaks of the impulse to want to wear her multiple geographies at the same time, but realizes that the resulting costume would be incomprehensible. She writes, “Sometimes I think I could lift these scraps of space and much as an indigent dressmaker, cut them into shape. Stitch my days into a patchwork garment fit to wear” (30). However, “[such a creature] has no home, no fixed address, no shelter. Sure, everything else looks fine. She has two hands, two feet, a head of long black hair, a belly, breasts. But it is clear she is a nowhere creature” (30).

Interestingly, she goes on to describe the silence and obliteration resulting from multiple migrations not just as a burying under an externally-imposed map but a committing of the female body into the earth, into a geography that consumes her. Perhaps this is the tension between two worlds that are equally unfriendly—the imperial world outside her ancestral home where she is written into an ethnicity pinned onto her body, and the world from which she seeks departure that might swallow her up as a female subject in service to national and patriarchal desires. Indeed, the well-known Hindu epic, the Ramayana, tells of its revered
female protagonist, Sita, being swallowed up by Mother Earth to hide her shame when her consort Rama doubts her purity following her abduction and rescue.

With this myth in place, the Indian women of Alexander’s ancestral land are guided towards burying their own shame with their bodies in a similar way. Alexander notes:

And sometimes women took it upon themselves to do away with their own shameful bodies: they jumped into wells. The image of women jumping into wells was constantly with me during childhood. A voice comes to me, out of mist and desert rain, out of well water and water in a blackened cooking, out where I looked in and saw my face: “You come from a long line of well-jumped women.” (107)

Lending itself to an autogeographical analysis, Alexander’s text goes on not just to imagine the floating faces at the bottom of the family wells as disembodied, but also as displaced:

“I stare into well water. In that shining water no names anymore; the houses and places don’t matter any more; no first there, nor second nor third; no foreground, background, left, right, or sideways” (107)

Having established displacement as both cause and effect of the diasporic subject’s experience of betrayal exacted through language, myth and body, the autogeographical memoir reconstitutes both place and identity—intertwining the two—through these same three sites.

Language is perhaps the most obvious and easily recognized site of restoration for the diasporic subject because it can be written as an intermingling of languages and their idioms. Also, it can participate in a rich literary tradition that tropes language as not just a feature but a “location” of identity. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong notes that for diasporic subjects, “[b]eing home . . . is . . . living in and inside the language that one feels at home with” (Ryang xl).

In his travel memoir, A Place Within: Rediscovering India, M.G. Vassanji announces, “I am going to the state of my ancestors, Gujarat, where people speak a language I speak. How do I feel? On the train I strain my ears for Gujarati. I see a man counting beads, tasbih” (36).

Here we see (and hear) that he is looking for external signs of his ancestral language while already acting as an agent of that language by introducing the Gujarati word for prayer beads,
tasbih. While writing his book in English, he colonizes this English space with Gujarati words. He does so without italicizing the Gujarati or rendering it apart in any way. Rather, he lets the Gujarati and English words intermingle, inscribing parity between them on the page as an act enabled by his physical journey to the place where the Gujarati words take precedence.

In *The Storyteller’s Daughter*, Saira Shah uses the personalized language of naming to show both a colonized and liberated claiming of identity posited on first Anglicized (English) and then Indian space. She begins this project by establishing the identification of language with place. She explains that she was baptized as Mary Elizabeth, “[a]nglicized from Mariamma and Eli as befit our existence in the aftermath of a colonial era when English was all powerful” (73). As she develops her identity as a teen, she begins crossing out the places where her colonial name appears and writing in Meena, which is “what everyone knew me as, but just as important to me, the name under which I had started to write poems” (73). She explains, I felt I had changed my name to what I already was, some truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden. . . . It is also the home name my parents had chosen for me at birth. It is the name under which I wished to appear” (74). It is interesting that Alexander uses the word “appear” to constitute the visibility as an Indian woman that her Indian name gives her. By positing this as an anti-colonial act, she uses her name to talk back to a legacy of place-taking, using her name as a place-holder.

To emphasize the significance of her act of changing her name, Alexander flashes to Audre Lorde’s words at a Hunter College conference at which she’d been invited by Alexander to speak along with two other women of color. Their names are left off the program, and Lorde says, “They want to suppress our names, Meena, they want to scrub us out” (74). The colonial impulse to change names in order to obliterate bodies is further commented upon later on when Alexander states, “There is a violence in the very language, American English, that we have to face, even as we work to make it ours, decolonize it so that it will express the truth of bodies beaten and banned. After all, for such as we are the territories, are not free. The world is not open” (199). Alexander is making sure that her readers, by the memoir’s close, are fully aware of the connections she has deliberately drawn between language, bodies, and place.
In *Lipstick Jihad*, Moaveni enacts a similar liberatory self-location by choosing to identify as an insider within both languages she uses. She realizes as a reporter in Tehran that she uses “we” when talking to both Iranians and Americans. She notices a flexibility of identity achieved through language: “In truth, the language I was speaking directed my reference points, invoking a set of experiences and accompanying beliefs particular to an American or an Iranian context” (52). This is another example of recuperating a sense of place and belonging through language. Reading this memoir as an autogeography, we note Moaveni’s explicit connection between language and place:

> [English] was the language in which I had fought many battles, but it was also the language of an alternate existence in which I had never felt fear. It was unpolluted by the brutality of the things I heard and spoke about in Farsi. . . . Of course I wrote about them in English, but exported across the border of another language, their horror was somehow muted” (emphasis mine) (89).

Language becomes place for Moaveni, its borders re-written to be protective rather than restrictive. English becomes a site where the horrors she witnesses in Farsi are transmuted to a discourse where she hasn’t faced these kinds of violence. Furthermore, she realizes that her identity requires her to be able to slip between languages to express herself fully. Wanting to be accepted when she first goes to Iran, she notes the following: “I resolved to immediately banish all English terms from my Farsi, and in the process realized that without English, I, as I knew myself, ceased to exist” (89). This is another example of how the self is situated (placed, located, held) in language, which becomes a self-holder, a container for a diasporic identity.

Indeed, by the memoir’s close, Moaveni has come to a recognition of language as both vehicle and passport to the destination of both place and self. In a section entitled, “Parsing Wor(l)ds,” in the book’s last movement, she tries to find words for a eulogy for her beloved grandfather, Agha Joon, who always spoke in rhyming couplets. She writes: “In Farsi I found the perfect lines—playful, elegant, profound—but they stubbornly refused to be led into English. I traced the Farsi words under my finger, in frustration, wanting to tear them off the page, command them to cross the border and not cling so willfully to just one world” (241). Despite this frustration, it is in the failure of translation that Moaveni arrives at the realization
that she must travel between the worlds of these two languages, content to let them stay fixed and herself mutable:

The urge to translate, this preoccupation with language I had dragged around with me, had been a resistance to the sense of foreignness I felt everywhere—a distraction from the restlessness that followed me into each hemisphere. . . . I didn’t want to accept that displacement was an inescapable reality of a life between two worlds. I would perpetually exist in each world feeling the tug of the other. The yearning, which I must embrace and stop assaulting, was a perpetual reminder of the truth, that I was whole, but composed of both. (243)

This is a brilliant description of a diasporic identity, not as a fractured, fragmented one, but as a flexible, feeling one. She would learn to live in each world attuned to the absence of the other, an absence marked by a failure of translation. Nonetheless, by marking these failures of translation in her memoir, she creates a place for the unknown, a place the reader can respect and acknowledge as an identity-marker that complicates the diasporic subject in direct contrast to the simplifications of mainstream constructions.

The second reconstitution of identity in autogeography occurs through a revision and personalization of ancestral mythologies, sometimes participating in revisionary history. In The Storyteller’s Daughter, Saira Shah explains that when she is 15, the Soviet Union invades and occupies Afghanistan, instantly making any return to the homeland dangerous and impractical. Shah tells her father she’s afraid she’ll not really be Afghani, growing up outside of Afghanistan, and that she’ll be rejected as outsider when she returns. All she has are stories, and how can stories possibly match experience? The following dialogue renders a beautiful trope for understanding how stories (mythologies, ancestral histories) function as place-holders for the diasporic subject.

“I’ve given you stories to replace a community. They are your community.”

“But surely stories can’t replace experience.”

He picked up a packet of dehydrated onion. “Stories are like these onions—like dried experience. They aren’t the original experience but they are more than nothing at all. You think about a story, you turn it over in your mind, and it
becomes something else.” He added hot water to the onion. “It’s not fresh onion—fresh experience—but it is something that can help you to recognize experience when you come across it. Experiences follow patterns, which repeat themselves again and again. In our tradition, stories can help you recognize the shape of an experience, to make sense and to deal with it. (7)

Shah takes her father’s lesson to heart, believing that the stories she is raised on will serve her in understanding the people of her ancestral homeland, should she ever go there, and the motivations behind their conflicts. Indeed, she spends quite some time recounting stories of the Mongol heritage of Afghani horsemen, musing on her own appetite for adventure as an example of this.

At the same time, Shah is bold enough to re-educate her western audiences, including several references to the militant mujahidin being given weapons by America, distributed via Pakistan, for uprisings against the communists. She is providing a revisionary history that paints not necessarily a different picture, but a more precise one than offered in the western media. In a similar bold move, she references the birth of the Taliban for an audience who may not know its genesis. She writes,

In 1994 an obscure Muslim cleric called Mullah Omar began his political career by saving the lives of two young girls. One of the former mujahidin commanders had kidnapped them, shaved their heads, and taken them to this military base near Kandahar to rape them. While everyone else stood by, too frightened to intervene, the mullah and a group of his religious students stormed the base. They freed the girls, strung the commander from a tank gun, seized his weapons—and the Taliban were born. (203)

While not denying the atrocities of the Taliban, Shah complicates our understanding of them, for instance, by pointing out that the Taliban started as a loose student organization seeking justice for ordinary citizens, rather than as an experienced cartel. Shah uses her identity as a British journalist—one with special access to the histories of a maligned group—to grant potentially new insight into that group. Following her father’s metaphor, she is rehydrating new
stories to serve as markers of her own experience, doing for her audience what her father did for her, giving us understanding that is partial, “but more than nothing at all.”

In *A Place Within*, M.G. Vassanji also participates in autogeography by grounding his experiences in the stories of his deceased father, creating a family history through the repetition of patterns around place. Growing up, Vassanji is fed stories of his father’s and uncle’s journeys to India. He learns from his mother that his father once took a ship from Mombasa to Bombay but was not allowed to disembark. His uncle also went to Bombay but chose to return home on the same ship after seeing the poverty there (30). These stories are meager and center around frustrated attempts to visit a homeland, further obscured in the telling by his widowed mother. These aborted attempts to visit India grow through their repetition and become a personal mythology for Vassanji so that he notes, “[i]t is a singular piece of irony for me that my father saw Bombay only through a porthole; I see it also from a porthole, of a plane, as we fly over it. I see it desolate, the streets and highways empty, except for a few places within, tentative crowds” (30) Marking his trip as a repetition of his father’s, Vassanji writes himself into the family myth, and writes his own story in relation to an ancestral place.

Like Shah, Vassanji is interested in providing alternative histories to counter the dissolution of myth that marks his travels in India. By writing actual history in place of the myths that served him until his return, Vassanji is asserting a more realistic connection to his ancestral land, creating a role for himself as historian in relation to it. He begins by providing the mythic story of his ancestors’ conversion from Hinduism to a gentle brand of Islam associated with singing, dancing, and continuing to honor Hindu gods while embracing the new Islamic ones.

According to a founding legend of my people, the Gujarati Khojas, a Muslim holy man arrives in medieval times to a remote village in western Gujarat and joins the people in a traditional dance called the garba. As he dances, he sings them a song. The villagers and the mystic—for such he is—go around in circles, clapping hands in rhythm and singing. The people are poor and desperate, for the land is prone to drought; the visitor is new and charismatic and hopeful. They are
Krishna devotees, whom he teaches to expect an incarnation of the god to come from the west. You should sing day and night, he sings to them. . . . These spiritual dance songs are called garbi and belong to a larger corpus called ginans.

(XII)

The above legend, joyful and jovial as it tells the happy story of conversion to a new way while integrating the old provides a comfortable terrain for Vassanji to couch his identity as a western humanist living and writing in Canada. For him, this ancestral history, a happy combination of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam, without a thought to internal contradictions or to mainstream traditions, inevitably defined [his] relationship with India. The existence of such inclusive systems of belief was proof of an essential historical quality of India, that of tolerance and flexibility, a certain laissez faire in matters of the spirit. (XII)

Vassanji’s first visit to India is marked by disillusion as he realizes that Gujarat, the birthplace of his ancestors, and of Gandhi, is host to the most graphic violence resulting from a recent bombing of a mosque by Hindu extremists. He writes, “[i]t is in that state that the violence has raged for the longest time, in a manner that defies reason, defies everything I thought Gujarat was: the land of Gandhi, of peaceful though clever shopkeepers” (36). His response to this may be seen as autogeographical—as the myths he was raised on fall apart, he conducts historical research to find fresh examples of peace and equanimity in India, writing a place that supports his pacifist identity rather than being at odds with it.

Vassanji provides a poignant example of this in his retelling of the history of a popular tourist attraction, the Qutb Minar, built by a series of sultans of the Mughal Empire. He begins with a literal description of the mosque followed by this observation:

An inscription on the mosque tells us it was built out of materials taken from twenty-seven Hindu and Jain temples, the evidence of which is still visible in the rows of pillars in the mosque decorated with typical Indian floral motifs and animal and human figures, some of which have been disfigured so as not to offend the piety of the Muslim prayer house. (63)
Troubled by this desecration of the non-dominant religion, aware of his own history as part of both oppressive and oppressed group, he continues his sight-seeing with an agenda of finding a balance, an intervention, something to compensate for the disparity that challenges his notions of Gujarat as the Indian seat of tolerance and pacifism. In a chapter entitled, “The Sultan and the Sufi” (65), he provides the long troubled history of the Muslim conquest of northern India, adding his own twist ending by establishing a type of compensation for the arrogance of the Muslim sultans. The Sufi ultimately wins over the sultan in that his grave is both marked and visited whereas the sultan’s is buried and obscure: “While the monuments of the sultans lie silent, some of them abject, neglected, ruins, those of the poets and mystics live on and sing and perhaps mock to this day” (70). He goes on to note a razed fort, once formidable, now in ruins and barely detectable. “Across the road, equally forlorn, lies the tomb of the sultan. . . . Nizamuddin’s [the Sufi’s] final resting place, on the other hand, is visited every year by thousands of people of all faiths, bearing baskets of roses as offerings and desires to be fulfilled” (74).

As a self-reflexive mode, autogeography allows the writer to comment upon the significance of his choices, and Vassanji himself questions and explores the significance for him personally in recuperating his ancestral and cultural stories.

Why this obsession with the past? I can only conclude that it reflects the deep dissatisfaction of unfinished, incomplete migrations, a perpetual homelessness in my life. My colonial existence. . . created an uncontrollable and perhaps a vain desire to know and record who I am. . . . In how I connect to the history I learn about myself. (53)

Vassanji himself closes the loop on our interpretation of his writing as an autogeography. He becomes knowable to himself through his history—a history tied up to a land with which he identifies, first through story, then through experience which he in turn renders through story, thus becoming not just the recipient but the arbiter of history and identity.

The final theme I will note in my definition of autogeography is the most intimate collapse of self and space. It marks the ways in which writing autogeography allows the diasporic subject to renegotiate how the body is constituted as a marker of race and ethnicity.
Before the writing of self into place, occasioned by autogeography, the diasporic subject usually experiences positive cultural associations with the bodies of family members while having negative ones thrust on the self by society. This can also be seen among immigrants, as Alexander explains her father’s hastily arranged marriage before going to continue his studies in England: “It was customary that a young man, before setting off abroad, be fitted out with a bride, an anchor, a calling card in reverse” (54). In this set up, the new bride stays home (in this case the home country), acting as a place keeper for her husband, perhaps a motivation for return.

For the diasporic subject, is it usually not a spouse but a parent who embodies the finer aspects of ancestral identity. If the parent-child relationship is fraught, as it often is, then so is the child’s relationship to the homeland, provoking complicated responses as the diasporic subject seeks to bypass the parent in her reach for ancestry, community, and homeland. As a child, Moaveni saw her mother as embodying Iran much like the brides of Alexander’s India did for their husbands. As an adult, Moaveni realizes in retrospect that she needed to journey to Iran to forge her own relationship with it—an individuation of the child that is seen in many memoirs, but that gets written as renegotiating ancestral place within autogeographies. Moaveni writes,

Now I could see how much of my journey back had been directed to this very point—the point where my relationship to Iran was bilateral, not negotiated through a third party (my mother) and at the mercy of our turbulent relationship. Before I came to Iran, my mother essentially was Iran to me. During her long stretches of estrangement, I felt exiled from Iran as well. . . . Looking back, I saw that my return to Iran was partly to preempt my fear of a loss I knew was inevitable. One day my mother would die, and with her my Iran would disappear. (212)

After spending time in Tehran, and negotiating an independent relationship with it, developing her Farsi to outdo her mother’s, and authenticating her understanding of Iranian culture, Moaveni feels free to embody Iran in New York. This is something she could not do as a child in California who felt that Iranian identity was thrust upon her by external (familial and societal)
forces. Heading to President Khatami’s press conference in downtown Manhattan, knowing that Iranian eyes would be fixed on her as one of their own, she dons the veil as a mark of solidarity from afar, the ultimate gesture for her as a woman of the Iranian diaspora, racializing her body and doing so as a personal choice (171).

Just as the bodies of the family members around her are place-holders for the diasporic subject before she can negotiate that place herself, the ancestral place, once she visits it, becomes a self-holder, a site at which she can reconstitute her identity as an agent of story. Meena Alexander recalls explaining it this way to a new American friend who can’t quite understand what she means: “It’s as if in all these years as a poet I had carried a simple shining geography around with me: a house with a courtyard where I grew up in Tiruvella. My mother’s ancestral house with its garden. . . . And because it was, I am whole and entire. I do not need to think in order to be” (197). This is a powerful and deliberate reconstituting of selfhood through a counter cogito. Rather than thought preceding and proscribing selfhood, it is place.

Moaveni achieves a similar epiphany towards the end of her memoir in her interpretation of Farid Ud-din Attar’s epic Persian fable, The Conference of the Birds. Moaveni explains that a flock of birds were summoned to undertake a perilous journey to reach their mystical king, the Simorgh. At the journey’s end, the guide turns to them and tells them that they themselves are the Simorgh, which in Farsi, translates as “thirty birds,” their number. “The goal of their journey, which they had imagined as a quest for their king, was actually their quest for self” (245). Recalling this story, Moaveni appreciates that it was ultimately herself she sought in Iran because she believed it would give her access to parts of herself to which she didn’t have cultural access. She writes, “[t]hough with each day there I accumulated as many questions as answers, like those steadfast birds, something kept me honed on course, a belief in the obscured value of the destination” (245).

Ultimately, autogeography achieves its purpose for the diasporic subject when he or she no longer needs to constitute place in his or her own body, but can carry it along, unpacking and repacking it at will. In this iteration, place becomes portable, leaving the diasporic subject empowered to assert and insert her geographical identity to suit the moment and her purpose. Autogeography’s resolution becomes the self’s ability to reconstitute home around oneself.
without necessarily needing to mark it on the body—in such a model, place is provisional rather than permanent, and the diasporic subject decides when to enact any of the spaces available to her, often being able to lay one place over another thus creating unique cultural spaces.

We see this in Moaveni’s final paragraph where she muses upon her time at a café in New York following a play she enjoys with other Iranian Americans:

For us, home was not determined by latitudes and longitudes. It was spatial. This, this was the modern Iranian experience, that bound the diaspora to Iran. We were all displaced, whether internally, on the streets of Tehran... strangers in our own country, or externally, in exile... foreigners in a foreign country, at home together... Iran had been disfigured, and we carried its scraps in our pockets, and when we assembled, we laid them out, and were home. (246)

Like my own maternal relatives who gathered on that day in 1974 to recreate Kampala in the kitchen, diasporic subjects can carry their sense of place and identity with them wherever they wish, able to recreate it at will while resisting easy racializations of the body where geographies are inscribed upon them in predetermined ways. Autogeography is the creative act of forging these liberating connections between place and identity, and it is the critical act of reading the memoirs of diaspora for these same revisionary purposes.
Works Cited


Assignments

Working With(in) Autobiography

Cabrillo College
2011 - 2012

Presented as Outcome # 6 in Geneffa Jonker’s sabbatical project and presented to the Sabbatical Leave Review Board in fall 2012.
Here is a brief biography of a man who turned his fortune around:

For many generations before this century, the standard procedure for developing skilled craftsmen was for the father to teach the sons his trade. The skills necessary for the craft were passed from one generation to another.

Many years ago a shoe maker was teaching his nine-year-old son his craft to prepare him for life. One day while working, an awl fell from the shoe maker's table and tragically put out the eye of his nine-year-old son. Without the medical knowledge and expertise of today, the son ended up losing not only that eye, but the other one as well. His father put him in a special school for the sightless.

At that time the blind were taught to read by using large, carved wooden blocks. They were clumsy, awkward to handle and required a considerable amount of time to learn. The shoe maker's son, however, was not content only to learn to read himself. He knew there must be an easier, better way. Over the years, he devised a new reading system for the blind by punching dots into paper. To accomplish his objective, the shoe maker's son used the same awl that had blinded him. His name was Louis Braille. (Zig Ziglar)

This story contains an irony. Irony often occurs when something is not as expected. Can you find the irony in the above biography of Louis Braille? Write it down here.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What is the tragedy in the above story?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What is the triumph in the above story?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

For our next class meeting, write about a time when you turned a negative situation around to produce a positive outcome. The situation may be major or minor as long as it shows a shift in attitude or behavior. Like the story above, your description should be at least three paragraphs long.

Note: When you write a biography about yourself, it is called an autobiography.
When we tell a story, it is important to describe it from several different angles, just like a film uses several camera angles to create a more complete picture. When writing autobiography, a story about yourself, it is important to include three different angles: scene, summary, and reflection.

For our next class meeting, write a one to two page story about an important event from your life, and tell it using techniques of summary, scene, and reflection. Some examples of events you may want to consider are graduating from high school, having a baby, returning to college, the death of a loved one, meeting your significant other, an unforgettable vacation.

**Summary** – this tells us what happened in general terms. The summary should give us a general sense of the story to come, hopefully making us want to dive right in and keep reading. The summary should not include many details, but rather, a brief explanation that sets the stage for the scene.

**Scene** – once you have set the stage with your summary, you are ready to write the scene that drops us into the story as though we are feeling and experiencing it ourselves. The scene should be written as a couple of paragraphs. It may include dialogue or a description of the setting.

**Reflection** – this is where you look back at the significance of the story you just told. How did it affect you in the moment? How has the event you describe continued to have an impact on your life?

As a rough guide, your summary could be one paragraph, your scene could be three, and the reflection could be two. You may want to keep them in the order I have suggested, but feel free to experiment with the order or to weave among these three practices if you see a good way to do this.

When you do more quoting and paraphrasing at the end of term and in English 1A, you will use the skills that you’ve developed for writing summary and reflection to integrate research.

This assignment is due at our next class meeting. Please ensure that your response has your name on it, and that it’s written neatly if not typed. Please double-space your response for ease of reading.

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ENGLISH 1A
INTERVIEW PAPER

Write a 3 – 5 page paper where you interview a person you know to be an immigrant about their experience. Rather than provide an exact transcript of what your interviewee says, I want you to take what they say and retell it in essay format with an introduction that sets up the interview, perhaps providing background history about the person you’ve chosen. The body paragraphs should incorporate the content of the interview. Focus paragraphs about what you learned from this immigrant person. If you are an immigrant, you cannot interview yourself, but feel free to interview a member of your family. Use direct quotes every so often to authenticate your paper and interview, as well as to communicate the person’s style and tone. Finally, include a conclusion that compares or contrasts your own life experiences to those of this person you have described.

If you are unable to find someone to interview, see me for an interview article that you can use instead.

Some interview questions to consider:

1. Can you please describe your experience immigrating to this country? What stands out about the experience in your memory?

2. What were your hopes and fears before you immigrated? Did these change during the process of immigrating? Did you develop new hopes and fears?

3. Once you were here, how did you feel?
   a. Did you feel welcomed? Explain.
   b. Were you homesick?
   c. Did you have an easy or a hard time adjusting? Explain.
   d. How did you handle learning a new language or dialect?
   e. How did you integrate yourself into a new society and community?
   f. Did you enter school or the work force? What was this like for you?

4. Did your feelings change as you spent more time here? If so, how?

5. Where do you think of when you think of “home”?

I recommend using a tape recorder if you have access to one, and then writing down the transcript of the recording so you can refer to it without having to play the recording over and over again.

Your paper must use MLA format (Introduction, Body, Conclusion, typed, double spaced, and with a works cited page).
ENGLISH 2
GROUP MEMBERSHIP PAPER
“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

(Pastor Martin Niemöller)

Silence is a socially sanctioned response to both privilege and oppression. If you experience privilege in a situation, you are prompted to remain silent so that the privilege (private law) stays invisible. For example, if you are given a “free pass” because of who your parents are, your class background, your racial background, etc., you are advised not to talk about it. On the other hand, if you experience oppression in a situation, you are encouraged to keep silent for fear of negative repercussions. For example, victims of child abuse, rape, gang violence, etc. are threatened with further violence if they disclose their experiences. Thus, whether privileged or oppressed, we all suffer and survive in silence. One of the most important outcomes of critical thinking is breaking the silence around privilege and oppression.

Write an essay about your membership in a group, either at present or at some point in your past. Describe the group, your identity and participation within it, and how it functioned within the larger context of society. Then, go on to examine the silences that you observed within this group—the unspoken codes, the secrets, and the assumptions. Looking back, what were the privileges and / or oppressions that you experienced within this group.

*** NOTE: Choose a group you feel comfortable disclosing, and only reveal what you feel comfortable with. If you are having a difficult time thinking of a group to write about, consider the institutions we’ve discussed in class: family, religion, school, sports, etc.

Length: 3 – 5 pages (minimum of 7 well-developed paragraphs).
ENGLISH 12F
TO SEE AND BE SCENE

Working off your brainstorming work for your next piece of memoir, you are going to experiment with drama. Drama is the oldest form of literary expression, and it is a great way to get to know your own story better by staging it as a play.

1. Begin with a character sketch of your main characters, writing a brief paragraph for each of them on your first page. You may title this page, “Characters,” or Dramatis Personae, which is the traditional term, if you prefer.

2. Next, write a paragraph or two on the setting where you would find your characters interacting. Describe the landscape or one of the places in which your characters might find themselves together. Include both general and specific details. With this description, you are setting the stage for your characters to come off the page and breathe.

3. The next step is to write a monologue from the perspective of one of your main characters. A monologue is a speech that reflects the primary concerns of the character and is often delivered in the presence of a witness. A soliloquy is similar to a monologue except that the speaker is addressing the audience and revealing his or her inner life.

4. Next you should write a dialogue between the character who represents you and one other character. The dialogue will reveal how you express yourself and how others respond to you.

At our next class meeting, we will share and discuss some of these, so please have this writing assignment complete at that time.

Creating a dramatic framework for a piece of memoir or fiction can be very useful for watching how your characters and your story “play out” upon a stage, and becoming conscious of how they may be viewed by an audience—how they resonate, entertain, annoy, provoke, etc. You may find yourself including some of the above materials as you write your memoir.
DMCP 110
FOUNDATION COURSE PAPER

This paper, coming at the end of our intensive two weeks together, is a chance for you to reflect on the growth you have experienced through this course, and to contrast your experience of the Foundation Course with other educational experiences you have had.

You will go home today with the two art projects you generated through this course. The first one, created on Day 2, is an abstract piece developed from a meditation upon your educational experiences from early childhood to the present, but not including the ACE program. The second art project, that you developed this morning, emerged from your reflection on the last two weeks—your experience of the Foundation Course.

Write an essay of five paragraphs or more in which you contrast the products of your two art projects, and then go on to contrast the educational experiences that they represent. Sum up the main difference between the two experiences, focusing on the effect each has had on you. You may also want to consider answering the following questions in your essay: how did you feel about yourself as a learner in your past educational experiences, and how do you feel now? What hopes, anxieties, and reassurances do you carry forward into the rest of your college career?

Possible organization:

Introductory paragraph – description of one art project (what you see on the page) followed by a description of the other. Name the main distinction you see between the two pieces. If they are similar, you should still focus on any differences.

Body paragraphs – think of about 3 – 5 areas of difference between your past educational experiences and your Foundation Course experience. Then, for each of these differences, write a paragraph that first describes your original experience and then describes your FC experience. Be as detailed as possible in your descriptions so that the reader can easily imagine what you are describing.

Do not be alarmed if you have limited experience with paragraph and essay writing. For this written assignment, you will be graded on content rather than form. You will be taught essay-writing skills to bring you to a college level in your English course.

Format: Typed (preferable) or neatly hand-written, double-spaced, on one side of the page only. Write or type your name in the top left corner, and put the course title and date underneath your name.

Due date: This assignment is due in your Team Self Management class at your third meeting. Your English instructor may also give you an opportunity to work on this paper, with his or her guidance, during the first week of the bridge semester, but it will not be enough time to complete it. DO NOT PROCRASTINATE! It is best to draft at least a rough version of this paper while the Foundation Course and the art projects are fresh in your memory.
Paper Objective: Examining ourselves through the lens of family

Our lives are part of a larger web of lives and experiences. The forces that shape who we are, or will be, stretch back many years, and we are more connected than we know to people and events that have come before us. Indeed, as we embark on our individual journeys, we must first decide on our baggage—which luggage to take with us on our journey and which baggage to leave behind. The purpose of this family history paper is to help you to examine and understand your own life choices through the lives of family members or your culture and background. Although you will be writing about other people in your life, the focus is still on you.

Options for the Family History Paper

Write a paper that explores in some depth one of the following topics:

1. **A legacy you have inherited from your family—it can be one you wish to continue or one you’d like to release.**
   A legacy can be a ritual, tradition, talent, spiritual path, language . . . and it can also be a habit, pattern, addiction, preference, or world view. Describe how you have observed or experienced this legacy, and use this paper as a forum to decide whether or not you would like to carry it forward, and how you will continue or release this legacy.

2. **The Community that Has Raised Me.**
   Describe this community and the values it has given you. Do you wish to preserve these values or revise them as you move forward in your life? In the past, students have written about religious / faith-based communities, youth organizations, sports communities, the foster system, the military, the boy/girl scouts, gangs, the prison system, and many other organizations and institutions that have played a large role in their upbringing.

3. **The Family I Wish I Had.**
   Describe your ideal family in detail, looking at both daily life as well as the overall picture. What values, beliefs, and traditions do you wish you’d grown up with?

4. **How I Can Be the Parent I Wished For.**
   How can you become the ideal parent you’ve always wished you had? What lessons do you wish to impart, and what values would you encourage? What would your legacy be? Note: you do not have to be a parent, or even want to have children, to imagine this response.

Other Options

You may combine some of the above topics, or you may develop a related topic of your own, but you must get my approval for an alternative topic before you pursue it.

**Format:** typed, double-spaced, MLA format

**Length:** minimum 3 pages

This final paper is due at your last class meeting. Late papers will not be accepted.