

Suspension of the imaginary in the real: fiction as truth in the memoir



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In its creation and consumption, literature involves an inherent contract between reader and author. The parameters of this contract are often set by the work's genre, and help the reader to determine whether the text should be interpreted as truth or imagination. When an author blurs this distinction, the reader considers the contract violated, and material that, under different contractual expectations, would be considered harmlessly fictitious instead becomes maliciously deceitful. Conflict almost always arises when readers discover fiction lurking beneath expectations of truth – the sacred boundaries of genre dependent on a razorblade division between fact and fiction.

Of course, any such distinction has always been impossible, genre attempting in vain to erect tenuous partitions between the ultimately inseparable principles of truth and invention in the represented world. Before the generic distinction between fiction and non-fiction had been established, even presumably “pure” fiction itself was met with skepticism, and in its earliest days, the novel was decried as deceitful, sinful, and corrupt. Based on the inherently paradoxical principle of verisimilitude, the novel devotes itself to the representation of that which is like reality, but is, in fact, fiction. Thus, even in its simplest, most recognizable form, narrative inextricably mixes fact and fiction, the real and the imagined, rendering it impossible for any author to satisfactorily separate the two.

This conflict is only further compounded in the memoir genre. While authors often fail to fulfill the expectations outlined by even clearest of generic distinctions, the boundaries of memoir are obscure from the outset.

Generically distinct from autobiography, memoir does not necessarily

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promise non-fiction, but still presumably relates the real experiences of real individuals. Through memoir, both Maxine Hong Kingston and Allison Bechdel explore the tentative boundary between truth and fiction, both ultimately seeing the latter as a means of discovering and conveying the former. In unapologetically mixing fact and fiction, *The Woman Warrior* and *Fun Home* highlight the ultimately arbitrary nature of genre.

These memoirs illustrate the truth as equally dependent on what did happen, and what did not happen or may not have happened. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston extends this principle to speech, and her narrative builds meaning as much through what is said as through what is not said. Noting the importance of silence in the memoir, Jill Parrott remarks: Scenes without verbal communication, words that are not spoken purposefully, or words that are changed or left out serve as important a function in the overall rhetorical strategy of the text as the words that are expressed. They are “simultaneously meaningful” in that they exist side-by-side on the page and work together to form the complete meaning-making artifact of the text. (377). Indeed, silence – at least in principle if not in practice – can even be said to dominate *The Woman Warrior*, the memoir itself opening with the silencing command, “You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you” (Kingston 3). In this opening section, Kingston establishes the power of silence through its use as a weapon. The eponymous “No Name Woman” of the introductory narrative, Kingston’s unnamed aunt, becomes the victim of silence. In an attempt to erase any memory of her existence, her family forbids any mention of her name, or – in Parrott’s Foucauldian terminology – “the family forcefully suppresses the linguistic representation of her name,

dehumanizing her and symbolically denying her existence” (378). Thus, for Kingston’s family, silence – that which is not said – makes as powerful a statement as any vocalized or written truth. As Kingston herself says, “ There is more to this silence. They want me to participate in her punishment. And I have” (Kingston 16). Silence not only erases past truth, but actively functions to create and convey a new truth, the construction of which Kingston is forced, through silence, to participate in.

In an attempt to reclaim power, Kingston breaks this silence, making “ the rhetorical choice to extend existence back to that long-dead relative by telling the story” (Parrott 379). Of course, however, Kingston cannot give a factual account of her aunt’s history, any possibility of that truth having been sacrificed to years of compulsory silence extending through multiple generations. Instead, Kingston presents multiple variations of the story, illustrating her aunt alternately as a victim of rape and coercion, and also as a romantic, a young woman in love. Deprived of fact, Kingston is left to craft truth out of fiction, to fill in the gaps left by silence with her own interpretations.

In *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel also creates meaning out of the absence of linguistic representation. Like Kingston, Bechdel’s family history is of course also plagued by silence and repression. However, as a graphic memoir, the “ gaps” left by the absence of expression in *Fun Home* manifest more literally in the form of the narrative – that is, in the “ gutter” between illustrations, whose vacancy is silently responsible for the creation of meaning between each illustrated scene. Thus, as in *The Woman Warrior*, meaning in *Fun*

Home is constructed not merely in spite of, but literally through absence.
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Of course, for Bechdel, this structural absence mirrors actual gaps in her knowledge. Bechdel's understanding of her father's life and death is necessarily incomplete, and in her attempt to make sense of it, she illustrates and conveys as history events that she could not possibly know to be accurate, as she was not there. Through illustration, Bechdel shirks some of the responsibility to convey fact promised by the autobiographical leaning of her work, establishing a loophole in the contract between herself and the reader by rejecting linguistic representation and instead turning to graphic representation in which she is free to illustrate her own version of the truth.

Perhaps the best example of Bechdel turning to illustration as a way to convey the unknowable as truth is in her depictions of her father's death. Like Kingston, Bechdel defines her own personal memoir largely in terms of her family history. Also like Kingston, Bechdel grapples with the uncertain circumstances surrounding the death of a relative - in this case, her father - and is left to fill in the gaps in her knowledge with speculation. The notion of his death as a suicide is an unproven - and perpetually unprovable - theory that dominates the narrative, and Bechdel illustrates the scene multiple times throughout the memoir. In creating these images, Bechdel is able to redefine and ultimately possess a crucial moment of which, having not been a witness, her knowledge is incomplete. Although in words Bechdel remains bound to her autobiographical contract with the reader and is forced to temper her assumptions about her father's death with qualifying admissions of uncertainty like, " Maybe he didn't notice the truck was coming because he was preoccupied with the divorce," and, " People often have accidents

when they're distraught," in her illustrations, she remains free to recreate and depict truth according to her own interpretations (28).

Bechdel's willful revision of fact through visual imagery is also evident in the variations of her treatment of memory across these two - sometimes competing - mediums, text and image. Recalling an old story her grandmother used to tell her in her youth about her father's childhood, Bechdel supplements her grandmother's narrative with illustrations of the events she describes. In one of these illustrations, Bechdel depicts a man as a milkman who in her grandmother's story is actually described as mailman. Once again, Bechdel qualifies her illustrated revision with text, including the confessional parenthetical, " I know Mort was a mailman, but I always pictured him as a milkman, all in white, a reverse grim reaper" (41). Here, Bechdel once again deliberately veers from fact, taking advantage of the freedom to interpret and express her own version of the truth through her illustrations. This variation between the realities presented in Bechdel's linguistic and visual representations reflect the idea of multiplicity as truth - an idea that ultimately comes to define Bechdel's personal narrative and understanding of herself as an individual. For both Bechdel and Kingston, the individual is an amalgam of different influences and individuals, including the family. As Bobby Fong remarks of *The Woman Warrior*:

Kingston reconstructs a past from fragments of memory, most notably the stories given her by her mother. That past is not simply facts recollected, but myth and story retold and transformed to meet the needs of the narrator.

The work is achronological and open-ended; as readers we are left with the

impression of a life in process, with a developing order, but not static, ever unfinished. (117).

While Fong contends that Kingston's departure from the traditional autobiographical focus on the self as an individual in favor of "defining herself in terms of her place in a kinship line" is uniquely reflective of eastern culture, it can be extended to Bechdel's decidedly western rendering of the American family as well (Fong 118). For both authors, identity depends on family history, and understanding that history is crucial to understanding the self. Thus, Bechdel and Kingston have no choice but to fill in the gaps in their knowledge with their own invention and speculation, using fiction to create and convey the truth of their own personal identities.

If readers expecting factual autobiography feel betrayed by these tendencies toward speculation and fabrication, they will certainly be left shocked and confused by both Kingston's and Bechdel's ventures into actual fiction. Both *The Woman Warrior* and *Fun Home* incorporate fiction directly into the telling of their personal narratives - Kingston through myth, Bechdel through intertextuality. In this way, both Kingston and Bechdel irrevocably obscure the division between fact and fiction, using both to define themselves through their narrative and shattering any expectations or presumed promises of fact the reader may have of the genre.

In "White Tigers," Kingston departs from the preceding section's speculative interpretation of relatively recent family history, instead imagining herself as the legendary Fa Mu Lan. This story is one of the many "models of reality" Kingston illustrates, rejecting the idea of her identity as a linear and

individual progression (Fong 119). Though obviously not factual or reflective of her real experiences, Kingston traces her own life through an interpretation of Fa Mu Lan's story, in order to both highlight their similarities and differences. Ultimately, Kingston uses the Fa Mu Lan legend as a kind of revisionist history, presenting her real life in stark contrast with the idyllic lapse into legend. Breaking away from the narrative with the confession, "My American life has been such a disappointment," Kingston uses the Fa Mu Lan story to highlight the failures and struggles of her own life (45). For Kingston, her triumphant retelling of her life through the story of Fa Mu Lan allows her to point out the sexist injustices of her real existence as a woman in a society which she claims, "even now wraps double binds around my feet" (48). In reflecting on this, Kingston defines her life not strictly in terms of what has happened, but in terms of what might have happened - how things could or should have been different according to her personal values and beliefs.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel takes a similar approach, intertwining her narrative with other works of literature in what she refers to as "a suspension of the imaginary in the real" (65). The memoir both begins and concludes with an allusion linking Bechdel and her father to Icarus and Daedalus. Naturally, this comparison eventually gives way to Joycean allusions, as well as countless other references including Albert Camus and Oscar Wilde intimately interwoven within Bechdel's narrative. In this way, Bechdel literally, if paradoxically, depends on fiction to convey truth. Perhaps the most significant and entangling literary analogy Bechdel draws is between her father and both Jay Gatsby and F. Scott Fitzgerald, taking the intertextuality

even further with the statement, “ I think what was so alluring to my father about Fitzgerald’s stories was their inextricability from Fitzgerald’s life” (65). In a multi-step labyrinth of intertextuality, Bechdel sees the lives of herself, her father, and even of F. Scott Fitzgerald himself hopelessly entangled in fiction, the real completely dissolved in the imagined. For Bechdel, there is no distinction between fact and fiction, history and story. With statements like, “ My parents are most real to me in fictional terms,” Bechdel actually emphasizes the idea of fiction as a pathway towards, rather than a diversion from, reality.

Both Bechdel and Kingston unapologetically intertwine their personal narratives with fiction, actively subverting any expectations of autobiographical fact presumably promised by their memoirs. Neither author sees truth as a mere compendium of objective fact, but rather as a patchwork quilt of fragmented memories, incomplete personal and familial history, and even fiction itself. Any attempt to distinguish absolutely between fact and fiction in these texts would not only be futile, but also impossible. In fact, this distinction - which genre claims to delineate - is impossible to truly identify in any literary work. Once an experience passes into the represented world, even if it is taken there with the most dedicated intentions of accuracy and faithful depiction, it becomes precisely that: a representation forever divided from the reality of its real world existence and subject to interpretation that will bring it perpetually further still. Thus, the purported delineations marked by genre are arbitrary at best. There can be no fiction or non-fiction. They are inextricably bound up together in the wonderland of the represented world.

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