

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: MENDING THE GAP
BETWEEN TRUTH AND MEMOIR

by

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Abstract

The memoir is a genre that still remains somewhat in the shadows in terms of its allocation within the subjects of academia, literature, English instruction, among others. This thesis is an attempt at appeasing the genre via three seemingly different, yet similar routes. First, by creating a new definition for memoir. Second, by putting into practice the theory behind memory writing through the creation of the memoir titled *Lejos de la casa y el árbol*. Lastly, by deciphering its role in English instruction. This thesis thus serves as a means to bridge the great divide between memoir's unstable reputation and its true colors in the fields of literature, academia and language instruction.

Resumen

El género de la memoria es uno que aún permanece en un tipo de oscurantismo con relación a su posición en los campos de la academia, la literatura, la instrucción en inglés, entre otros. Esta tesis es un intento de apaciguar el género mediante tres vías que aparentan ser contradictorias, pero en realidad tienden a ser similares. Primero, fabricando una nueva definición para la memoria. Segundo, poniendo en práctica la teoría detrás del género mediante la creación de las memorias tituladas *Lejos de la casa y el árbol*. Finalmente, se descifra su rol en la educación en inglés. Por consiguiente, esta tesis une las dos caras de la memoria: la estereotípica y la verdadera.

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For my Father:

“Hoy te quiero cantar más allá.

Más allá de dónde ha de llegar la canción.”

(Silvio Rodríguez 182)

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Chapter I

Why Memoir? An Introduction

We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives.

(Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*)

The Narrating Mind

Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" were written as oral memoirs, notes Leslie Schenk, and adds that many of the earliest novels were written in that form, as "first-person reminiscences" (475). Literary works such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Beauvoir's *Memoirs d'une jeune fille rangee*, Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, even Proust's *The Past Recaptured*, considered by many as the novel-of-the-century, consist of "thinly veiled memoirs" (475). In non-western literary traditions we can find another form of the memoir: the Japanese "I-novel," or *watakushi shōsetsu*, a genre of the 20th century focused on the author as its central character and the narration of his or her self-revelation. Be it fiction or non-fiction writing about one's life experiences is a universal practice and every time and again us humans feel the urge to tell our story; for relief, for survival, or for merely recording one's existence on earth. We have what Dan P. McAdams calls a "narrating mind" (27), where stories or narratives are the natural way for our storage of ideas. Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood in one of the entries of his *Diaries* explains that he wrote in his journal to "provide evidence... that he was

neither wasting his life nor spending it in the wrong way: that he was doing something of value, that he was keeping a record” (quoted in Schenk 479).

Through the narrative we express memory. However, many argue that personal recollections are not relevant to the rest of the reading public. As Isaac Bashevis Singer states, writing about one’s life is not “a healthy habit” (quoted in Schenk 478); it will eventually become redundant and boring. To contest this claim I resort to what Ann Rigney, in her article titled “The Point of Stories: On Narrative Communication and its Cognitive Functions” humorously states. She claims that, just as M. Jourdain suddenly discovered that he had all along been speaking in prose, scholars have also “suddenly realized that we’ve been talking all along in narrative form” (264). In other words, there is no escaping the narrative; something so innate should be embraced, not rejected. The personal memoir or autobiographical story is a very powerful medium, something that should not be devalued or thought to be secondary in terms of human existence, cultural production or the dissemination of knowledge. Alasdair MacIntyre strongly concurs on the narrative’s essentiality by concluding:

Not only may narratives provide the models with which individuals interpret experience, but also the role models upon which they base their actions in society: deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and in their words. (201)

If we lose storytelling we lose ourselves. This is the reason why narrative acts such as the memoir serve such an important function; they are vehicles for finding the self or selves in the act of composition.

The “real” self that is to be found through the writing of one’s memoir should not be mistaken for finding the ideal self. Laurie Stone writes; “most memoirs fail as

literature because the authors mistake their experience for a story rather than find in the story their experience” (quoted in Blais 3). After receiving the Pulitzer Prize for his memoir *Angela’s Ashes*, Frank McCourt shared with a group of Long Island high school students that it was not until he grasped the “significance of his insignificant life” that he was able to write his book (quoted in Blais 3). It is worth questioning the preconceived notion that to write a memoir one must have had an exceptional and celebrated life; this not a pre-requisite for one to be able to sit down and write one’s memories. It is the sense we get out of events and experiences that matters.

What drove me to write the memoir that informs this thesis, *Lejos de la casa y el árbol*, was the need to pay homage to my father while aiming for the aforementioned self-discovery, because like all literature, memoir is a process of discovery and, as Virginia Woolf stated, “the record of our discontent” (99). These findings sprout out from the deciphering of past events. As a memoirist, I was thus driven by questions such as: What is the meaning of how I remember this moment? Why do I remember it in such manner?

Encountering and Articulating the Self

Tobias Wolff once wrote to a friend about memoir writing: “Take no care with your dignity... Don’t be afraid of appearing angry, small-minded, obtuse, mean, immoral, amoral, calculating, or anything else” (Muir 14). I understand then that the memoirist is not a role model that the reader should follow in his/her footsteps. The memoirist is there to tell others that he/she sympathizes, that he or she has been through something like that and that it is, rudimentary speaking, okay. The memoirist is there to help the reader find his/her way by unraveling a story with which the reader might relate. The memoirist is not there to dispense advice; again, the memoir is the writer’s search for him/herself. The memoirist seeks meaning in the memory by

making connections. It demands the memoirist to bring out not just a story, but to reflect on “the how” and, once more, “the why” of that particular story. Seemingly average or even insignificant events are recounted in memoir, moments that for others might be unnecessary. Hence, the memoirist’s aim is to reveal the deep meaning behind that apparent nonsense of events. This is where the marrow of memoir lies, in the search for answers as to why ostensibly superfluous matters do in fact matter.

Not only does the writing of memoir help define us, but also the mere act of writing presupposes an audience, thus affecting or influencing self-illumination. According to Engel, “...the public use of a memory gives it a definition and substance it didn’t have when it lived only in one’s mind... (16). Having *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* read by professors and later on by peers will enrich my journey towards self-discovery since the experience becomes amplified for the “simple” act of becoming public. As a result, memoir, and more notably, publishing a memoir, may ensure the attainment of one of the most complex and daunting experiences of human existence: being able to find the raw self.

It was anger that first drove me to narrate my life in a memoir, in the process this anger turned into a bittersweet feeling as I hoped that the actual writing would lead me to a new sense of place. My father was killed in a car accident in the summer of 2004, when I was twenty-one years of age and in my fourth year as an English literature major at the University of Puerto Rico - Mayagüez. At the time, I had no intention of “using” such an experience for anything. The thought of turning my father’s death into a thesis project for my master’s degree was nowhere in sight. I did not even know what was going to happen to me; whether I was going to be able to reach that graduate level, for I felt like an orphan, with no one to look after me. I had no father to tell me that I could do anything I wanted and that money was not an

impediment. Afraid of not having money for my future, I got a job at the university's newly founded writing center. It was during my senior year in college, while working as a tutor at the writing center, that I realized my passion for writing. After graduating I had neither a job nor money. I thought about my options, which were not many since I had to look after my mother. I chose to apply to my department's graduate program and was admitted. During my second semester I had to start thinking about my thesis topic in order to fill out my plan of study. One rainy afternoon, while I was having lunch with a friend, it dawned upon me that I could write a memoir using songs from the Cuban singer and songwriter Silvio Rodríguez to immortalize my father through words. I decided to use Silvio as the muse for my project for he was, and still is, my life's sound track. Some, if not all, of his songs remind me of my father, because it was Silvio who accompanied us in every moment. In addition, many songs personify the man, my father, as well as my insights upon life and death. It was not until I was deeply immersed in the writing of my memoir that I realized that the excerpts I had chosen were also an ominous foreshadowing of my father's departure.

However, this idea was not going to be an easy one to propose to my thesis committee since it was something that had not been done before. I was going to write a memoir focusing on the death of my father, and I was going to have to defend and justify such an endeavor in the context of academia. In other words, two colliding realms: academic research conventions and creative writing were to work in synergy through my work. I began working on my memoir and after I finished it I started constructing the academic part of the project and finally wrote the afterword. At the beginning I believed that the project would be painless and straightforward for the fact that it was grounded, mainly, on my experience. I also thought that I would feel better afterwards; that the act of recording my pain on paper would somehow dissolve

it forever. I thought that it would be like writing up a list, placing it in a bottle or a balloon and sending it away forever. What eventually happened is that I gained a new sense of hope, which carried me to another level in a new place. Through revisiting Silvio and my life I was finding my way home; I was reuniting with my father. This is the journey represented by *Lejos de la casa y el árbol*.

“Why memoir... Why now?” (Gornick 89). These are the questions that remain a subject of debate among many scholars. Vivian Gornick in her book titled *The Situation and the Story* attempts to answer these questions. For Gornick, the memoir earned its place as a product of the encounter between the Modernist movement of post WWI and the nineteenth-century novels based on “realistic linear narratives” (789). Writers such as Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and Thomas Hardy told their stories from beginning to end, providing the readers with the aforementioned “linear, realistic narratives” (789). Twentieth century modernists such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce added to the linear nineteenth century narratives the journey of the unconscious, where the narrative accounts developed in the mind. According to Gornick, the memoir was born from the merging of these two movements. However, the reasons as to why the memoir genre emerged have to do with the intrinsic and impulsive human tendency to find one’s way towards the true self, or to define one’s identity. Self- narration thus, has become a medium for self-discovery. In her essay titled “Sense of Place, Sense of Self: Windows into an Examined Life,” Marcia Austin-Zacharias explains the reasons for memoir or memory writing. She feels compelled to go back in time to mentally visit the places (through writing) that inform who she is today. She further goes on to discuss that all human beings have the right to write a memoir because all people “need to make sense of the theater of the mind” (788). She concludes that the memoir remains

incomplete in its definition for it is necessary to add the importance of a “sense of place” (790) as a tool for self-knowledge, which is the main aim of the memoir.

Austin-Zacharias expresses her argument in these words: “The narrator casts awareness and insight upon a life, but it is the gift for writing coupled with a sense of self threaded through by a sense of place that ultimately provides illumination” (791). The author confirms that human identification is possible through the story or the telling of one’s life experiences, which ultimately lead the individual to a metaphorical home or special place in the course of his or her life.

Furthermore, Austin-Zacharias adds a pinch of human psychology to her argument using Jung’s “active imagination.” The Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung coined the term “active imagination” to define the ability of a person who is able to take the reader to his/her world causing a life-like empathy for that individual’s narrative. The person who can achieve this through his/her personal narrative is a memoirist. Austin-Zacharias connects Jung’s definition and applies it to the sense of place that for her must be present in the memoir. “Active imagination can provide insight into our inner selves, thereby becoming a practical tool for the memoirist in accessing the intricate weavings of sense of self and sense of place” (793). Therefore, the more detailed the descriptions presented in the narrative are, the deeper the connection between writer and reader will be, for “this is literature at its best: the reader identifies and is transported” (Schenk 477).

In a memoir there must be a dialogue or, as previously stated, a connection between memoirist and reader. M. M. Bakhtin’s definition of language “as a living thing that relies on the relationships among speakers, listeners and contexts” (293) further supports this claim presented in Margaret K. Willard-Traub’s “Rhetorics of Gender and Ethnicity in Scholarly Memoir: Notes on Material Genre.” In her essay

she highlights the importance of connection between reader and writer: if there is no connection, the text is not a memoir. For Traub, the genre must be “determined by subject, audience, and author” (512). In other words, the categorization of a text under the genre of memoir must present a dialogue between the author and its reader through the form of written words that are presented in the subject of the memoir. Thus, the memoirist must have the ability to engage the reader up to a point where the reader not only feels for the memoirist’s account, but also identifies with him or her.

Another issue raised by Traub that is worth discussing, due to its polemic nature, is the tension between academic writing and creative writing. Students in English departments, as well as in many others across the globe, are constantly harangued and pressured to follow the academic rule of always supporting their claims with “reliable” sources. In the discipline of History this is often what distinguishes the *autobiography* from the *memoir*; the former is documented with external primary and secondary sources, whereas the latter need not be. Such a rule may cause a lack of confidence in the student’s own voice and/or ideas. Indeed, I did not develop a clear voice until late in my college education, not because I did not have one, but because the class curricula did not foster writing that would ultimately lead to validating my personal voice. As an academic, Traub realizes that students and professors are used to not have credulity in their words, which results in the need to sustain all ideas based on somebody else’s words. Traub analyzes her memoir writing experience and addresses the importance that that event had in her academic life. She now has authority as a writer: “I have been able to feel, more simply, like a writer” (524). This is a crucial reason as to why English students should have the chance to write something that comes from them, in order to find their voice, which is often silenced in the field of academia. Breaking away from the academic voice can

therefore bridge the gap present in English education, demonstrating that writing creatively may ultimately aid academic composition. Personal writing, whether it narrates a victorious account, a contemplative moment, an every day routine, or a tragic event such as a death in the family, can develop students' writing skills in more ways than one. Indeed, as Susan Rose states, autobiographical writing has helped students in becoming more effective readers and better listeners regarding others' personal stories.

Triggers for Memory Writing

One, if not the most powerful reason to write a memoir is loss. Arthur W. Frank opens his paper on "Illness and Autobiographical Work: Dialogue as Narrative Destabilization" with the following thought: "A self that has become what it never expected to be requires repair, and telling autobiographical stories is a privileged means of repair" (135). In my case this was the major reason for writing *Lejos de la casa y el árbol*: I needed repair, and even if the medicine of writing turned out to be worse than the cure, it was worth it. I finally felt, as Traub, like a writer having produced a work where the primary source is my creation and the secondary material supports my text. For a literature student this is the ultimate experience in writing since all our work is always expected to be a response to someone else's "primary" materials and is always expected to use secondary sources to anchor our own claims.

Other than pain, a trip or journey to a foreign place, is another reason for the genre of the memoir. The sense of place described earlier in reference to Austin-Zacharias's goes in direct concordance with this journey. Abraham Verghese's *The Tennis Partner: A Doctor's Story of Friendship and Loss* shows how pain is a central quality of the travel experience. Frank writes: "The tension of the narrative is whether such a permanently destabilized consciousness can learn to live with its pain, or if the

pain will destroy the bearer of such a consciousness” (141). Austin-Zacharias concurs with Frank when she foregrounds the importance of travel when trying to find one’s sense of place. She writes: “I have found that a strong sense of place in beauty and nature helps to tether or recapture a sense of self in times of emotional trauma and loss... I have been formed by places that are impressed with circumstances that have both mirrored and supported my life” (796). Regarding my experience, it was not until I went abroad to Europe that I was truly able to grieve my father’s death. It was not exile what drove me away to a foreign land; I went on a tour through Europe with three of my best friends. The trip’s alienating effect was imposingly present in my journey. Not being in my land, the last living link to my father, caused the void in me. Seeing the mountains and the rivers was reuniting with him. I had finally seen him after death, but all the more beautiful.

Meena Alexander in the memoir titled *Fault Lines* asks herself why she left India: “I am tormented by the question... as I saw the land, to write I had to flee into a colder climate. Else I would burn up and all my words with me” (146). I personally did not flee from home. I went traveling to Europe with my friends unaware of what this would create in me. Being so far, so alone, witnessing so many cultures helped me grow by becoming aware that there is a living world outside of myself. Crossing the Atlantic was thus “both a literal requirement of a successful escape and a metaphorical vehicle for an internal displacement” (Miller 991-92). I was out of place, and this dislodgement, contradictory as it may seem, helped in my allotment. The journey of telling one’s life can therefore serve as a rite of passage or what in literature is called the *Bildungsroman*.² This shows that the journey has its diverse reasons, but it is always present, being either physical or psychological. In sum, “the

² “Bildungsroman,” Glossary of Literary Terms, 2005 ed.

journey of self knowledge is entailed by the practice of autobiography” (Miller 1009). The last lines of Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* highlights the theme of the journey as a means for self discovery: “Listening, and telling my own stories, I am moving home” (232). And it is the arrival to that home which will ensure the completion of the memoir. This home can either be the physical edifice or the faces of friends and/or family. In recent years many memoirs specifically written by female writers have focused on the theme of loss from a woman’s standpoint.

In her essay titled “Public Statements, Private Lives: Academic Memoirs for the Nineties” Nancy K. Miller ominously predicted that memoirs written by women centered on the loss of a parent were going to predominate during the twenty first century. She was right, a stream of female writers has risen up and showed the world their stories of grief, and these have tended to focus mainly on the loss of the mother. Works such as Susan Letzler Cole’s *Missing Alice: In Search of a Mother’s Voice*, Marianne Hirsh’s *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Anne Herrmann’s *Letters from Another Climate: A Menopausal Memoir* are some examples of memoirs based on the departed mother figure. Ruth Behar’s essay “Writing in My Father’s Name” portrays the loss of the father as an object of scholarly inquiry, an object which she illustrates can lend powerful insights into some of the ideologies that influence how women write, and are written by, culture in the academy. All this is only attained through the fracturing, or tearing apart of her family. Marcia Austin-Zacharias herself wrote a memoir about the sudden death of her son because that was what she “felt compelled to write about” (797). These memoirs support Vivian Gornick’s argument that “what happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to *make* of what happened” (91). Alice

Kaplan in her memoir *French Lessons* also writes motivated by a loss. In it she is haunted by a dead father who left her on the day of her eighth birthday, she warmly states that her father is “always in the wings” (199). Another memoir based on the loss of family members is, as stated earlier, Marianne Hirsh’s *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. In her work she poses a set of arguments to account for the process by which one comes to know his or herself in the family. Seeing herself in pictures gave Hirsh a sense of who she was in the context of family. This is the reason why photographs are powerful, for the fact that they might show something that otherwise is unknown, or they may provide a “masking effect” (Miller 1002), thus leading to false assumptions, such as the relation between a parent and a child. Seeing one’s self between family members in a picture can provide insight into one’s self. I constantly look at family pictures and always find myself playing the part of the youngest sibling, instead of being myself. In my memoir there is a line between who I am and the role I was expected to play given my position in the family, especially with my father’s passing.

All these memoirs make one rethink the questions posed by Gornick at the beginning of this introduction. “Why memoir... Why now?” It is time for writers to show readers that all people share humanity, and the memoir establishes that relation between the writer and its reader. Why is it significant to write a memoir based on the experience of loss? Because “trauma and loss cut us loose from our moorings every bit as dramatically as if gravity has suddenly let go of its grip on us” (Austin-Zacharias 800).

Project Overview

In the preceding introductory pages I identified and explained the reasons why people write memoirs with references to various primary and secondary texts,

memoirs and books, and scholarly articles about the memoir. The former served as the basis and inspiration for my own memoir while the latter aided to address the theoretical part of this project, which is the debate between truth and memoir, which I further develop in chapters II and III. I will use my memoir, presented in chapter IV, as further *hard evidence* to overrule the negative opinions toward the genre of the memoir presented in chapters II and III. Chapter V will then serve as an epilogue on the experience of memoir writing and also discusses its pedagogical role in the teaching of English writing courses as well as its contribution to academia. This chapter will finally serve as the hand that hushes the mouths of the critics that argue against memoir by claiming that it is only disguised fiction:

Narratives are emotionally meaningful, casually connected sequences of actions that provide both temporal and evaluative cohesion to life events.

Particular events become important parts of our life story because they provide some meaningful information about who we are, and the narrative forms for representing and recounting these events provide a particular structure for understanding and conveying this meaning. (Fivush 136)

The tool, then, for achieving the personal narrative's end is memory or recollection. I claim to have the memory of an elephant, but there is the inevitable truth that one does not go through life with a tape recorder and is consequently unable to jot down all conversations that one witnessed throughout life verbatim. These are paraphrased or summarized as faithfully as possible. On other occasions there are very old memories that have a slight shadow cast over them; these moments are described as accurately as the memory can remember. Nevertheless, the aim remains the same, to rethink the past in light of what was once the future; to have them collide

through the lens of the now and thus become the Greek gods of our life, seeing it with a hawk's eye; from every angle and with full illumination.

The past is radiant. It sheds the light of a lived life. One who writes memoir wishes to step into that light, not to see one's own face – that is not possible – but to feel the length of shadow cast by the light...(Hampl 36)

Chapter II

Theoretical Approaches to Truth and Memoir

A man who sets himself to the task of portraying the world may spend years drawing images of kingdoms, mountains, stars, horses, and people, only to discover shortly before his death that the labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.

(Jorge Luis Borges quoted in Spengemann 167)

According to Charles Berryman, the word “autobiography” was invented in the year 1797 by a linguist who perceived the need for a common term in English to cover the many different accounts that authors make of their own experience. For authors in general “memoir” was the more favorable term for the genre in the nineteenth century, but scholars and editors preferred “autobiography” to refer to the genre of writing about the self. Although “autobiography” is mostly used in chapter I implying that both terms are at times, used interchangeably, this is not always the case in certain fields such as history and women’s studies. For the purposes of this thesis, “memoir” will be the preferred term from this moment on, considering that what I present in this thesis (Chapter IV) is my memoir. Like authors in the nineteenth century, I too prefer the term *memoir* over *autobiography* because it leaves more room for creativity and self-expression, and is thus less rigid in its structure and content. But, regardless of it having been coined two hundred and eleven years ago first as “autobiography” and then as “memoir,” the debate to define, locate and justify its position in the literary world has not yet ceased. In our times, these disputes have proliferated since the 1980s when men such as Albert E. Stone and Avrom Fleishman exposed what seemed to be contradictory definitions of *autobiography*. From then on what has followed is a surge of different ideas as to what the term means, which field

it belongs to, and, most importantly, what critical theory should be applied to the already confusing, thus theory-bound, *autobiography*. To this day all there is are aims at providing relief to the aforementioned issues; a never-ending dialectic cycle of theses, antitheses, and syntheses is what is available, with emphasis placed on the synthesis of what memoir is, or better yet, what it ought to be. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a chronological survey of the many approaches of literary theory towards memoir, often known also as “autobiography,” with the aim of contextualizing the debate presented in the following chapter about whether memoir should include the word truth, or fiction, as part of its definition.

For some, autobiographical theory is the child or by-product of context. Berryman explains “how the changing definitions of fact and fiction...moved questions of autobiographical theory more to the center of critical inquiry” (71). Therefore, the polemic sprouts from whether memoir is fact or fiction, and the catch lies in the fact that these terms are mutants of setting. As stated earlier, the word was invented at the end of the eighteenth century. But it was not until 1976 when Thomas Cooley reported how the term was first used in a work of professional criticism, and why the creator of “autobiography” was concerned about the new word sounding rather “pedantic” (3). This concern appears to have been a response to the gap between personal narrative and the professional study or review of such writing, the very gap that theories of autobiography in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first have still been attempting to bridge.

The act of self-writing existed before the creation of the term; countless autobiographies or memoirs in English had been written before the word was coined, but under different names. Examples of this are *The Autobiography of Thomas Shepard* in the 17th century, as well as Benjamin Franklin’s, which became known as

his Autobiography during the middle of the 19th century. These two pieces did not contain the word autobiography in their titles; it was placed many years later under editorial decisions. Shepard's account was originally titled *My Birth and Life*, but was later changed in an 1832 edition; this is the first time the word "autobiography" appears as part of a title in print. As a result, a word that did not exist at the time of these texts' creations became the common label for these men's records of personal experience. Berryman concurs when he notes that "the invention of autobiography as a critical term marks the birth of a genre – not in practice, of course, which goes back at least as far as St. Augustine, but in theory which has been called forth by the act of definition" (72). The 19th century thus marks the beginning of a new field of study, the study of autobiography and/or memoir.

Once exposed, the term was considered to be an important part in the field of historical record keeping. But given the fact that history and literature departments are distinct and distant in any American university campus "the early union of autobiography and the study of history proved to be less than a happy marriage" (Berryman 72). Even if these two fields share language as a common denominator, for most of the twentieth century a distancing from language took place as the base for historical inquiry, and the study of autobiography or memoir was left in a state of limbo between the departments. It is only in the last decades that a new synthesis, which returns to language as base, comes afloat to save autobiography/memoir from this theoretically ambivalent agony in terms of its allocation in a specific field.

Figures such as Georg Misch in Germany could not save autobiography/memoir from its limbo state in the twentieth century. The times were not fertile for it, until as late as 1956 when H.N. Wethered's *The Curious Art of Autobiography* was published, but, interestingly, under a philosophical library

volume. The panorama was so obscure that in 1964 Robert F. Sayre observed that common distinctions between fiction and autobiography remain “shamefully unanalyzed” (ix).

Memoir or autobiography became the bastard child of literature and history where it was merely valued as a form to keep a personal record. In time, however, with historians’ desire to write more scientifically driven texts, where sheer objectivity was the goal, a distancing from the self was needed in order to record historical accounts. The use and purpose of autobiography/memoir was fading away with historians aiming at a dismissal of the self, which contradicts the very essence of autobiography. From autobiography’s poor campus life across History departments, a rejection coming from English departments’ literary theory wing would also deter its position.

Not only did memoir or autobiography suffer from the rejection of history, it also went through the pangs from the perspective of the New Critics, a movement dating from the 1920s, which rejected the importance of the historical and biographical contexts towards the analysis and interpretation of literature. If New Criticism claimed that the presence of the author is irrelevant towards the analysis and interpretation of a text, autobiography was sure to become public enemy number one in these critics’ eyes. “As long as the intentional fallacy was accepted as critical dogma, how could literature be explored in terms of personal statement?” (Berryman 72). Context plays no part in such an approach, neither historical context, nor biographical information from the author serve as vehicles for the search of a work’s meaning. Berryman sums it up best when he concludes that “autobiography was sacrificed by the New Critics on the altar of formalism” (73).

On the other hand, Deconstruction somewhat saves autobiography/memoir from the notion of it being a subjective reconstruction of memories, by putting into question, among everything else, the historic truth of autobiography. Founded by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, one of Deconstruction's pillars is the notion of *différance*, or difference where "meaning is made through differences among signs but never made certain and secure through those differences" (Hall 162). What this means is that Deconstruction "reduces the apparently solid ground of a text to nothing but thin air" (Miller 341). By questioning the very foundations of language, then the differentiation between truth and fact is also under scrutiny, thus paving the way for a theory of autobiography/memoir. A text that produces harmony in contradiction is the ideal specimen for Deconstruction, and what better example than autobiography, which creates "multiple and contradictory self-images" (Berryman 73). In summary:

Autobiography is an all-inclusive genre precisely to the extent that it remains impossible to conclude whose life is being written – or read. When the status of the writing self is no longer either singular or knowable, the result may be what Frederic Jameson has called the postmodern "disappearance of the individual subject." (Kamuf 124)

If there is no such thing as absolute fact or pure fiction then there is no accusing autobiography or memoir from claiming illegitimate truths, for what is truth? and what is fiction? Seen through the perspective of Deconstruction, autobiography is rescued from its unreliable reputation of selling fiction disguised as truth for the simple fact that there is no absolute truth as there is no fiction. Deconstruction is autobiography or memoir's sole ally during the 1960s.

Twenty years later, the theoretical approach entitled New Historicism became another friend of memoir or autobiography. New Historicism regarded it as an

expression of power to define the self, thus furthering the blurring of the line between fact and fiction. “Literature and history become interchangeable when all writing is interpreted as a form of power” (Berryman 73). Therefore, any literary work is a social and political act, which requires a merging, or relation to history itself. Thus the implications of this approach require the self to be regarded in terms of political and social power. Leo Braudy, in his book about fame titled *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History*, explores how writers such as Augustine and Franklin “redefined the concept of self in creating their autobiographies” (4). They were subjects, who wrote as subjects, but re-defined the subject. Memoir thus sprouts from history’s rib, and consequently becomes powerful once more in time:

The critical study of autobiography was then called upon to explain how any personal statement could be viewed as a political act, and conversely how all forms of social and political discourse both disguise and promote definitions of self. Instead of being treated as a poor stepchild of opposing disciplines, autobiography was discovered again to be implicit in both literature and history. (Berryman 73)

With autobiography and or memoir’s progression in the world of theory, certain authors began experimenting with the mixture of fiction and non-fiction in their works. They challenged the notion of having fiction and reality in two separate spheres and succeeded with works such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and *Ragtime* by E.L. Doctorow. In these texts a blurring between the fictive and the real occurs, paving the way for novels that take on an autobiographical approach at times. For example *Slaughterhouse-Five* contains an autobiographical chapter where Vonnegut introduces a “persona of himself who then intrudes from time to time into the fictional account of historic moments in Dresden” (Berryman 73). However, his

work was not discussed at the time of its creation since it did not fit into any theoretical mold. The New Critics did not even consider the novel; it was not until critics like Robert Scholes, with his terms such as “metafiction” and “fabulation,” that a hybrid piece of work such as Vonnegut’s could be considered for respectable discussion. The mixture of history and fiction called “for a critical method able to view the novel in a political context, and the author’s professed intentions call for autobiographical and deconstructive criticism” (Berryman 73). Vonnegut’s book made the literary world think twice about having fact and fiction in an eternal divorce; a marriage was indeed possible.

As mentioned earlier, Doctorow also challenged what was considered New Critical dogma with his book *Ragtime*. The novel portrays a narrator who recounts all the events while looking upon them. Even if the novel is fictive it recreates the real-life scenario of humans looking back and narrating from the present. The author also explored the land of fiction and non-fiction in a series of essays on the matter. Doctorow concludes in one of his essays: “I am thus led to the proposition that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative” (Essays 26). Berryman expands on this by adding that Doctorow’s novels have the common denominator of presenting a narrator who seems to be an “autobiographical persona” (73) that interchanges history and fiction.

With the appearance of these texts other critics, such as Frederic Jameson and J. Hillis Miller, responded and gave their takes on the apparent tension between factual and fictional writing. They mostly began by critiquing, for example Doctorow’s and Vonnegut’s works, and slowly but surely found themselves deep in the truth and fiction debate. Jameson expressed confusion towards the subject, describing *Ragtime* as “a kind of hologram” (23). For Miller the book was also

puzzling stating that “if Deconstruction is a demonstration that a text has already dismantled itself, then Doctorow’s novel is an act of fiction and criticism” (99).

Another writer who picked theory’s brain with the fact/fiction dance is Roland Barthes. His autobiography questions *who* Roland Barthes is. He directly asks the reader to re-think what constitutes Roland Barthes with the intention of concluding that the “self” portrayed in his autobiography is indeed fictive. In his line of thought this is because all autobiographical writing leads to the creation of a person. Whether or not the accounts are true, the narrator is created as the story progresses. “Writing an autobiography thus becomes an act of self-creation” (Berryman 74) regardless of its factual accounts. A new or distinct self is constructed and achieved through the act of writing autobiography; the lines are absolutely blurred. However, these experiments in autobiography in the 1960’s were still invisible or theoretically non-existent since the available definitions of autobiography did not cover examples such as these. In 1960 Roy Pascal expressed his opinion on the matter and attempted to offer a definitive notion of autobiography as “a retrospective account that involves a search for the true self” (39). This seemed to calm the waters during the year 1960, but not for a very significant amount of time. At the time of his definition, which seemed somewhat prescriptive and limiting, advances in language theory were taking place, and two of the most sought after topics were in fact the meanings of “true” and “self.” What remained essentially true for the language theorists was the presence of language, on which autobiography rests. Thus, if autobiography rests on the unshakeable, then the very base of autobiography is thus grounded on truth, in other words, the veracity of language.

In the years following 1960, many figures kept on discussing memoir/autobiography by adding definitions, subtracting, synthesizing and adding

once more in the name of theory. Some of these critics' opinions deserve attention such as Robert F. Sayre (1964) and James Olney (1972). Each one presented distinct takes on autobiography, but both distanced it from New Critical antics. For Sayre memoir/autobiography presents many selves, posing Franklin's autobiography as an example in which he presents "provisional identities" (7). As a result, he overrules Pascal's definition of a one true self. Olney, on the other hand, decides to define the term in a non-literary manner, but in a more psychological way. He is interested in the how and why an individual decides on writing about his or her self, or selves. Both Olney and Sayre introduced aspects of autobiography that pulled it further apart from fiction, and brought it a step closer to non-fiction, creating a hiatus in the New Critical world. Delving into the motives for composition goes well beyond the dogma of the New Critics (Olney), as well as claiming that many selves interfere in autobiography (Sayre) disrupts the New Critics' claim that unity and coherence are the catch of the day. "One creates from moment to moment and continuously the reality to which one gives a metaphoric name and shape, and that shape is one's own shape" (Olney 34).

The 1980's proved to be an even greater year for the study of memoir/autobiography in the sense that it became less of a definable term and more of a productively complex subject where distinctions between truth and fiction were finally abandoned. The "man for this season" was William Spengemann. In *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*, published in 1980, he tried to finally resolve the ambiguity of autobiography in the world of theory by tracing its forms throughout history according to the "changing ideas about the nature of the self" which for him are portrayed in "history, philosophy and poetry" (xiii). The most interesting part resides in his idea that these three elements are the three different stages autobiography has gone through in this same order. Therefore,

first comes historical autobiography, then philosophical and finally poetic autobiography. Thus, for Spengemann, the development of autobiography corresponds to the way critical theory has progressed beyond the concerns of writing *persé*; it is a contextual phenomenon.

As the decade progressed more attempts at definition appeared such as Albert E. Stone's description of autobiography as "a simultaneously historical record and literary artifact, psychological case history and spiritual confession, didactic essay and ideological testament" (2). The key word here is simultaneous. Autobiography is thus defined as a series of paradoxes where fact and fiction, privacy and publicity, education and fraud are all combined. So instead of fighting these contradictions Stone decides to unite them and define the genre as the sum of its parts. He also addresses the question of the self and places it as "both actor and author" (2) in autobiography. In conclusion, Stone "embraces the contradictions in theory to form an inclusive canon for the study of autobiography" (Berryman 76).

In the following decades more critics postulated their theories of autobiography/memoir, with extensions of the already hackneyed truth/artifice debate. In a 1989 issue of *The Journal of American History* the delimitations between what is truth and what is fiction in autobiography were discussed in order to either separate them once and for all or synthesize them as a means to put a peaceful pause to the theory of autobiography or memoir. The crucial root that would permit the final settlement was the attempted definition of memory. By solving the enigma of memory they would prove that autobiography is both a mixture of truth and artifice where creation takes off where memory comes to an end. Smith concludes:

Memory is less a record of the past than a new fusion of image and language determined by present motives and circumstances. If memory is understood to

be a creative act, then the record of experience in a memoir or autobiography is a mixture of design and truth that cannot be unraveled because the past is available only in new forms of present imagination. (57)

Smith adds, following the line of thought of many of the aforementioned critics, that language is contextual; thus, the meaning of words such as *memory*, *fact*, *fiction*, and *truth* changes through time thus furthering and complicating the debate where limits or ends are nowhere in sight. If the aforementioned terms are a product of context, then there is no beginning, as well as no end to the debate, hence, it is a never-ending thought cycle directly proportional to time and space.

I do not squarely align myself with any of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives, but rather find that there is sense in all of them. All should be considered in hopes of finding a theory for autobiography or memoir. I agree with Derrida, that all should be questioned, and that no fixed meaning should be ascribed to anything. I understand, like the New Historicists, that creation cannot be separated from context, and that a word such as “truth” varies like the tide in its definition. But in the end, one cannot question language. For me literary theory is a product of humans’ need for control, where the mere act of defining or naming appeases us. This is the reason why I do not take literary theory too seriously, because I realize that is it precisely that: theory. And like theory, infinite in its possibilities, so is memoir. As the epigraph states, we have spent hundreds of years trying to decipher what degree of truth and artifice are added to the recipe for writing non-fiction or fiction, only to find at the end that it all harks back to what one knows best, one’s own life. Therefore, memory, however unreliable it may seem, is always the base for artistic creation no matter how far imagination may take it.

Therefore, the closing remarks of the first chapter can be deemed *accurate*. One *can* have the memory of an elephant, but unless you are equipped with technological gadgets at all times capable of recording all events in a documentary-like fashion, memory can only take you so far. It is then up to the fancy to spice things up and fill in the gaps from the perspective of now, which will never be the perspective of then.

Chapter III

A Dialectic Attempt to Synthesize Truth and Memoir

Between the memory, which brusquely returns to us, and our present state, and no less between two memories of different years, places, hours, the distance is such that it alone, even without any specific originality, would make it impossible to compare one with the other. Yes: if, owing to the work of oblivion, the returning memory can throw no bridge, form no connecting link between itself and the present minute, if it remains in the context of its own place and date...for this reason it causes us suddenly to breathe a new air, an air which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past.

(Marcel Proust *The Past Recaptured* 132)

If Proust proclaimed that recounting one's past in written form would never truly bring back the past, but a fresh one should sprout out every time one reads those old events, then the equation for memoir's enigmatic stance would be solved. The answer would read as follows: the debate as to whether memoir is non-fictional or fictional has ceased due to the breaking news that it is *neither* truth nor fiction. Then, what is it? Louis A. Renza begins his essay asking this same question. Is memoir fiction or non-fiction; is it both; or is it none of the above? For Renza the answer is the third option, but the attainment of such information was not easily reached. This man had to go, just like Dante, through Hell and Purgatory in order to arrive in Heaven. In other words he examined, studied and evaluated the realm of the fictional and the non-fictional to finally end up with a definition of memoir.

What was once can never be the same again. No matter how hard one tries to recreate the same food, the same outfit, the same makeup, the same party; they will never be an exact copy of the one past. Cloning is possible, but it does not work with

memories. This situation happens in writing; the past will never be the actual past that the writer is trying to recreate precisely because it is a recreation and not the real *thing*. It is a picture negative or a fossil of the events and feelings that happened and are extinct, unless time travel finds a way back to the setting. The memory can only do so much and creativity must fill in the gaps. It must also help with editorial shenanigans such as page constraints, limits, budgets, and the taste of the reading public. As a result one must take the “perceptual real,” move it around, pull here and tug there in order to create a decent creative work, worthy of readers’ attention. Therefore, what Proust argues is true: no matter the might we put into our memoir, pinches and dashes of art must be added to the recipe; the real past can never be truly recaptured because, plainly, it is impossible. The closest we can go is writing it as faithfully as our ability allows, but even that carries art into the composition process mainly for two reasons.

The first reason is that the telling of a story, be it fictive or real, requires artful skill, and the second reason is that we are not computers with exact memory. What we write about the past is through the lens of who we are at the time of composition, and this will keep changing as long as the author progresses on to his or her death. In the words of Northrop Frye: “Autobiography, in short, transforms empirical facts into *artifacts*” (307). Thus, the writer uses what he or she considers to be the true events as the base for his or her artistic creation. Or as Roland Barthes once wrote: “When a narrator of a written text recounts what has happened to him, the *I* who recounts is no longer the one that is recounted” (163). Therefore, memoir requires a homogeneous mixture of truth and fiction.

For Frye as well as James M. Cox the impulse and willingness to write one’s life is not enough since there are other conditions in the serious ordeal that is writing.

The completion of a memoir entails abilities pertinent to fictional writers with the only difference that the events being written happened in actuality. Renza explains this apparent tension in the following section:

Perhaps the most obvious way involves citing the presence of explicit fictional techniques or elements in specific autobiographies. But the presence of such elements only shows that autobiography self-consciously borrows from the methodological procedures of imaginative fiction, not that autobiography is founded on the immediate requisites of imaginative discourse. (2)

Unless new rules are created that introduce a gamut of never before seen elements of non-fiction, memoir's foundations will continue to be based on fiction's conventions. So the question resides in the following:

Must we settle, then, for that compromising, commonplace conception that depicts autobiography as a formal mutation, a hybrid genre, a vague, unresolved mixture of "truth" about the autobiographer's life dyed into the colors of an ersatz, imaginative "design"? Or can we formulate autobiography as a unique phenomenon, definable neither as fiction or non-fiction-not even a mixture of the two? (Renza 5)

I believe we can attempt such an endeavor. Memoir can then be defined as the retelling of one's life through the necessary use of artifice, skill, and determination with a shape-shifting, nomadic narrative entity as its teller.

Similar to Renza's conclusion regarding the definition of memoir I too had to go through a long process in order to attain such description. The opinions and arguments of many individuals were thoroughly studied, since such a matter should not be taken lightly. These somewhat philosophical attempts at deciphering memoir will be revealed in the following paragraphs not as a tool for persuasion, but as

another set of ideas to further examine the enigma that is memoir. I call them philosophical in the sense that they are epistemological meditations on the origins of truth, artifice, and the reliability of a memoir's narrator. From my definition may come another one and so on, so that the dialectic may continue. It is important to note, however, that most of the following thinkers regard memoir as a mixture of both fact and fiction and are also trapped in "*Limbo*," so to speak, in terms of locating this mysterious genre into a clear-cut niche of its own.

If memoir is a factual (however partial or selective) retelling of a person's life through the use of fictional strategies, then the narrator is also half real and half fictive. The author, who in reality lived through those events that the narrator is telling and reflecting upon, creates the entity that tells the story; he or she creates a new self out of his or her old self. Since these events happened in the past they are described and analyzed through a new set of eyes, not the eyes that in reality witnessed those events. As a result the narrator or voice that the reader gets to meet is none other than the author of the text, and not the *I* he or she claims to be. Therefore, the line between fact and fiction is blurred; the narrator is none other than the author of the memoir in his or her present state going back in time but in their present state of mind. Georges Gusdorf further explains: "The autobiographer of necessity knows as well as writes about his past from the limiting perspective of his present self image – *ce qu'il est devenue*"(120). This leads to even deeper waters since such a conclusion would change the definition of memoir to one where the past is not as relevant as the present from which the past is looked upon. Thus, it is not surprising to attain an explanation such as Barret John Mandel's who states that "the immediately accessible narrative *is* the autobiography; in other words, autobiography is the writer's attempt to elucidate his present, not his past" (327). From this perspective, then, memoir goes

through yet another change in which the core of the story lies in retrospective meditation on one's previous experiences. Such an idea supports my definition of memoir as having a shape-shifting entity as its teller since the one recounted is not the one who recounts. Mandel summarizes it best in the following thought:

My *present* creates my past by inspiring meaningless data with interpretation, direction, suggestiveness - life. But as long as I live, my past is rooted in my present and springs to life with my present... I cannot fully give my past to the page because it flows mysteriously out of the incomprehensible moods of the present. And as new moods come upon me, my past comes upon me differently. (327)

If the memoir's author were to revisit his or her creation many years later, he or she would write that same story quite differently from the *new* present. Consequently the personal notion of memoir as having a shape shifting, nomadic teller is proven through the meditation presented above. I can re-write the same events that I narrated in my memoir many years from now quite differently from how they are described in *Lejos de la casa y el árbol*, because of how I will regard them in that future time. However, I will recount the same emotions, because these are not perceptual or contextual. The word choice to reenact them may be different but the effect remains the same. Feelings, I believe, are truly cast in stone.

The narrator of *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* is not "real"; the author *created* the woman who tells the story out of necessity because I am not, and can no longer be that woman. I am thus reflecting upon my past life, but conjuring it up from my present, and that is why a new self invades the space of memoir. The narrator's point of view is not the one I had when those events took place in real time even though the memoir implies that it is. Here is where the artifice lies: the memoir is both fact and

fiction, not because the story is contrived out of fancy, but because the narrator is out of setting while claiming the contrary. Augustine of Hippo reflects:

With regard to the past, when this is reported correctly what is brought out from the memory is not the events themselves (these are already past) but words conceived from the images of those events... My boyhood, for instance, which no longer exists, exists in time past, which no longer exists. But when I recollect the image of my boyhood and tell others about it, I am looking at this image in time present. (XI.18)

Plato regarded the material world as a vague copy of the *ideal world*; he viewed objects as valueless mockeries of the things that exist in the realm of the *ideal*. Such things attempt, try to be as faithful as possible to the perfect, flawless inhabitants of the ideal, but they can only go so far; this is the reason why he called them shadows. Writing an autobiography or memoir is somewhat similar to Plato's theory. What we write is the shadow of the past, the trick is to make that shadow as bright as possible in order to remain faithful to one of memoir's objectives, the conveyance of what we consider truth. In other words, "writing is what explodes that darkness on which the memory draws" (Erickson quoted in Renza 7).

On the other hand, in order to comply with the dialectic procedure, a counterargument must be considered. It is true that one cannot clone what one used to be, and thus needs certain elements of fiction to aid in the process of writing a memoir. It is also certain that the narrator is a new self, looking back at the memoirist's old self. Nevertheless there is a catch, which can overrule the unreal realm of memoir, and that is the reliability of the created narrator. Rousseau's *Confessions* serve as evidence for such a statement. In his book there is a shift in style from one chapter to the next, which according to him, had a motive. This was his way

of expressing the diverse states of being that he went through. Up to now this goes in accordance to the changing narrator described in my definition of memoir. The opposing idea is that even though he admits to the inclusion of fictive elements in non-fictional writing, to the introduction of a new narrative self, he rejects that that self is fictitious in its entirety. Rousseau writes:

I may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates; but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do; and these are the chief subjects of my story. (262)

Rousseau's opinion, contradictory as it seems, concurs with my definition in the fact that memoir is a hybrid that arises from fact and fiction; it is a distinct species that has not been allocated in any kingdom. Just because the past is no longer available does not mean that the emotions are gone as well, as in the preceding paragraph, they are fixed, cast in stone. In *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* all the sentiments are as real and raw as ever even if I am writing them two and half years after their occurrence. Emotions are not forgotten or misinterpreted and the narrative is the medium to transmit these immutable feelings. In other words, Rousseau is going against the general notion of autobiography as having a somewhat unreliable narrator because the recounted emotions are one hundred percent real. Renza adds: "to write autobiographically means to react consistently and aggressively against self-forgetfulness through the discursive act-against fictional intentionality" (17). As stated earlier, the memoir's narrator, although metamorphic, should or ought to be reliable. At the end of the day, memoir is primarily grounded on subjective truth due to the veracity of emotion -- feelings being the reality of perception even if these are not objectively factual. A synthesis has been reached, but continues on.

This dilemma commenced too many years ago, and continues on to this day at an even worse degree. Renza explains that in the days of Rousseau, Augustine and Proust, honesty was a more common trait amongst individuals, in contrast to our capitalist centered times, where I believe (economic) power is the most highly esteemed characteristic. In this context memoirs and autobiographical texts have suffered a bad reputation due to a stream of writers who have been “caught in the act” of disguising their novels as non-fiction works. Perhaps they have failed at their memoirs, because, as stated earlier, “the authors mistake their experience for a story rather than find the story in their experience” (Stone quoted in Blais 3), leading them to want to make up stories due to insecurities concerning their real life stories. This sort of happening complicates the matter since many novels aim to seem real while being unreal, but with the condition of legally publishing them under fiction. However, writers such as James Frey, Nadsijj and JT LeRoy have all committed the crime of flat out lying to everybody’s faces that their work was indeed real. One of these men went to the extreme of claiming to be a Navajo Native American when in reality he is a white, gay man who used to write erotic books and goes by the name of Timothy Patrick Barrus. If this were fiction, all would be fine but, as Joe Woodward cholericly argues, “a fake is fine in fiction, but not in a genre that is meant to purvey the *truth*- no matter how many writers like Frey, Nadsijj, and LeRoy may sully that term’s definition” (10).

But what, or better yet, which definition is Woodward referring to? According to Aaron Hamburger, there is still no definition. We are still in the same haze that Rousseau and Frye were in many years ago. In other words, the battle has remained the same for hundreds of years where unless a truce or synthesis comes about in the literary world the only common denominator to define memoir would be the word

truth, and even that is shaky territory with this new streak of deceiving authors as well as many other theoretical approaches such as post-structuralism, which rejects the notion of there being an absolute truth in anything. But even a theoretical stance such as this goes in accordance with the concept of self in memoir since post-structuralism believes in the presence of many and conflicting selves in a text and in the interaction between its author and its reader. Therefore, in some way or another there is a truce.

But, there is always some light to be shed at the end of the tunnel, and Aaron Hamburger is the one responsible for such illumination. In his article titled “Imperative: Why Truth Matters in Memoirs” he explores and discusses the reasons as to why aiming to the most accurate level of fidelity in memoir writing is of sheer importance without forgetting the human brain’s limitations. Hamburger begins his piece with a somewhat curious statement that sets the tone for this overwhelming and never-ending paradigm: “we expect our novels to be true and our memoirs to be false, as if the choice of genre were a matter of style, not substance” (27). Put simply, the reading public is going through a type of sensationalist transformation that was not present in previous years. This causes more problems with memoir writing because the public is contradictorily satisfied; they want truth in fiction and fiction in truth; which surprisingly enough brings us closer to the definition of memoir presented at the beginning of this chapter where the genre is none of the above. This also brings us closer to the long awaited synthesis of the concept of memoir, but with enough enigmas to keep the dialectic going.

Hamburger is a strong advocate for the notable position of veracity in memoir. He internalizes and clarifies his understanding of the memory of the human brain and how it is impossible to remember events exactly as they happened. Similar to Hamburger, Jane Taylor McDonnell also understands the limits of the mind with

regards to elements such as “physical setting, what the characters looked like, maybe facts like the weather, the time of year” (46). She also points out we may have never known such things. McDonnell also adds that we may remember in patches with lagoons blurring how one event leads to the next. In cases such as these it is acceptable to integrate fictional strategies. The memories of my father and I presented in *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* while bike riding during the mornings are an example of McDonnell’s point. I am unable to recall what time of year it was when we set out together. I am also unable to remember the specific attire he wore on that particular day, but am able to infer his outfit due to my knowledge of his character; he had a particular uniform for outdoor activities. My description of him as a type of forefather or historically important figure is also an example of the ideas presented by Hamburger and McDonnell regarding memory and perception. When one is a little girl or boy, one tends to see everything around as grand and imposing, be it people, places or objects. As the author of the text I strive to re-create that child-like voice that exteriorizes my perception of him as a three-or four-year-old child. Like me, Hamburger also realizes that memory, offspring to perception is “notoriously murky territory” (27), and as a way to prove such a statement he uses Samuel Beckett’s famous line that there is no such thing as truth. In addition he exposes the excuses that aid many memoirists into lying in their stories by saying that no one can “hold a memoirist responsible for remembering details in his or her life exactly as they happened...it is alright for a memoir to be true to the author’s recollections, rather than factually true, because memoir is fundamentally unreliable” (28). To this he replies that “a memoir is a serious attempt to reconstruct true events, or else it is a fantasy. Not both” (28). I concur with his opinion since even if truth is directly proportional to perception and therefore unreliable, the purpose of memoir is to

reconstruct factual happenings and feelings. My perception of my father might be under scrutiny, but the events, such as the bike rides with him at dawn, are a fixed and objective truth. With Hamburger's comeback is where the darkness begins to fade, for Hamburger is starting to define what memoir should be: an attempt at truth.

He continues on to write that in order to attain truth one must not settle with memory, but rather become a researcher to pick up where memory can go no further. He states: "that's why a good memoirist doesn't rely only on memory and imagination. She does research ... doing the work of a historian or journalist to verify her story" (28). In writing *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* I had the need to dig up information considering my father's death, information I did not want to know at that time concerning all the legal, gruesome details regarding how he died and the trials that took place after up until 2008. The memoir writer should "stick to facts" (Hamburger 28) even if they impede the telling of a good story. Rather than stunting the tale these seemingly boring, factual events can make the work even better, for the teller of the story bears a responsibility to the reader, and that is his or her reliability through words. And when things, put simply, get tough, the writer must let the reader know that what he or she is writing is not to the best of their mind's ability. As McDonnell writes: "The best way to deal with such problems is to acknowledge them directly as problems and to involve your reader in your efforts to recreate an unknown or partly forgotten past" (46). According to Hamburger this is what brings respect to a memoirist and this is why publishers prefer non-fiction to fiction. He explains:

The whole point of writing a memoir is that the story related between its covers actually happened. That's why publishers prefer memoirs to novels: A memoir's ring of truth gives it a sensationalist value that novels can rarely match. (29)

This does not imply however that the writer cannot integrate the art of fiction into his or her work as McDonnell so carefully explains. For example, dialogues to some extent must be invented, but these recreated words must be grounded on truth and should be a paraphrasing of what was once said. Such actions ought to be present in all memoirs and autobiographies not only because it is the right thing to do, but also as an example for other writers as a means to set the writing ethics straight and avoid frauds. In summary, present and past writers are the models for future writers, and are thus responsible for the literature that comes out in the future. We, memoirists, must popularize truth foremost by writing truth, if we want our successors to write truth as well, while also acknowledging the limits of memory and the role of perception.

Hopefully it ends with us. As writers, we have a special duty to act as guardians of the special relationship between words and meaning. If we don't mean the words we say and write, then we mean nothing. If we don't value truth, then we value nothing. (Hamburger 30)

Hamburger concludes that such accomplishment will only come with the definition of memoir, and until that day comes we can only "stand by our words" (31). He then adds yet another set of ideas relevant to the definition of memoir contributing to the dialectic from a current point of view. However one can see that things have not changed much.

By writing *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* I am also becoming an advocate and guardian of truth for future writers who wish to write down their life stories. The difference is that I have already come up with a definition of memoir that could set the record straight. But despite my definition, which is unknown to the world, therefore invalid to the rest of the literary community, memoir remains unresolved.

What is still valid is the fact that my initial definition, regardless of all the theses and antitheses, remains constant. So much so that it goes very well in accordance with the synthesis that the author who first questioned memoir's position in literature poses at the end of his essay:

Thus we might conceive of autobiographical writing as an endless prelude: a beginning without a middle (the realm of fiction), or without end (the realm of history); a purely fragmentary, incomplete literary project, unable to be more than an arbitrary document like the one Wordsworth, in Book VII of his autobiographical poem, recalls having seen appended to the person of a blind beggar, signifying for all of its verbal brevity and plainness. (Renza 22)

And so the dialectic momentarily ends; momentarily precisely because of its cyclical nature in which an argument arises, a counter argument follows and finally a somewhat merging truce concludes the conversation. Regarding memoir as the retelling of a person's life through the necessary use of artifice, skill, and determination with a shape-shifting, nomadic narrative entity as its teller serves as the dialectic's thesis. This also implies that the narrator is consequently perhaps unreliable due to his/her metamorphic character, which is where the antithesis resides. The feelings portrayed in an memoir, regardless of the artifices employed, are genuinely true. And with truth is where the synthesis is reached. Therefore, memoir can finally (but not absolutely) be defined as the retelling of one's life to discover the self, through the necessary use of artifice, skill, and determination with a shape-shifting, nomadic narrative entity as its teller whose ultimate purpose is the conveyance of subjective truth.

Chapter IV***Lejos de la casa y el árbol: A Memoir*¹**

Hoy no quiero estar lejos de la casa y el árbol.

Cada rizo del suelo es un sueño contado;

Algo como un recuerdo, una imagen, un beso,

y en la espalda del día se queda ese algo.

*Hoy no quiero estar lejos de la casa y el árbol*².

(Silvio Rodríguez 182)

¹ Far From the House and the Tree

² Today, I do not wish to be away from the house and the tree./ Every crevice on the ground is a recounted dream;/Like a memory, an image, a kiss,/ and at the end of the day something remains./ Today, I do not wish to be away from the house and the tree.

I

*Va cabalgando el Mayor con su herida
y mientras más mortal el tajo es más de vida³*

(Rodríguez 138).

As fluorescent champagne glasses clinked among white iridescent faces at the stroke of twelve, I reflected on the past few years. The first thought that came to my mind was “Damn, I’m glad this crappy year’s over. Two thousand four will not be as bad... in fact I’ll make sure it’ll be better.”

It all started in 2001 when my second father tragically died. By second father I mean, he was my father’s best lifelong friend who brought us all up since my oldest brother was born in a chilly December in 1972. He was a vibrant man, one of those beings who light up a place and even if you don’t know them very well you strangely love them. He was tall and slender with blond hair that eventually was dyed to a reddish yellow that everyone told him to get rid of. He had a smile, how should I put it, which was electrifying, the way a jellyfish sting feels like. It woke you up and infected you with endless laughter. Laughter... that was his most notable trait, he laughed so hard and so uniquely that you knew when he was in a room. He practiced medicine for the whole town, and unlike others who shared in his profession, he knew no hierarchy. He saw all patients as equals and money was not a condition. If you saw a very well dressed “bum” in the street, you knew that it was he who had dressed him. If you looked into a fine restaurant and saw a man with an unusual guest; that was him. It is a pity how in life the ones who live it as divinely ordered are the ones who also divinely suffer it.

³ The General rides along with his wound and, the deadlier the cut, the more life prolongs.

Picture this: you are sitting in your home late in a warm and humid June afternoon when the phone rings. It is a man you casually knew asking you to meet him someplace. You politely answer you have other business to attend to and you nicely hang up. Now, picture this: an hour later you are driving your own car towards the northern Puerto Rican beach town of Isabela, but instead of a cap and sun block, there is a gun pointed at the rear of your head. Next scene: you are in a cheap motel room locked inside a bathroom while lying gagged in the bathtub. You have no idea about what is happening, or will happen. You hear loud moaning and you figure that the man who abducted you - you really don't want to call the situation an abduction, but something in the back of your adrenaline infested brain tells you the blunt reality - is having sex in the room, presumably with a woman. The sweat cascades down your face, arms, legs, and through interstices of your body you were never aware existed. You somehow wait for the moaning to cease and for the door to open so you can start negotiations with these strangers that will somehow play the most important role in your life. Final scene: your body is tied to an automobile's differential and is being covered with trash bags. A sudden sharp blow numbs you of the fact that you are being thrown into a four feet swamp that will swallow your being into the unknown darkness of death. The rotten smell of methane, something that made you gag all your life, is the last impression of this world. Bam! Another blow to your head while you try to recuperate from the pain and struggle to move your body, which is linearly crucified to a piece of machinery. The dark waters slowly but surely wrap you up in the cocoon that is death.

My father's non-biological brother died June 9, 2001 while I was abroad. My family told me nothing as I had short long distance conversations in scattered payphones throughout the city of Cancún, Mexico. However, the undeniable feeling

that something was horribly wrong stuck with me for the rest of my high school senior trip. My days as a teenager were soon to be over, and an abrupt initiation into adulthood was soon to take place.

As I eagerly searched the hot expectant San Juan airport crowd for my parents, I noticed that, one by one, the passengers on the plane met a warm hug. My eyes kept imagining mom and dad's faces, but all I got was one of my friends' mother telling me that I was leaving with them. The trip from San Juan to Mayagüez was an eternal agony with my mind going into an endless scavenger hunt for possible explanations. Out the window all was dark, the conversations around me were also in the dark; I did not hear a single thing of what they were talking. The only thing I do recall is the car stopping at a Church's Fried Chicken fast food restaurant in the middle of dark mountains somewhere in the center of the island. It was the most detached car ride of my life; I could only think of what news awaited me and my concentration was solely devoted to this. My eyes were in a crystalline blank, nobody dared speak to me in the car because somehow they empathized with my state. Finally I go up the stairs which lead to my house's front door when, without my knocking, a dead face opens. It was my mother's face, with a dead look, a dead color, a dead entirety. "Chiqui is missing, and we don't know where he is," my mother said. Those were the welcoming daggers I received as I returned from supposedly one of the best times of my life. My cold turkey initiation had begun.

When Chiqui died I finally started to understand the brittleness of life, and how like, in the lottery, where you never think you'll never win while seeing others constantly win, you think the same thing about death; it comes to others but not to you or your close ones. Why is that? Why is it that the surest thing of all is the hardest to

grasp? I certainly don't have the answer to these questions, but if you do... don't hesitate to call.

II

*Yo he preferido hablar de cosas imposibles,
porque de lo posible se sabe demasiado*⁴

(Rodríguez 158).

Back to the champagne toasting party; hope this year isn't as shitty because from 2001 to 2003 there has been this long streak of one disaster after another. Two thousand and one was done; 2002 was OK, so OK that I can't even remember what in heavens happened that year. So in a way it's sometimes better for notable things to happen -good or bad- so that you remember. Therefore let's skip to 2003 where the two following strikes took place. At least I thought so, during the party, that all there was were three strikes, and then I learned the crucial lesson that the popular phrase of "three strikes and your are out" is a dirty fallacy.

It's seven in the morning of a sunny January weekday. *El pito de la India*⁵ wakes me up to the thought of "oh crap, not again." I battle my inner sloth and liquidly slide out of bed. I do the usual ritual of teeth brushing, face cleansing, nose blowing, toilet seating repertoire when I hear my mom talking to herself as usual- she's not sick, this is regular procedure- and wondering where my brother's at. "He's supposed to be home by now! There is something wrong!" she complained. I tell her to calm down, that maybe he woke up later and thus went running later. My words seem Esperanto to her and so she shuts her inner ears. Not another second elapses when the phone rings, it's a friend of my parents. He tells mom that Mario is stable and that dad is already in the hospital. Confusion, panic, and denial invade the house while mom rushes out of the house and leaves me alone without a word expecting me to go to school in such a state of trepidation. So I'm left without a clue and without an

⁴ I have opted to speak about the impossible, for we know the possible all too well.

⁵ Fog horn from a beer factory next to the house I lived at

option. I have class at nine, I get there on time, the topic for this day seems interesting, but yet I can't hear a single word the professor is saying. If I ever wanted to witness what it was like to be Charlie Brown in class this was the time. All I hear in the room is noise, pointless noise, while I struggle not to break into panic, not to vomit, not to scream, not to cry. As I sit there, realizing my existence, my big bro' might have lost his existence determining apparatus, or what we commonly call "the brain." I try to seem interested in the class while praying that my brother is alive, and not a figment of my imagination, and at the same time trying to look concentrated enough to not provoke the professor into asking me a question about the class's topic which has something to do with a color, I think it's purple. An hour and twenty minutes go by and finally it's over. I rush outside to call the hospital but I still don't have the income to own a cell phone, however, my friends certainly think they do, so I borrow one of theirs. As I stood under the midday sun in front of my university's cafeteria all I could feel was sheer terror at the fact that someone was indeed going to pick up that hospital phone and was going to tell me my brother's fate. That voice on the other side of a copper wire was to confirm my sanity, or the schizophrenia of telling me that someone I thought existed really did not. When the ringing stopped it's my dad at the other end of the line telling me Neno was gonna be alright. He existed; he lived.

That same night I arrived at my house eagerly waiting to see him. I still feel chills up and down my spine when I remember what he had turned into. My brother, 31 at the time, had become a child. His mannerisms, his stare, his hands, his legs were like those of a newborn baby. The head concussion that he received from the impact of the car's front windshield was powerful enough to leave him in this pre-natal stage for the rest of his life. It was a question of time before we knew if this state would be

permanent, since head injuries are still somewhat of a mystery to the medical community. Perhaps this is the time to tell you that my brother is a doctor, a pathologist to be exact, and was a doctor at the time. And the most painful thing was to see him trying to fight his condition because somewhere in his head he knew what was going on and what he had to do. So he started testing his mind, didn't let himself go to sleep, and never shut up. He kept on talking and talking and talking; something he rarely did in his "good years." Pedro, my other brother used to say: "Hey, for all the years he never said a word now with this bump in his head he can't shut up." But that was Pedro's humorous side. I couldn't see it in the same way, and to this day can't. For me it was so gut wrenching to see such a great professional, academic, and athlete shrink back into a diaper stage that I could not bare it. I used to lock myself in my room and cry just from seeing him, even though he was alive, I had to be thankful that he was alive, but at the time I couldn't see it that way.

This event took place at the start of 2003, and the third strike took place between the months of September and October of the same year. Go figure why I drank so much champagne at the New Year's party. In the middle of my brother not working and acting like a one year old, my dad working and my mom, well, just being mom, the sundae was crowned with a big, fat, plump, red cherry. My mom was diagnosed with a serious type of breast cancer. "And the hits just keep on commin," I used to say to myself, not knowing the slap that was awaiting all of us. To make the long story short, dad was her biggest support. I tried to cheer her up, but there was something about my father that set her at peace. Every day she went into treatment after having had two surgeries. Dad always went with her, or at least as often as he could. I remember arriving from the university and peeking into her bedroom. My head peering in, as to not disturb her in a Poe-esque kind of way, while mom lied as a

fetus sideways with her tiny back facing my sight. She was in this position for the thirty days she was bombarded with “therapy.” A frail frame withstood the pain meant for a gladiator. She confronted the situation with a strength I never knew she had, although now I know that she is made of steel; “true womanness” is how I like to call it.

New Year’s eve party once more. I’m standing in a corner looking at the beauty of the décor. It is arranged in a way that even the nastiest looking person looked almost pretty. White everywhere; candles, silver, drapes, rare fruits, carpets, it almost looks like the setting of an old plantation in Georgia but without the slaves, or are they lurking back there in the tennis court? The mansion has a great white wooden balcony that wraps around the whole house. I’m in a corner with a glass at hand revisiting the tragic scenes of my recent past, and I am determined that 2004 is going to be good. You know, the kind of good that you-can’t-remember-type. The one I told you about earlier. I see mom, wearing a beautiful satin white dress set from where her scars peep out of her blouse once in a while. She’s finishing her treatment and from what the tests show she’s in remission, as the doctor lingo indicates. Next to her is the man that lights up my life... my father, elegant yet always reluctant to wear a tie. I stare at them for a while and get teary eyed. “Maybe it’s the champagne,” I say to myself, but still I feel like crying. Perhaps it’s because I’m beginning to understand that people are not givens, they are not a default setting and are finite. My parents were no longer an eternal painting on a wall that would never go down. I will never forget the still frame of that night because that was the last New Year I would see that picture. One of them would be here no more. My schizophrenic-like fear was to be confirmed.

III

*Porque éste es de los muertos que crecen y se agrandan,
aunque el tiempo devaste su gigante esqueleto⁶*

(Rodríguez 40).

I remember... I remember the breeze, the cold damp early Puerto Rican breeze that blushed my cheeks with cold. All was still; only the sound of my father's bicycle filled the space between us, and the rest of the world. We used to go on adventurous expeditions on random weekend mornings to find all sorts of "new" artifacts, which were only tree seeds, but for a four-year-old girl these were treasures. My dad didn't dress me up for these outings; he just put on my tiny sneakers and that was that. I went out in pajamas, my helmet, and my indescribable thrill of expectancy. We used to ride all over town when there was still no one to be seen on the streets, the sun was just coming out, and the cold was refreshingly free of signs of global warming. The sound of silence with my father's bike as the background comforted me. Today I know that that peace was really what the Buddhists call the great void: emptiness. On that bicycle next to the love of my life, I experienced what many humans long for: a taste of simply being alive, nothing more. I felt alive without thinking, and that is something that I owe to him. He was a master at teaching you the greatest principle of all: "You are here, be grateful and submissive towards Nature, you are no bigger than she is, therefore you should love her and protect her. You are another piece of the puzzle, but she can do away with you, without you being able to reciprocate."

My place on the bike was behind my father on a yellow seat that had a little belt to strap me on to. It was plastic like the regular high school auditorium chairs we have all sat on, but it was mounted on a two-wheeled contraption. My front view was

⁶ Because he's the kind of deceased man who grows and rises even if time consumes his giant skeleton

my dad's bald, massive, flat-in-the-back head. My side views were Mayagüez, muted. We rode all over, just me and him and our good friend, Silence. We did not speak to each other while we were in motion. We started conversation when we had reached our destination, which could range from a park, to a particular tree, or to the mountains near town. I don't want to imply that my dad was Emerson, Thoreau, or Siddhartha Gautama, but for me, he definitely bore some of their traces as well as some of el Che's, Albizu's, and Hostos's. However, while he had some of their qualities, he was Him, he was my father and what mostly stood out from him was the fact that he did not resemble anyone but himself. He was the epitome of originality. When I was a teenager my guy friends used to be terrified of him because he was "so tall!"- they used to say. Fact is that he wasn't all that tall at all. He was five foot ten, but his presence was huge. He also had the air of being a very important historical figure, he inspired respect, almost to the point of bowing when you saw him. Nevertheless, he did not dress to impress, did not have a sports car, or lived in a mansion on the Beverly Hills of Mayagüez, which we call Cerro Las Mesas. Dad was a practical man, he took pragmatics to the next level where he only used his resources for what he really loved and considered important.

If you have a car, buy it cash and keep it until it falls apart in your garage. My dad had a 1983 Volkswagen where he kept all the things that mom considered to be useless in the house. If today Al Gore is the hero for the environment, dad had already started this trend twenty years ago. He did not throw anything away, he kept even the straw of a soda he drank at a gas station so he would not have to throw it to the trash because that would mean more trash for the island, that was so small, and the landfills were already filling up. The only new cars that we had were for mom; he really loved to spoil her. He treated her the way she was raised.

Dad's Volky was a legend in school. All my friends loved the fact that I arrived at school in such a cool vehicle. Every morning, from the time I was five years old until I was a freshman in college, Dad took me to school in that car. Everyone knew when I had arrived due to the particular noise the van would make. It's that vrrruummm, vrum-vrum-vrum-vrum... that vibrated in everyone's ears, and they loved it. When I was younger I used to hate it, seeing my classmates drive up in those perfectly silent cars where not a single soul knew that they had arrived at school. But, as the daughter of the peculiar lawyer, I was on the not so regal spotlight. Later in my school years I grew to love the noisy wagon because it made me look groovy and original, almost as if I was the surfer's daughter. All my guy friends wanted my father's car and went out to the school lobby just to see me arrive. When it was my time to drive, I wanted it, but driving the stick was quite an intimidation for me, so I went for the more conservative "mommy car." Jota, my best friend, decided that he was macho enough for stick shift and after he got his license he went out and, in my dad's honor, bought a Volky himself. He had become my dad's successor.

When it came time to dressing up, my father dreaded the tie. He would rather wear the jacket without the tie and a pair of relaxed pants in his favorite color: khaki. He would then put on his top siders, sometimes with socks, and if he was going to be outdoors, he would top off the outfit with one of his many panama hats. In parties he would talk, eat a lot, drink his Heineken covered in a zipped up cooler and sit wherever he saw a spot of nature where the wind current would caress his skin. He would take a chair, preferably a rocking chair, and sit down looking up at the sky if it was nighttime or dusk. If it was still bright, he would look at the trees and whistle along with the birds. I remember the way he had of placing his arms on the armrest of a chair and the rhythm with which he rocked it. He loved old furniture; he used to

look at them all the time since he was a woodworker on his spare time. Actually, in his spare time he played many roles: hunter, farmer, woodworker, conservationist, architect, dog trainer, boat builder, fisherman, he could do almost anything. Perhaps this is why I used to call him Daddy Indiana, as if he were Indiana Jones, because there was no way that you could feel unsafe with him, and this happened to all the people he touched.

We lived in an old house in the center of town in one of the oldest “urbanizations” or residential areas of Mayagüez. Today, it has transformed into a student villa: most of the old houses have either been torn down and replaced with condos or turned into rooming houses for college students. The families that always lived in them inhabit the others that are left. One of these cases was my family. We lived in the top floor of my father’s house. He knew no other home. The original building was the downstairs house where he, his older sister, mother and father lived until my grandparents’ last days. My grandfather was a type of a businessman: his enterprises ranged from owning an “*agencia hípica*”⁷ to being the sports commentator of a famous local radio show. One of his sources of income was his idea of building a second story to the house to rent it, and to build a two-story apartment house in the backyard. Families lived on the second floor apartment, while students rented the backhouse. When mom and dad got married in 1972 they lived in an apartment in Miradero, a well known rural area in Mayagüez. After that, they moved in with my mother’s parents in the upscale suburb of El Ensanche Ramírez. My mother’s family was well off; my maternal grandfather was one of the only two surgeons in the west of the island at the time. After a short while my parents got tired and, for obvious reasons, decided to move out.

⁷ Race horse betting agency

They moved to my father's house on the second floor temporarily, while they looked for a home to buy and even considered building one. It was a small three-room apartment with one bathroom, a small kitchen, and a tiny family area where living room and dining room were merged in an almost nonexistent area. One had to go up a long flight of stone stairs to reach the front door, but however tiresome it was, the house had a great beauty: a huge, umbrella-like *quenepa* tree. It covered the whole house so it was never hot inside or outside. When it rained, the boughs of the tree would almost kneel down as if they were greeting us upon arrival. I loved such an entrance, it seemed as if one were entering another world where the tree served as its portal. Nevertheless, this is how I regarded my tree house, but it was not the same story for mother. For her the house was fine for two, but it soon became six. The temporary state of living there turned into thirty years of my mother waiting for a "proper home" where she could fit the whole family. Mother, being accustomed to another kind of life, hated the situation and complained almost everyday until today, but me and my brothers and sister didn't care. We loved the place. It was antique, close to everything and we were able to carpool everywhere. The space wasn't an issue for us and we did not mind if we couldn't have parties or invite friends over. That was all we knew, so how could we miss the other stuff?

This was my view of the place when I was younger, but seeing it today, I have no idea how we managed. The house looked like a housing project for F.E.M.A.⁸ When it rained I had to literally put a raincoat over my bed. My room's ceiling was rotted wood and if the sun shone brightly enough the rays would creep in through the roof and light my room up. I now say this from my cement, high class, architecturally designed home where nothing seeps through. But at that time I didn't see it as

⁸ Federal Emergency Management Agency

anything to be ashamed or sad about. It was my house and I loved it; even if I closed the door and a shower of wood dust fell on my head, or if there was an iron beam hanging from a fishing line that would hold the kitchen ceiling up to prevent it from caving in.

Dad taught us to not cherish material goods because they were perishable, miscellaneous, and would turn out to be a burden rather than an asset. He always told us to use money for the things that really mattered in life. This is why we always had money to travel, to eat in really nice places, to study anywhere we wanted, and to have fun, the kind of fun that stays with you forever. This is also why we had a boat. Many people could not understand our situation. For my friends at school I was poor, but suddenly they heard that I had been traveling, or returned on Monday showing traces of the ocean sun on my skin, and they wondered. When I answered that I had been on my boat at the beach they were baffled and could not digest it.

--“How come my dad has a BMW, we live in a luxurious house, dress in the best clothes and don't have a boat?”

--“My dad knows where the money is worth and spends it on the things that matter,” I replied.

At the time the thing that I thought mattered most was going to the beach because that was fun. But I now realize that the things that matter most are the memories that money can buy. That boat cost money; it was a material possession that was a vehicle for entertainment. So why would dad buy it if it resembled the same thing as having a big car? He knew that boat would end up serving another purpose; it was a way to guarantee a remembrance of the past in which each member of the family carried a different story on that boat until the end, whether it was dad and my brother Pedro going out fishing, Neno setting out to wind surf, mom and dad spending

a romantic afternoon on the ocean, or my sister spending a day at the beach with her friends. For me it was snorkeling with my dad. That is the difference between the possession that pleases the outside and the possession that pleases its owner. Dad believed in personal possessions, and that's why he didn't care to show the world that he was a rich man with big toys to symbolize his status. He bought what he thought would enable his family to cultivate its emotional life. However, his theories only persuaded us. People admired his hippie notions on life but they could not espouse them. They believed it was impossible to live in a house with less than four bedrooms and four bathrooms. They would suffocate if they did not have the car to accessorize their up-scale lifestyles. They used to say: "Ay, Mayito, ese loco, quién lo entiende, pero yo no podría ser así jamás."⁹ In other words, they could never be practical and have what one really needs. This song is still sung today, but this time to my brothers. Their peers cannot believe that they have not followed the established Puerto Rican formula:

Surgically enhanced wife

Unaffordable house

Kids with more extracurricular activities than the renaissance man

Pure breed dog

Controlled access suburb

+ One car per family member

Happiness

They think my brothers are odd, that there is something wrong with them, when in reality Mario and Pedro are better off. They have the life they really want,

⁹ That Mayito, that crazy man, who can understand him? But I could never be like that.

not the burden the others are carrying either because they don't have the courage, or because they lack the brains to figure it out. The fewer things you have, the less you have to lose.

Those luxurious morning rides with my father didn't cost a thing except for the bicycle, thus proving his theory of investing on the things that will guarantee bonding and unforgettable moments. As I twirled my pajamas on the moist, cold, dawn grass seeing my father filling his great lungs with joy... I lived. We picked up seeds together to take them home and plant them so we could see that tree grow in our yard; we threw some in the air because they floated like helicopters. He sang, I danced; we were together every morning, and every morning he still visits me.

IV

Lo más terrible se aprende enseguida

*y lo hermoso nos cuesta la vida*¹⁰

(Rodríguez 152).

I have become agnostically atheist. I envy my siblings; I envy my mother, my aunts, my grandparents, my cousins... I am Othello. And like in *Othello*, the light was turned off too soon.

I envy all the people that are older than me, for the bike ride lasted only twenty-one years. My fingers tremble, as they intuitively know what awaits them. They will have to retell what the brain has wanted to erase for all this time. In writing my memories my body enters a civil war where opposite, familiar but not fully known, forces must somehow productively clash.

I am constantly thinking about death. I am still unable to tell whether it is out of fear, curiosity, or simply because the last few years of my life have been filled with the hollowing effects of death. Every night I must think about foolish things such as “what will I wear tomorrow?” or read a distracting book in order to avoid a panic attack. I find it impossible to understand death mainly because what most troubles me is the fact that I cannot conceive that when you die you lose consciousness and are thus unable to tell yourself: “I’m dead.” Therefore, what most scares me is the inability to think, and the incapability of acknowledging my own death.

Every time a person dies I go into a trance from which I cannot easily extricate myself. I can’t help but ponder about the person’s life, what he or she thought when the moment came, and especially, if he or she thought anything at all.

¹⁰ The most terrible things are learned quickly, but to learn about beauty takes a lifetime.

There's another thing that baffles me. Do you know the day you are going to die? Do you wake up one morning and receive some sort of subliminal or ethereal message telling you that today is your last day, and to disclose your upcoming departure?

I think about all this once I get news about a person's death. What frustrates me the most is that there is no way of retrieving the answers, consequently furthering my curiosity... and my obsession. Sometimes I feel like Woody Allen in the film *Hannah and her Sisters*, terrified of death, but not because it's the end, but because it's enigmatic. I hate mysteries, I'm the sort of person who has to know the explanation for everything and if I am unable to do this, I obsess.

In my obsessions, I have often convinced myself that somehow dad knew. That's why on that particular day he broke the routine both for that day and for the rest of mine. Knowing him, the last thing he probably said was: "Winston! Be careful!" He was a very precautionary driver, so much so, that everybody hated having him as a passenger, because he behaved like a driving instructor; he made people nervous while driving.

Sometimes mother goes into a type of martyrdom competition in which she proclaims herself as the one who suffered dad's death the most. I don't argue with her, or tell her that she's wrong, I simply tell her in my mind: "At least you had him longer and really, truly knew him. I only had him for twenty-one years. Not even really, he died a month after I legally became an adult. They've all had him longer, even his clients are worthy of my envy.

When that fatal blow hit his vigorously, perfectly alive body, I wonder, I wonder if he already knew...

V

*No te muevas,
si puede estar quieta la felicidad,
si puede volverse de piedra el amor.
Convierte en estatuas los días y el mar.
Quizá me comprenda mejor.
O al menos conforme ya esté, repleto de piedras, sin sed
el día en que voy a partir.*¹¹

(Rodríguez 414)

For most of us, people are recurring images. We are used to seeing them over and over again to the point where that particular person is like a constantly projected image, like that of a computer. Like the character of Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*, you “grow accustomed” to one’s face. For me the recurring image was my father entering the house every weeknight.

I’m sitting on the oversized royal blue couch in the living room watching TV. The place is so small that you can hear the slightest sound. I hear his strong yet serene footsteps downstairs while he’s going to get Pachucho and play with him for a while in the damp darkness. “Pochi, Pochi!” he calls. After a couple of minutes I hear him coming up the stairs, again with his distinctive walk. If I heard it today, I would recognize it immediately. He opens the white wooden door and peers into the living room with a mischievous look. Sometimes mom, Neno and I would be reading and he would make fun of us. “What is this, a study hall?” he would ask. The three of us would stare at him and continue on with our books waiting for his laughter on the way

¹¹ Do not move,/ if happiness can remain still,/ if love can turn to stone./ Turn the days and the sea into statues./ Perhaps I will understand myself better./Or, at least I will be content, well-filled with stones, satiated/ on the day I depart.

to the kitchen. Then, he would stand in front of the stove and eat whatever mom cooked straight from the pots.

But this is not a study night. He leaves his stuff on the white armoire we have. He puts down his huge key chain and his change, then drops his green L.L. Bean fanny pack on an empty flowerpot mom has. It's empty because she has given up on plants or, better said, plants have given up on her. After that he clears his throat, goes into the bedroom, takes his button down, short-sleeved shirt off, and goes into the living room to say hi to mom and I. He kisses mom, but I never kiss him. He is the love of my life and I don't kiss or hug him, or tell him that I love him. I still can't explain why I do that to the ones I love the most. It's like I can't propel my body to express those deeply felt emotions. In tears, mom once told me that this hurt him deeply. I know this and wish I could change it. An affection inhibitor was injected into my bloodstream and to this day it flows copiously through my veins. I think that my problem is that my admiration makes me nervous, almost star-struck and dad had this effect on me. He is my star.

When a person disappears faster than you can say "huh?" you realize that people are not fixed images that you will see over and over again. On the contrary, they are transient, short lived, impermanent on this earth. "I'll see him later" or "I'll see her tomorrow" are thoughts that do not cross my mind any more since I saw the last image of my dad: in front of the stove, eating from the pot, with his khakis and bear chest. I was grounded at the time for hanging out too much and for too long. I asked his permission to take a friend to dinner at Pizzeria Uno for his birthday on June 8, 2004.

--"Daddy can I go out please?"

--"OK, babe, you can go."

I did not cross the kitchen door to touch him, or face him. Then, just like that, like if he had been just a dream or a flight of my imagination, I never saw his image again, not even lying in a coffin. They erased my father from my life. There were no goodbyes, no closures. There was nothing. How in hell could I have known that after I left that night my father would turn into an abstraction? I sure didn't, but it's that simple: *now you see it, now you don't*.

People who haven't witnessed this magic trick can only observe from afar. They hear without listening, they see without realizing. I know now that it is as ordinary as tomorrow; just like erasing a word on a computer screen, life erases people without distinction. Imagine being in a room and seeing a person enter; now imagine seeing that person walk out of the room but not making it to the other side. The doorframe is perhaps an inch-and-half wide and in that tiny space and moment a human is sucked into nothingness. We are not David, an eternal statue that today, tomorrow, and the day after the next twenty years, will be there. We might, but there is an equal chance that we might not.

But my inability of loving lingers: I hate myself for having done this and even more for doing it still. Even though I realized my flaws, I haven't fixed them. I never said: "dad, I love you" or "*papi, te quiero mucho*." My whole family knows this and they all believe my heart is made of stone. They see me as a pillar of strength when in reality the one who keeps weeping to this day is I. I guess I'll never know the reason why I act in such manner. Sometimes I try to think that dad knew that I loved him and that it wasn't necessary to spill it out. That's my solace, or is it my made up theory so I don't go crazy with guilt and regret? If mom, or one of my brothers and sister passed away, I would be in the same place. I cannot articulate those amorous words or offer my arms in a hug but I can commit them to paper in casual notes. Yet, I have only

been able to do this with my partner, never with my family. I've grown bitter with life. Perhaps this is why I behave oddly on New Year's eve every year.

My father dissolved into thin air from my sight, like sand blown away with the ocean wind. It is surreal: was I hallucinating for twenty-one years? Did the person I believe to be more real than myself never existed?

That's how it feels when you lose a person faster than the speed of light. You want to tip down walls with rage and desperation. Miguel Hernández's poem "Elegía" best expresses my feelings: "Quiero minar la tierra hasta encontrarte/ y besarte la noble calavera/ y desmordazarte y regresarte"¹² (Hernández 35- 37), since, otherwise, the pain surmounts to heights where even breathing hurts: "Tanto dolor se agrupa en mi costado,/ que por doler, me duele hasta el aliento" (Hernández 11-12). When a person dies and you don't even see them dead you lose all certainty about where he is or whether he ever was. The mind cannot grasp that which is no longer graspable; this leads to insanity and the denial of death.

No hay extension más grande que mi herida...

Siento más tu muerte que mi vida¹³. (Hernández 16-18)

¹² I want to scrape the earth until I find you/ and kiss your noble skull/un-gag you and bring you back.

¹³ There is no greater extension than my wound... I feel your death more than I feel my life.

VI

Hoy me tendiste el lecho

Para después volar:

Hoy te llevaste el mundo de mi pecho,

*Hoy la aurora es soledad*¹⁴

(Rodríguez 218)

It was the night of June ninth when I had coffee with a friend at the local gas station. When we decided to leave, I didn't want to take the usual route to my house.

--"I'd rather take a different road," I said.

--"But why? That's not practical," said Roberto.

--"I don't know. I just feel like I can't take that road, that's all!"

Now I realize the reason why I was reluctant to drive on that road... On that very night, on that very road, my father left us unexpectedly. Since that day my foreseeing, or better yet, forefeeling "powers" went with him, and all the events I was able to foresee are now unpredictable. I felt it in my stomach, in my gut that something terrible was going to happen that day, and nature was already in mourning. It didn't stop raining that afternoon as I watched *Rhapsody in August* with my mother while explaining to her all the things I'd been learning in my summer film course.

It was about three in the afternoon, rain pouring outside, and mother and me paid close attention to the scene in which a small Japanese lady walked fiercely against the wind. My film class was driving me crazy, I explained to mom, since I would never again be able to just watch a film. I had to observe it, just as I would soon do with life as well.

¹⁴ Today you made my bed/ and then you flew away:/ Today you ripped the world from my chest,/ Today dawn means solitude.

The phone rang some time later and it was Roberto inviting me out for coffee. I accepted and put on the first thing I could find, which was the same sweaty dress I had worn earlier for film class. Of course even if my friend invited me, I had to get him over at Miradero. (If this were today I would've declined because of the price of gas). So I picked him up and we went to a gas station where they made great espresso. Perhaps they still do, I wouldn't know since I haven't been there in four years.

After chatting and enjoying our coffee, I decided to leave and drop Roberto off at his house. We were in the middle of an interesting conversation when, out of the blue, I had to get out of there. An overpowering feeling of anxiety invaded my chest. I couldn't breathe, butterflies fluttered in my stomach. I felt nauseous, my heart pumped, my hands trembled, I could not stay put, I sweated profusely. Worried and desperate, I felt as nervous as an actor five seconds before stepping on stage.

--"We have to go," I stuttered.

--"What is wrong with you María?"

--"Nothing, you know me. When I get these feelings I must obey them."

--"Fine, I respect your madness."

And so we left, but taking a detour. It was certainly not a shortcut as it was the least direct way to get to Roberto's. However, I wasn't the one driving, something else was steering the wheel and coordinating my motions.

When we finally arrived to Roberto's house we sat down to continue our conversation. The cold, damp smell of rain invaded the basement apartment and we kept chatting. Our topic of conversation was Nietzsche and how I embodied many of his theories. This would explain the letter Roberto gave me as we ended our conversation, but told me that I had to read it alone in my house. I accepted it and left in a hurry to read it.

I never did; today it sits in a drawer in my room's desk, untouched.

I got home at about six in the afternoon. Mom, Neno and I were there. That's all I know. I can't remember what went on from the moment I arrived home and the events that unfolded later that night.

I seem to recover my memory at nine o' clock at night. I was watching TV, my brother was reading and mom was going about the house. I had to hand-in a paper the next day for my class, so I printed it out and continued staring at the television. Time kept crawling ever so slowly, slowly, slowly, until it was about ten thirty. We were used to dad not coming home until nine or nine thirty, sometimes ten, but this time he had gone over his curfew. Mom started to get upset, saying that he wasn't home because he was out with his childish man friends as usual. She wasn't worried, she was angry. Neno was none of the above, he was just reading and not caring about the world around him. But I was worried, so worried that the stomach flip I had felt in the afternoon had come back with all its fury.

Tick-tock, tick-tock... the minutes began to speed by. They were no longer crawling anymore, they were flying. My brother went to bed in his stoic manner and even mom went to her room, but not to sleep. "Beba; when your father comes in don't tell him I'm mad at him; actually, do tell him I went to bed unconcerned." This was her plan to teach him a lesson. "OK, I'll do that, but first let me call him." I dialed his cell phone number, which my mind has now erased. After a few rings, the voicemail service was activated and I left him a message: "Dad, it's me Beba, you better come home because mom is pissed." That was the last time I addressed him, and it wasn't even him, it was a recording of his voice.

The night pressed on, the house was asleep, but I wasn't. My rising angst made me pace around the house; I couldn't sit, lie; stay still. I had to mute the TV

since concentration was nowhere in sight and when nervousness invades the spirit only silence is allowed.

I sat by the window, hoping to see his Rocky jeep silently arrive at the gate. He had to stop riding his Volky a few years earlier because it did not work anymore, but he kept it for sentimental reasons and for storage. He now drove Neno's jeep. I stared out the window for more than an hour. My legs were already asleep with pricking needles when suddenly I had a vision. It wasn't a vision in strict terms because I did not see pictures, what I saw were feelings, emotions that cannot be explained for these are the ones that are only intelligible when they are experienced by the self. These are the feelings of death. I foresaw my family's future as well as mine. Right then and there I knew it: my father was dead. As this came upon me the shadow of doubt was lifted, phone in hand I calmly got up, closed the window, turned my back on the images it had shown and turned off the lights. Walking toward the phone table I heard a frantic chorus of sirens wailing from the highway. His death was confirmed; the ambulances were on their way to get his corpse. I felt a shiver enter my body through the tips of my toes and move all the way up to my head. When it reached my eyes I understood that it was not an illusion, and immediately I dropped the phone. The hopes of him being alive never crossed my mind, for some reason I knew that he was the kind of man who dies and is not wounded.

I entered my room and laid flat on my bed, tense as a long piece of metal. I held Purri, my stuffed animal tightly, I held myself tightly; the tension in my body was unlike anything I had felt before. I could have cracked into pieces if someone had touched me. I ordered my body to "unwind," but it was not responding. I don't know how many hours went by, but some time later I started praying; it was a prayer I had never heard before, but my lips began moving and releasing it: "Arrópalo con tu

manto, llévatelo en paz, que no sufra, yo sé que está muerto, pero que se vaya contigo. Arrópalo con tu manto de bendición y llévatelo en paz...”¹⁵ This was the last time in my life I prayed.

At one point the phone rang and I heard my mother picking it up half asleep. It was my brother Pedro.

--“Mami; Papi está ahí?”¹⁶

--“No, él no ha llegado.”¹⁷

All that my mother heard was a deep sigh followed by the words “Ay Dios mío...”¹⁸ in a shivering tone. It appears that a friend of the family had seen the accident and believed to have seen a body, face down on the highway, that vaguely resembled Mayito. He had Pedro’s number and so he called to make sure that the dead subject was not our father.

Pedro didn’t know his condition. Mom woke Neno up and silently he left the house without saying a word. I was in bed, pretending to be asleep, seemingly unaware of the occurrences. I felt compelled to keep playing the role of the young, oblivious child. I didn’t need confirmation, but the rest of the world did.

So, then came the waiting, the waiting for my brothers’ news. I just waited for the movie I had already played in my head at least ten times.

Feeling like I was in a bad episode of the *Twilight Zone*, I heard the phone again, sweat went down my face and legs and my brain began to immerse itself into a deep trance of denial, of rage, of lunacy. I had entered the realm of reality for the first time in my life at twenty-one, my mother at fifty-eight, my brothers at thirty-two and

¹⁵ Cover him with your sacred shroud; take him in peace without suffering. I know that he is dead, but take him with you.

¹⁶ Mom; is dad there?

¹⁷ No, he’s not here yet.

¹⁸ Oh my God...

thirty-three and my sister, still unaware, at twenty-six. The majority of humans live under social sedatives that go by the name of material possessions. People invent these in order to escape the reality of life that is death. Thus, some people live life never entering this dimension, since they never truly live soberly. To avoid thinking about this, creations such as problems, jobs, and all sorts of responsibilities come to the aid of the human brain that needs to live in denial of the only thing that is undeniable. Therefore this is why people are metaphorically high all their lives, as a means of escapism; only a select few leave this matrix. I'm one of them.

Going back to the gruesome events: I awaited my definite cold turkey rehab, it began without warning and with my mother storming in my room and switching on the light. She blazed in a possessed-like-state, her eyes seemed wild; she looked as if she was flying and not walking. She threw herself on my lap as I sprung up and sat on my bed. “¡Mataron a tu papá, mataron a tu papá!¹⁹” Pedro had called her once more from the funeral's morgue to tell her: “¡Se murió mami, Papi se murió!²⁰” She got up and left the room; I went after her and she collapsed in the living room. She melted in my arms, trembling like a newborn child. She could not stand. I picked her up, but she wanted to stay there. Minutes later I looked out the very same window that had shown me this scene hours before, and saw Dad's jeep draw near. But the one driving was Pedro. This confused me since if it was a car accident how come the car was intact?

All was so hazy and still, in a vacuum-like pause, we were disorientated and clueless; the only thing we knew was that dad was dead. All was obscure; the shock shuts down the mind.

I don't know how she mustered the energy, but my mother got up to call her sister. Hysterically she cried out: “¡No está herido, lo mataron, no está herido, lo

¹⁹ They killed your father!

²⁰ He died mommy, Dad is dead!

mataron!”²¹ She kept screaming as Mario, Pedro and his wife Raisha came up the stairs. I was unable to see their faces, and at the same time no words were needed. All I did was hit the wall with my bare fist and slide down to the floor.

I never saw him again, only his car. For Pedro, the sheer act of driving his dead father’s car (who an hour earlier had been alive), was something I cannot retell. They brought back his fanny pack, his wallet, his keys, all retrieved from his dead body. The phone I had left a message in was also there. I had left a message for a dead man.

People immediately rushed to our house where the *quenepa* tree greeted them first. My aunts and cousins, scared to death, not knowing what to expect, entered our home. Perhaps they feared finding my mom hanging from a rope, my brothers with their wrists slashed and I, with my heart of stone intact, still standing. My sister Ana, who lived in Miami, was still unaware at the time. My aunt Ketty was the one brave enough to make the phone call. To their surprise we were all alive; nobody had attempted suicide. As the night progressed there were hugs, tears, screams followed by silence.

Little did they know that I was having a *déjà vu*.

My mother begged me for strength, while others stared at my tranquility. I tried to cry, to react “accordingly to expectations,” to act the way one is supposed to when in the face of tragedy. But I couldn’t and thus ended up playing a role that lasted three years. Such a reaction scared me and scarred me for I came to the conclusion that I was inhumane and did not love my father. I wondered what was wrong with my emotional apparatus. It wasn’t until I spoke to a friend who had gone through a similar experience that I knew that I wasn’t alone in feeling that unfeeling

²¹ He’s not wounded, they killed him!

way. I was etherized, in a dream where I saw myself from afar and could not connect with my body or my reality. I woke up from this narcotic state a year or so ago. I now react how the others already reacted, and I really, truly cry acid tears everyday, when the others have none left in their reservoirs. That dawn I went to bed exhausted, wanting to wake as if from a nightmare. Nobody else slept except for me.

The following weeks consisted of people going in and out of the house, food everywhere, and no parking on our street. Our tiny tree house was jam packed with new and familiar faces. I still don't know how mom survived it all. The human being is a marvelous creature, capable of immediate adaptation. Having never done something or gone through an experience people are capable of instinctively knowing how to go about their new lives. My mother was the perfect widow, she mastered the role, my brothers and sister also satisfied the public expectations, all except for me. I did not play the prescribed role, in fact I didn't even think of myself as the half orphaned "child" with no money and no secure future. I was simply *the other*.

Relatives believed I simply didn't care as much as my siblings because I was the baby and consequently knew dad for less time. Now I know that the ones who tend to react like I did are the ones most severely hurt because the pain is so much that it bottles up to then, eventually, explode. The day of the funeral Ana and I had to bathe, dress and fix mom's hair up. We went to the town's cathedral and there, in a full, standing-room only spectacle a mass for dad was held. There was no casket, no ash box, no flowers, nothing, only a limbed ocean. The ceremony was followed by a reasonable facsimile of an autograph signing line. Hundreds of faces came to grab us, kiss us, and slobber on us. Some even gave condolences to the wrong sibling. It became a torture that lasted an eternity, I wanted to get mom out of there, and we did

eventually after the last kiss had been blown and the last hug had been given. Today I try to remember the faces, but only heavy swirls of color come to mind.

Never again, I never saw him again. My aunt identified his body. I wonder how he looked. I never dare ask her. She probably lives haunted by her only brother's deathly image. Was he disfigured? Was he covered in blood? Was he recognizable? I will never know and don't want to, although this doesn't mean that I don't see these pictures in my mind when I least expect it. It's better to imagine him as he was. And even if I occasionally picture his body on a cold, flat metal bed with a tag on his toe, I still see him intact. After all, how does a man with a broken neck look like? In life, especially at its conclusion there is no escaping morbidity.

Something that I had no trouble picturing were the facts behind his death, thus, I will proceed as would a lawyer conducting a case, in his honor. He had left his office to go to his usual mooring, a gas station with an adjacent small bar owned by a man called el Gallego. He went there every weekday and every weekday mom hated it. She could not understand the reason why he had to do such a thing instead of coming home to her. But deep down she did not fool herself; he was a man of the world and thus not for us alone to keep. For many years the song remained the same: mother getting upset because he wasn't like other husbands and at the same time thankful precisely for that reason. At times she would dress up and leave the house to surprise him at his local spot. He was always there with no hidden agenda, simply having some beers and chitchatting. He never got upset with mom's sudden *rendez vous*; he embraced her and ordered her favorite beer. She never found what, perhaps, she expected or feared: her Mayito with another woman. This was her relief but also her torment, since she didn't have a concrete reason to argue about his daily outings.

He had a routine, a routine that was never broken. The one time he did, he broke it for good.

Dad was at Gallego's with the usual crowd, doing the usual thing when a friend shows up to invite them to a UBS gathering at the Mayagüez Resort. I'll never know why, but he agreed and left with Wilson along with another friend, Winston. I have no idea what time it was but, considering that he accepted the invitation thinking he would make it home at the usual hour, it must have been around six or seven o'clock. He leaves in a Ford pickup F-150, Winston at the wheel. They arrive at the party, many people see him, speak to him. He is alive.

Time passed; maybe they left the Resort at nine to return to Gallego's to go get his car. The drive was about three minutes long, but in that interval he managed to disappear. They had to drive through an "only-lane" to cross PR 2 perpendicularly, by the Mar y Sol housing project, right in front of the Castillo Condo, to head towards the former tuna factories. As they crossed a twenty-foot distance, a Nissan Pathfinder found its way onto the F-150. A hefty mobile one would think, was cut in half. The Pathfinder hit the front row passenger, sending him in flight more than fifteen feet in the air only to land face down on the pavement belittled as road kill, in front of a bus stop; this was dad. He broke his neck and died in the act. I wonder if he had time to scream at Winston when he saw that piece of tin heading straight toward him. He was a very cautious driver, he always gave me pointers to avoid accidents, and he hated reckless drivers. Maybe he never saw the car for there was a huge bush obstructing the view. Today, the bush is no longer there. Catastrophes must take place in order for humans to become cautious.

The back passenger, Wilson, was also thrown out of the car, but did not die instantly; he died in the ambulance after calling his wife. The driver, Winston, lives:

he has no recollection of the events and was in a comma for months. I have never seen this man, nor do I want to see him. Mother sees him often, but does not even look at him. In her mind he is guilty for dad's and Wilson's death; the lawyer in charge of the case also blames him. In the trial he offered very shady testimony, going back and forth with contradictory and misleading information.

The night of the accident was also the night of the biggest lack of police reliability. People in high places always get the upper hand. Nanette, the nineteen-year old college girl who killed two men (while driving over the speed limit while speaking to her boyfriend on the cell phone and after having drunk a few whiskeys), came out innocent. We will never know whose light was red and whose was green, but this information is legally factual. She now has a baby, she got pregnant during the trial, and now lives a "normal," affluent, quiet life, hopefully with two dead men in her chest.

I have also never met her, nor do I want to either. Winston and Nanette represent Satan incarnate for me and I don't know what I'm capable of doing if I meet either one face to face. All I can say is that I hope they never forget about what they did and what they went through; I wish them the memory of my dead father everyday. I hope they suffer everyday; that is all that I ask.

Nannette was found not guilty on criminal charges, but guilty on civil charges. I'm not a lawyer like Dad, so I can't really explain the difference. All I know is that Nanette's family paid us one hundred thousand dollars for a human being. It could have been a thirty million check and it still would not do. Can money bring back a man? Money can't buy life; but it can buy freedom. Nanette belongs to the Mueblerías Berríos family, an icon of affluence, and thus connections and power. On the night of the accident, it was certainly no accident that all the blood tests were

mixed up, the bodies were not lifted by the D.A. until many hours later and the exact time of death is unknown. For less than these occurrences, another trial would have been needed for police incompetence.

In the case of my father, it's ironic how a man who devoted his life to solving unjust crimes ended up dying a mysterious, unjustly, unsolved death. It is even more ironic that he died in a car crash, even though he was the most judicious driver in the world.

After the accident, our first loss, and the trial, our second loss, began our journey to the past, hoping to gain something this time. We all started replaying our mental tapes of conversations with dad and realized that it seemed as if he knew he was going to die.

It first started with my brother Neno. He was having a conversation with dad that had to do with his frustration with the life he was living. He hated what he did, he was "cracking up," he would say. He had become embittered, so much so that it was depressing to be around him. All this he said to a man whose positivism towards life and his willingness to live was exemplary. My brother was in a bottomless pit from where there was no way out. At the end of their talk father was so disillusioned with Neno that he ultimately told him: "Está bien. ¿Por qué no vas a la tienda de la esquina, tú sabes de balas, y compras unas, yo te presto la pistola y te pegas un tiro?"²² This he said with serious determination combined with a slight pause after each word. This is how he spoke when he was utterly upset. Mario grew silent and awkward; he saw something in dad's eyes that would never leave him. These were the last words dad ever said to him. Neno still cries over this since now he knows that he was complaining like a spoiled brat, but was too self-absorbed and selfish to take

²² Fine. Why don't you go to the store in the corner, you know about bullets, buy a couple. I'll lend you the gun, and you shoot yourself?

notice of the perspective dad was trying to show him. Dad ultimately proved his point on the banalities of life when faced against death, but in practice.

My mother had her own recollections. She had already survived cancer and thus thought that the first one to die was going to be her. She was ready, she always told us, and she had accepted her fate. One rainy Saturday afternoon as mom and dad drove around while stopping at small bars to have beers, get some food and eventually stare at the ocean, always together, mom spoke of the future. She discussed how she was unable to do even the simplest thing such as pump gas in her car. Dad laughed and told her:

--“Magda, tú no puedes ser así, tú tienes que aprender a poder hacer las cosas sola porque cuando yo no esté...”²³

Mom didn't let him finish:

--“¡Qué va a ser, si quien se va morir primero soy yo que tengo cáncer!”²⁴

He once again chuckled:

--“No, Magda, tú vas a llegar a bien vieja como tu mamá y tu abuela; yo me voy primero.”²⁵

He was right; he did leave first, a week later exactly. Mom always remembers this with such strong emotions; she believes he knew his death was approaching and so do I. Months before, mom had crashed her car against a light pole in front of a bank on her way back from her sister's home. She had drunk so much she didn't remember the crash. My brothers and father were so mad that they couldn't speak to mother, and neither could my aunt. After mom's accident, dad was determined to find

²³ You can't be like that Magda. You must learn to do things on your own for when I'm gone.

²⁴ Nonsense! I'll die first because I have cancer.

²⁵ No Magda, you will grow very old, like your mother and grandmother; I'm going first.

out what she had crashed the car into. Being the good detective that he was, he examined the car, and the paint that had rubbed on it; he traced her steps and found the pole in front of the bank. Some days later, driving around in my wagon – the other car was totaled – father parked in front of the scene and asked her if she remembered anything. Her mind cleared up and she started crying.

--“Ay Mayitoo; yo voy a pagar lo de la guagua.”²⁶

--“Qué va ser nena, yo lo pago, total, eso es lata y no vale ná, tu vida sí.

Inclusive, mientras buscaba con qué le habías dado sentí algo bien raro, de cómo sería si te hubieras muerto tú o alguno de nosotros, me entró una sensación bien rara.”²⁷

Somehow he felt it coming...

My own recollections are the ones that haunt me the most. Before his death I had become sort of a Paris Hilton-Britney Spears hybrid partygoer. I went to bed late, woke up late and was always out. Different guy friends dropped me off every time I went out. All this troubled my dad; after all I was his little girl. One day I was taking a shower when I heard the door silently open. (We only had one bathroom so we were all accustomed to sharing it.) He goes in to trim his mustache to go out and he asks me:

--“¿A qué hora llegaste anoche?”²⁸

--“Como a las tres y media.”²⁹ I answered, shivering behind the curtain while making all sorts of terrified faces. I was living la “vida loca.”

--“Eso está muy tarde Beba; vas a ser sansionada.”³⁰

²⁶ Oh Mayitoo, I'll pay for the car.

²⁷ Don't be silly; I'll pay for it. Besides, it's only worthless tin as opposed to you. In fact, as I searched for the crash site a strange feeling came over me of how I would have felt if you had died.

²⁸ At what time did you come in last night?

²⁹ At about three thirty

These were his last words to me. And so he left without a goodbye except for those final bitter moments we all shared with him. He left as Chiqui did, without a warning, on the same day of the same month. On the night of his departure mother screamed at the top her lungs:

--“Chiqui se lo llevó, Chiqui se lo llevó!”³¹

His best friend had taken him.

Coulda, shoulda, woulda: these modals drive me insane for that’s all we think about. If he would’ve declined the invitation, he should’ve gone to the party in his car, if I could’ve called him earlier; that’s the one that hurts me the most.

I am only twenty-five, but feel fifty-five. Life is too short: one can become so old so fast. I realize that these are my years of youth and that I must spend them being young. I try, but with a shadow that even at midday under the Caribbean sun, is always visible.

On that night dad and I took detours that distanced us from our usual paths, but he never arrived home; he went far, *lejos de la casa y el árbol*.

*Ahora me parece
que hubiera vivido
un caudal de siglos
por viejos caminos.*

*No hay nada aquí:
sólo unos días que se aprestan a pasar,
sólo una tarde en que se puede respirar
un diminuto instante inmenso en el vivir.*

³⁰ That’s awfully late Beba; you will be sanctioned.

³¹ Chiqui took him from me!

Después mirar la realidad y nada más.

*Y nada más.*³²

(Rodríguez 185)

³² It now seems/ as though I've lived/ countless centuries/treading old roads./There is nothing here:/ just passing days,/an afternoon to breath in/ a tiny instant full of life./ Then just face reality and nothing more./ And nothing more.

Chapter V

Conclusion and Afterword

The devaluing of one's voice for a canonical other, this is what students are regularly trained to do in the field of academic writing. All ideas must be supported by somebody else's words in order for the student's words to have value and legitimacy. This results in the student losing his or her voice, though not literally. Students become orphans, not knowing who they are, or who to turn to, because of what they have been taught all along in high school and college, which is to never express what they think unless someone with authority has written it before. Mine is not an attempt to eradicate research from the field of writing, since such an endeavor is always necessary, but rather to help the student become author and subject. I was always afraid to solely write what I thought, unless I was in a creative writing course. There had to be numerous amounts of quotes, ellipses, strangers' names, and a works cited page in order for my essay or paper to be considered acceptable. If there was a paragraph without a name, without an "according to," I was penalized for lacking sufficient sources to sustain my claims. At the end of my four years in college I had no idea who I was in terms of my writing, since all along I had only written pieces based on others' pieces using others' ideas about those pieces. In a nutshell, I had no idea about how my first-person writing really looked like or what it really was. I knew I was good at comparing, persuading and analyzing, but I did not know if I was any good at being what I had fervently studied for so many years, which were authors and their texts. I wanted to know if I was a good writer, a good author: a good storyteller. I wondered if I had learned to personify those which I had read and admired so much during those restless nights of literary reading.

I found out I had late in my years as a master's student, when I finally took the chance to conjure up a thesis that would enable me to become the writer I never thought I had in me. I had a style, but I had been silent; I had no authentic first-person voice. With my thesis came a sense of empowerment where my words were the focus, where there was not an *Other*, only me. I found that voice which had been absent for all these years not because it was not there, but because it finally had a niche to set roots in and sprout out for all to see. I owed no explanations, needed no contextualization, and required no sources other than my memory and detective-esque impulse. The primary text is my text, while the secondary sources support my work. I turned the tables; I finally feel like those I had read and studied as a literature major. I have been able to become the creator of a text that has no prior basis; there was blank space before and after my letter mass. I can finally say this is truly my work.

Having finished my graduate program with the aforementioned endeavor, writing a memoir dedicated to my father, was an unexpected finale for a Master's degree in English Education. At first I was uneasy with my decision since it had nothing to do to with what I had devoted my last two years of study. But after having researched into the pedagogical value of writing creatively I now know that my thesis project is strongly related to my master's degree in the teaching of English.

I was also unsure of my project due to public opinion. Many of my peers have regarded my thesis project as useless, too easy, and disjointed from the program. I bore witness to their disdainful opinions and had to stand thus, doubly firm in my decision to carry on with the memoir project. In addition to these struggles, I was breaking new ground, which put even more pressure on my work and me. No other student had previously done this in the department, so when the time came to write my proposal I was bombarded with oppositions. If I were to proceed with such a task

I had to write up a stronger proposal than anyone else. I did all of this out of might, respect for my father and because I am a Taurus: stubborn and relentless.

And so I wrote my first memoir at the end of my master's program. It served many purposes, but the most important one is that it gave me closure. As cliché as it may sound, I was able to move on. Before the memoir, I could not re-tell or re-think the events that took place on the night of my Dad's death. They came to me against my will, but when they did, I shut them off. With the thesis project, I had to face them head on at an even harsher degree since I had to narrate them in full view. As I wrote for many nights, at different stages of my grief, I thought I was not going to be able to do it. A sentence felt like a page. I felt drained, exhausted, naked, desperately despaired. When I arrived at the sixth chapter I knew I could go no further. I had finished my memoir, for the time being. I now know that I will continue writing my life story since there is much more to tell and reminisce about.

Another aspect I gained from this experience was treating my writing as a *text*. During the correction process I had to become the editor of my own written feelings and impressions. Having to mechanically fix sentences that had to do with images such as my father's corpse helped me see myself as a stronger writer, for I had to set aside feelings from writing conventions. I learned how to separate the personal from the professional and that is the most valuable experience I gained from writing a memoir as a master's thesis. Many students do not develop this ability and are therefore behind in their development as professionals. They turn out to be too personal when it comes to their work and are unable to break their work away from their personae. Their *artistic ego* gets in the way of critique, thus resulting in their work becoming stunted, without room for improvement.

Finally I experienced what is like to write a piece and have it re-worded, altered, and edited to the point where you fear the loss of personal style and must therefore draw a line so the editing does not go too far. Consequently, I have a sense of what it would be like if I sent my work to a publishing company.

In summary, I feel more like a writer, not because I wrote something (people do this all the time), but because I went through the closest thing there is to writing for an audience other than myself.

This meditation may seem a tad subversive, and it probably is. However, it can serve other purposes in addition to fulfilling what the American novelist Mary Gordon calls the “artistic ego” (quoted in Teleky 210). Creative writing can ultimately lead to transformation, a central objective of all educational endeavors.

Writing courses are known to be able to teach students the general strategies used by literary writers, and are thus considered the standard in effective writing instruction. But where do creative writing classes stand? The goal of a writing course teacher is to show models of what makes formulaic “good writing” and encourage students to follow these examples. Nevertheless, the task of a creative writing instructor goes beyond this. According to Richard Teleky, the creative writing teacher has the responsibility to “help students connect to silence as a place for thought and for the tensions that can produce art” (214). Composing a creative work can break the silence barrier, leading towards the discovery of voice, something that academia tends to shun in English classes in many a university. In addition to transformation, creative writing also leads to more reading since generally better writing comes from more reading. Teleky also argues that more writing leads to more writing, ultimately ending in the creation of a work of fiction. In other words, more reading leads to more writing and more writing leads to even more writing. Teleky then explains that this

daisy chain writing, specifically in the realm of autobiography, can be the foundation for great fictional writing. He states:

To suggest that students explore the autobiographical impulse is not to advocate treating fiction as artfully disguised autobiography, nor is it to urge students to write in search of an identity. But fiction has to begin somewhere, in order for a writer to create a world. (216)

The creation of *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* can thus be the portal into the creation of a work of fiction. Thus writing a memoir, or autobiography can expand or ignite an individual's writing career. As Salman Rushdie notes, when writing his novel *Midnight's Children* he began the work as an autobiography but then let the characters grow by distancing them from his real family's personas. For him "one of the discoveries of the book was the importance of escaping from autobiography" (quoted in Teleky 216). This may appear contradictory in the conclusion of a thesis based on a memoir project, but what is important here is the role autobiography can play as a vehicle for further writing. Information such as this is not very popular, thus explaining perhaps creative writing's murky reputation.

Therefore, writing a thesis based on memoir can benefit the English Education community for it may help to reestablish creative writing's waning academic reputation. Many articles discuss how this field used to be valued and considered relevant on its own. However, its primordial use is precisely what led creative writing to its downfall as seen today in almost every English department across the United States, regardless of the countless programs in many campuses. Patrick Bizarro explains that "creative writing was treated in most English departments as a component of or an approach to literary study" (296). In order to release creative writing from the shackles of marginality, Bizzaro states that relevant epistemological

differences must be established as a means to distinguish such field from other subjects in English such as theory and multicultural literatures so it is not treated as yet another literary approach, but rather as a field on its own.

Bizarro thus centers his essay in the differentiation between creative writers as teachers and English teachers. He believes that teachers of creative writing, being writers in the first place, have many tricks in the bag that regular English teachers may lack, and thus can aid in the development of a more well-rounded student. He writes: “research methods employed by creative writers are different from those used by scholars” (297). He does not suggest that one set of methods has to rule out the other one, but proposes a communion between the two in order to instruct at a higher level. Bizarro enumerates six traits pertinent to the creative writing teacher that sets us apart from other English teachers and may enable us to lend an extra push in turning pupils into better-trained ones. The first trait is that creative writers are readers, we read as writers and thus can teach students to read as both readers and writers. Second, creative writers understand people; we are observers and can teach interviewing in a way others may not. According to Susan Rose finding one’s voice through creative tasks such as memoir permits one to become a better interviewer. We possess what Kelly Cherry calls “positive capability” (quoted in Bizarro 302), which is “the willingness and ability to use one’s own experience in the formation of one’s characters” (302). Third, creative writers understand the importance of history and regard writing style and content as perhaps a product of setting. Fourth, we firmly believe in the writing process since “[A]s writers, we are better suited to reading, observing, and interrogating writing instruction than most early composition theorists were to study composing methods and instruction, trained as they were as literary scholars” (303). Rose points out that being the creators of stories, creative writers are

thus more adept in being “effective listeners, recorders, and interpreters of others’ stories” (5). Fifth, we understand audience as writers who want to please their readers, as writers who want to grab attention in more extraordinary ways. And sixth, creative writers are “adept at employing various genres” (303). Us teachers can share with our students the skill that goes into insightful description that can ultimately lead to genre. In addition, we are “increasingly aware of the role of readers in the making of meaning in texts” (303). In summary, I, as a creative writing teacher can commune with the English teacher and thus teach students the many methods and phases of writing. Ruth Ray concludes that “these skills render understandings that are qualitative, hypothesis-generating, inductive, contextualized and naturalistic” (quoted in Bizarro 303).

Another article by Art Young focuses on the use of creative writing as a rebel yell against an antiquated curriculum. He coined the term W.A.C. or Writing Against the Curriculum and defines it as “promoting active learning strategies for students and interactive pedagogy for teachers while introducing what writing teachers knew to the rest of the campus” (473). These are classes with teachers who believe in students’ ability to create, to be pioneers of their writing instead of falling prey to the “touchy-feely curriculum” (Young 473), which so many students dislike due to its narrowness of possibilities. Many times students end up being good potential editors, excellent grammarians, but are stunted at the creative level. They may know the mechanics but do not have a command over the content, which is the marrow of writing. In Young’s words, “there are purposes for writing in which correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar are not essential” (473). But sadly, most students are taught to believe that correct spelling is what makes good writing. Creative writing can change students’ outlook on the matter by presenting them with scenarios that get them to think out of

the box by providing “writing tasks that are unpredictable – tasks that keep writers off balance, that shut off the automatic pilot” (Young 475).

In addition to becoming subjects of their own writing, creative writing tasks can also aid in more effective learning. Students that create an original work as a response to a taught subject are more likely to internalize and truly learn the material since they had to dive into it in order to produce a piece of writing. Young argues:

Writers take the unfamiliar knowledge they are learning in the class and attempt to integrate it into the familiar – to integrate the new knowledge into what they already know – and thereby assimilate the new, or enrich it, or critique it. (475)

Students also reinforce and/or cultivate critical thinking skills. Creative writing breaks the “automatic pilot” habit and provides students with fresh tasks where an element of surprise to get them thinking in unforeseen ways prepares them for life’s Pandora-like antics. Hence creative writing leads to what Young calls “creative thinking” (476) in order to solve problems, be it school related or life related, since it sets the brain in motion and provides it with mental exercise for when the time comes to act in a heartbeat.

James Britton’s *Language and Learning* highlights another strong point regarding the pedagogical use of creative writing. He states that writing creatively grants the chance for students to assume what he calls the “spectator role.” What this means is that this role allows students to “free their imaginations in order to reflect on experience and to engage language where meaning is shaped and re-shaped by an active but disinterested mind” (quoted in Young 476). By disinterested he means a student whose aim does not include pleasing the teacher or getting an “A” in the class.

Finally, Young touches upon a series of goals that may be achieved through the use of creative writing. He believes that students will experience literature as producers as well as consumers, they will be more aware of the possibilities of language, they will be able to express their voice and/or discover it, they will behave as writers serious about their writing, and they will be able to astound themselves, each other, as well as the teacher. Susan Rose puts it best when she reflects that a creative writer exploits many areas to the point where he or she crosses interdisciplinary fields. They take roles as “outsiderinsider, historian-listener, participant-observer, minority-majority, student-teacher, apprentice-mentor” (22).

I concur with all of these experts’ opinions, but I particularly sympathize with Young since his proposal is the most revolutionary. He is replacing academically oriented assignments in response to literary works, with students’ literary works in response to the created works under study. In this manner students will develop a stronger and deeper appreciation for written works because they would know first-hand what goes into writing and would learn to regard it as a very complex, meditative and skillful task. As Young points out, in this model students experience literature as producers to then fully appreciate it as consumers. You love something intensely when you know what went into it; the same goes for writing. If a student creatively partakes in and witnesses the manufacturing of writing, he or she will admire the end product more fervently. Writing *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* changed my view on other writers’ pieces. I may not like their technique, their descriptions, their style, but I *respect* their craft.

One mostly learns by doing, by living, by experiencing, and what better way is there for students to learn writing than to get them writing? Many writing courses that use literature as a base for composition teach the theory behind the writing -- how to

write about literature -- but it mostly stays there. Even if the students write papers on a literary work, they write *about* it thus not going through the experience of actually becoming the creator of a literary text. Being the author of a literary text such as *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* created an awareness I did not have for literature. I now understand at a deeper level what it is to read a piece of writing because I went through the experience. In short, I do not treat a text as a given or take it for granted; I appreciate and respect it at a higher level, something I did not see when I only wrote *about* and *in response to* literature.

My previous argument should not be read as a dismissal of my literary and theoretical training. I realize that the historical and theoretical debates about memoir writing are reflected in *my* memoir as well. Having read so much on the matter aided me in using the techniques that ought to be present in a text for it to be considered a memoir, which are addressed and discussed in Chapter I. The main components that make up memoirs are: the encountering of the self or selves through the act of composition, the development of a connection between the writer and the reader, and finally, the disposition to narrate the mind's world.

When I finished *Lejos de la casa y el árbol* I thought I had not gone through a change process at all. I felt like I had not done anything for myself, unaware that the results were there. I did not find a new self, but unearthed two previously concealed ones. I discovered María-the-writer and María-the-theorist. I found the writer and the theorist in me, which were selves I did not know I had. I found the writer because, even if I had been writing for many years, I had never been an author and subject. I discovered the theorist because in “bashing” theory I became a theorist myself, theorizing on the *why* I sometimes dislike theory, as well as through the creation of

the new definition for memoir. I thus discovered that I had joined the group that I had been trying to beat all along.

The second characteristic of what makes up a memoir is for the writer to establish a bond, a connection, a sense of empathy between the author and the reader. I knew I had a pre-supposed audience, my thesis committee, but I overlooked their reading tastes and expectations in the first drafts. As I began to edit the memoir, I took into account that I was writing for a highly educated audience, and thus changed my wording significantly. However, while writing my memoir I was logically unable to notice if I was achieving such an end, since no one, other than myself, was reading my work during the process. When I finished the first chapter I sent it to my advisor for her to read it. I will never forget the words she uttered in response to my writing: “You blew me away! Keep doing what you’re doing.” I heard what I needed to hear to know that I was connecting to the reader through my words. As I continued writing I began showing it to my other committee members and they expressed similar opinions in terms of being transported and empathizing with me, the author; I established the connection.

In terms of exploiting the notion of narration as the exteriorization of the mind’s world, I thought this to be the hardest memoir objective to accomplish. The reason why I believe this is due to the undeniable fact that certain things are simply indescribable and untranslatable. But, one of the only ways for us to transmit memories to others is through the use of often-vague words that, put together, tell a story, a narrative. In many instances I thought I was not hitting the mark with my words and became upset, frustrated, at times desperate that my feelings were being lost in translation. I felt like the character of the vampire Louis in Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* when in resignation he explains to the boy: “How pathetic it is to

describe these things which can't truly be described" (20). But as I witnessed my readers' reactions, I grew confident that regardless of these limits, my feelings were getting across and creating an effect and the aforementioned connection. Perhaps I attained such a goal through the emphasis of recapturing emotion, which as stated in chapter III, is cast in stone and is where memoir's main truth lies. I again quote Louis: "That what he felt in one time in one spot continues. The moon that rose over New Orleans then still rises... The feeling, at least here... and there... it remains the same" (Rice 41).

This last element of memoir is what brings me to the last remark presented also in Chapter III, which is the definition of memoir. I finally defined the genre as *the retelling of one's life to discover the self or selves through the necessary use of artifice, skill, and determination with a shape-shifting, nomadic narrative entity as its teller, whose ultimate purpose is the conveyance of truth*. My memoir, *Lejos de la casa y el árbol*, complies with all the characteristics stated in the definition. I needed artifice and skill to tell a story that would entertain and attract readers other than myself. I required determination: without it, I would have never started, much less finished, such an uphill project. I became a shape-shifting nomadic narrative entity since I had to travel through time and visit places and scenes, which are no longer available, both at the symbolic and literal level. I took on many versions of myself at diverse stages of my life – the youngest daughter, the embittered civilian, the student, the creative writing teacher -- with the aim to attain an attempt at truth, a truth that is mostly grounded on sentiments. In light of this, the only revision that I would, at this point, make to my necessarily temporary definition of the memoir is that truth can only be attempted, but it can never be truly *recaptured*.

Afterword

To have written this down reminds me of what my life is like today, for it is nothing like what I ever imagined it would become. I must always remember the reason for its outcome since, otherwise, what I live today is unimaginable. Perhaps, it is the only possible path to justify my existence; he had to leave in order for us to exist in this other realm we call now.

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