UNABLE TO REMEMBER BUT UNWILLING TO FORGET: 
COGNITION, PERCEPTION, AND MEMORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MEMOIR

A dissertation presented
by
Genie Nicole Giaimo

to
The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the field of
English Literature

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
February 2014
UNABLE TO REMEMBER BUT UNWILLING TO FORGET: COGNITION, PERCEPTION AND MEMORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MEMOIR

by

Genie Nicole Giaimo

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of Northeastern University, February, 2014
Abstract

Life narrative is a burgeoning area of interest, as the term “age of memoir” suggests (Eakin 1). At the same time, the fact of recent memoir scandals signals that it is also a contested genre. Defining the genre has preoccupied critics for decades, and terms such as “autofiction,” “autofictography,” and “autography” try to account for the strange work that the genre does at the site of both fiction and non-fiction. This project is part of an emerging critical approach that places neuroscience and cognitive research in conversation with literary criticism. I examine the memoirs of Mira Bartók, June Jordan, Alison Bechdel, Art Spiegelman, and Tobias Wolff within the context of the cognitive turn in literature, arguing that contemporary American memoirists purposefully blend images and text to challenge the referential status of memory and its relationship to personal experiences. Often, they upend the conventions that we associate with life narrative, such as verifiability and linear chronology, by drawing upon neurological discoveries of fault and bias in memory and perception systems. These memoirs are part of the rise in “neuro” texts that seek out and press upon perceptual and mnemonic inconsistencies in our configurations of the world. I argue that illuminating—through close-reading and narrative analysis—the neurological processes underpinning the construction and production of life narrative changes how readers and critics understand the genre’s structure and function.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The acknowledgments page is a document preoccupied with memorializing. I read these types of commemoration with gusto. Finally, I get to engage in this memory process—to thank those colleagues and mentors who have provided excellent feedback and line edits. Lori Lefkovitz, thank you for believing in my ideas and my scholarly process from the first day that I walked into your office. You have shown me that literary criticism is a social process made more generative by deep and consistent interaction and revision. Were it not for your steadfast support and guidance, I wouldn’t be the scholar (or the writer) that I am today. John Eakin, thank you for responding to my “cold” email and for agreeing to be my outside reader. Your advice has consistently pushed me beyond the dissertation process. Because of you, I am trying to include more “Giaimo” in my work. Kimberly Juanita Brown, thank you for your wit and your elegance. You have helped me to enjoy all things visual. And Stuart Peterfreund, thank you for your comprehensive line edits and your willingness to let me run with my ideas.

Harvard was an institutional home away from home for this project. The lively seminars put on by Elaine Scarry and the folks at the Cognitive Theory and the Arts seminar introduced me to many influential scholars and scientists including Randy Buckner, whose work on the Default Network profoundly shaped chapter five. Angela Ards was generous to sit down with me to discuss my second chapter, on June Jordan, and to help set me up in the Jordan archives at Radcliffe. The sensing the body workshop at Harvard—sponsored by the Anthropology department—and in particular Julia Yezbick and Andy McDowell offered their time and space to workshop my prospectus.
For the third time (there will never be enough gratitude on my part), thank you to my mentors at Clark University, Betsy Huang, Jay Elliott, and SunHee Kim Gertz. Thank you, especially, for inviting me to present my first and second chapters in the fall of 2011 and 2012. Your professional guidance and friendship sustains me.

Of course this project would not have been completed so quickly or so effectively had it not been for the support of friends and family. Michael Gravina, I love you. Our shared passion for all things cognitive helped give rise to this project’s many complicated and novel arguments. Nate Hogan thanks for sympathetically listening to me while I spun my proverbial wheels and for inserting levity into many academic conversations. Katherine O’Brien thanks for always asking the right questions, for pushing the creative limits of my PowerPoint presentations, and for attending far too many humanities conferences on my behalf. Silvia Gosnell, thank you for being you. To mom, dad, and gram—you have helped me continue to “think the great thoughts”—your love and support have made me into the person I am today.

To all the lovely people at Northeastern who supported me, motivated me, and encouraged me, but in particular Duyen Nguyen, Emily Artiano, Jenna Scuito, Meg Tarquinio, Chris Myers, and Kate Templeton—we have grown together into a fine cohort! Melissa Daigle Briggs, Cheryl Delaney, Linda Collins, and Jean Duddy—NU English wouldn’t run without your tireless efforts and un-ending patience! And a special thank you to Professor Laura Green and Professor Elizabeth Maddock Dillon for their academic support and guidance.

This project is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Winston Napier. You pressed on the limits of my tenacity and made me into a fine scholar. Thank you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 4

Table of Contents 6

Introduction 8

- The Elusiveness of Autobiographic Memory
- Life Writing Studies and Cognitive Neuroscience
- A Roadmap of Memory and the Brain
- “Neuro” Life Narrative

Chapter 1 The Subterranean World of Memory: Mira Bartók’s Struggle for Articulation 44

- Brain Trauma and Mnemonics-Based Narrative
- Of Icons and Illuminations: The Authority and Malfuction of Bartók’s Images
- The Death of Memory? Technology’s Interface with Literacy and Knowledge
- “A Baby of the War”: The Collapse of Cultural Memory and Personal Memory
- Towards a Transdisciplinary Third Culture

Chapter 2 “Picturing It”: Visual Memory In June Jordan’s *Soldier* 93

- “Authenticating” June Jordan
- The Politics of Seeing
- Childhood Violence and Identity Confusion
- Poetic and Historical Hauntings
- Archival and Autobiographic Longings

Chapter 3 Recursive Moves: Memory Bias and Family History in *Fun Home* 145

- The Collapse of the Archive: Ontological Crisis in Bechdel’s Comics
- Confabulations and Biases: The Necessity of “Memory Sins”
- Steadying Frames of Reference
- Writing the Self into Cultural Legacies
- Structural Complexity in Graphic and Autobiographic Narratives

Chapter 4 Where Time and Memory Collide: *Maus* and the Neuroscience of Comics 192
Chapter 5 “Out of Dreams and Memories”: Self-Fashioning in Wolff’s This Boy’s Life

Breaking the Confessional Frame
Adaptive Functions of Episodic Simulation in Life Narrative
Naziphilia and Anti-Semitism
Authenticity in the Age of Memoir

Chapter 6 Refuting Folk Conceptualizations of Memory in Cultural Production

Bibliography
INTRODUCTION: The Elusiveness of Autobiographic Memory

I visualize memory as Russian nesting dolls. Each memory contains another one inside of it, moving down to the smallest molecules and cells of meaning that shape our identities. Memory provides us with origins and legacies, and guides the way we think and talk about ourselves. The link between memory and life narrative is at once crucial and tenuous; this became apparent to me while on a bus from Cambridge to Boston. On the side of a Whole Foods grocery bag I read: “Every meal has a story. Celebrate yours.” Life narratives, I realized, are all around us. We tell them to our family, our friends, our lovers, our colleagues, to people we meet on the train; we read about them in magazines, newspapers, books, and online; we listen to them on the radio, the television, in films, and in songs. The things that we consume, such as clothing, coffee, and produce, have their own life narratives. Even our meals have origin stories that stores such as Whole Foods command us to celebrate.

The ubiquity of life narratives is not only evident in popular culture and in our labor markets; it is also present in the field of literary studies as the 2011 MLA Presidential theme, “Narrating Lives” indicates. This project begins with the assumption that thinking, telling, and hearing life narrative is not only crucial to our development of identity and to shaping our sense of the world; it is as Paul John Eakin suggests, an “imperative,” embedded within us at many levels: the bodily, the psychological, the chemical, the existential (86). This imperative is hardwired into our brain physiology and serves an adaptive function; it fosters long-term planning, imagining the future and setting goals. In its most idealized forms, it helps us learn from our mistakes, consider our present desires, and fit them into an imagined schema for the
future. In short, life narrative and memory help us to survive and thrive in the world. Taking inspiration from the research of contemporary scholars, this project argues that cognitive science and neuroscience are crucial methodological tools that can illuminate the processes underpinning the construction and production of life narrative and its adaptive qualities.¹

To demonstrate what I mean by the processes underpinning the construction and production of life narrative, I’d like to return to the memory where I realized that life narrative is crucial to our meaning-making process. Upon further reflection, I realize that my mind has changed and consolidated many of the details of the memory—from the Whole Foods bag, and the quote that I jotted down on a note pad, to the implications that I drew from the experience. I am now convinced that I was not on a bus but on a train. Perhaps half a year’s time has elapsed since this train ride, yet many of the details of the memory have changed, morphed, twisted, and eluded me. The physiological explanation for the different ways I remembered this experience is found in how the brain accesses and reconsolidates memory with each new recall; it also lies in the information that the brain accesses and the task that prompts the recall. Implicit and explicit memory serve different tasks: the former occurs spontaneously and unconsciously; it is often procedural memory—skills we use everyday, often below the level of conscious awareness, such as tying a shoelace—writing, for a literary critic, has become part of procedural memory because it is hopefully done frequently enough to be almost automatic (Kandel 132). When I first recalled this experience I was guided by an implicit memory task, that of writing, and so the details of the memory were shaped by the procedural task of writing a narrative. Explicit memory is the conscious recall of information or an experience. The second time I recalled this memory, it was
to serve the task of inspecting my initial memory within the context of my larger project. At this moment, I realized the two avenues for approaching the same memory differed substantially from one another, perhaps because the task that I wanted to accomplish by remembering was so different. At first, I wanted to write an introduction and so I used the details of my memory to achieve this goal. But when I returned to the memory a second time guided by the task of scrutinizing it, the details of that memory shifted and changed. The two versions of my memory provide examples of the different ways in which the brain can recall the same memory and demonstrates how the structures of narrative take their cues from the cognitive structures of memory; the brain copes with, sometimes exploits, and often consolidates the inaccuracies of memory in order to come to a broader and more integrated meaning concerning the memory. Although some of the details changed between the implicit memory and the explicit memory, the larger implications of the memory were left in tact (that life narrative is important to my research and that this idea seemed to be “following” me, quite literally, around town). Memory is an important, if also inaccurate, component of life narrative and one that, because of its elusiveness, ought to be studied from a physiological vantage point.

In addition to the different types of memory at work each time I write and think about my memory of the bus/train, my visual imagination is also working. I can imagine the layout of the bus and then the train; I can recall the colors of the grocery bags; I can remember that it was sunny and early afternoon and the light filtered into the window as we crossed over the Longfellow Bridge. These visual details are important, if perhaps just as inaccurate, to my memory of the experience. Memory and visuality, however inaccurate or flawed, are deeply
intertwined in the process of identity construction, as the contemporary American life narratives I examine in this project demonstrate. In fact, the tension between inaccuracy and narrating life stories is one that drives the autobiographical impulse writ large: in spite of the cognitive limitations attached to perception and remembering, people still write, tell, and consume life narrative. Uncertainty of knowing partially accounts for the impulse to make sense of one’s memories and experiences: to create a coherent, if particular, biased, or flawed, narrative of the self. In fact, the adaptive qualities of autobiography suggest that the inaccuracies and biases built into the cognitive structures that produce life narrative are a necessary part of human physiology.

This project examines the limitations of the structures underlying cognition and perception in relation to life narrative: what is remembered one way and remembered again differently is more indicative, and more representative, of the subject’s meaning-making process than a wholly formed and unchanging memory. With this tension in mind, I examine contemporary American autobiographical projects created during the last forty years as case studies. The five texts included in this project—Mira Bartók’s *The Memory Palace* (2011) June Jordan’s *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood* (2000) and Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life* (1989) as well as graphic memoirs by Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), and Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1991)—all share similar thematic and formal elements. They all make use of photography, either in actual reproductions of photographs, drawings of photographs, or textual descriptions of otherwise absent photographs. These texts all consider the complex (and often traumatic) influences of family on an individual subject. The authors are all
literate and culturally conversant individuals. And all of these texts grapple with how to make sense out of memories and experiences, often relying on visual details and objects to do so.

It makes sense to place life writing and cognitive neuroscience into conversation because the cognitive functions of memory play a crucial role in the development of the autobiographic subject and text. The rise in neurologically-aware life narrative, in the form of both textual and visual narrative, suggests to me that literary scholars are pushing outside of the boundaries of traditional literary studies in both their methodology and their research focus in order to provide new and perhaps more meaningful interpretations of cultural production. The editors of the interdisciplinary anthology *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*—Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul Matthews, and James McClelland—argue that:

> By drawing on modern neuroscientific memory studies . . . a new scientific vigor can nurture analysis of the arts, anchoring their connection to the material world. Since memory is a detectible, even measurable ingredient in this perspective . . . it provides a reliable basis for linking literature and the allied arts to the basic human condition. (2)

The brain plays a crucial role in shaping our identities, our communicative practices, our view of the world, and, it is no surprise, our art. On a fundamental level, all of the things that we create—sculpture, music, literature—can be traced back to how our brain perceives the world and integrates information. Of the many important cognitive functions that play a role in the creation of art, none is more important than that of memory. Memory links us to a specific moment in time; it is the stuff with which we create a narrative of self and experience in the world. It allows us to integrate the various sensory experiences we encounter into our perceptions, and when, as
the popular neurologist Oliver Sacks points out, memory malfunctions, the self may be left in an
endless repeating feedback loop in which a new self is created and discarded every few seconds.3
Memories form the basis for the construction of our identities and our understanding of the world.
Understanding the processes of the brain—how we think, remember, act, and perceive—are
crucial to understanding the narrative structure of memoir, because these cognitive processes
drive and govern the genre.4

Up until fairly recently, much of the work that has examined memory, particularly in
trauma studies and visual culture, draws upon earlier conceptualizations of memory and identity
put forth in Freudian psychoanalytic theory.5 This project begins, in many ways, where Freud’s
theoretical work ended, having run up against the limitations of early twentieth-century science
and technology. Freud postulated models for memory—including neuronal plasticity, and
different neurons for perception and memory—that neuroscientists would prove correct in the
middle-to-late twentieth century. Due to the lack of knowledge of the brain’s physiology at the
time, however, Freud’s work remained ensconced in an earlier, more limited, model of cognition
and identity (198). Still, he anticipated the importance of neuroscience in the creation of a more
integrated theory of memory: “No psychological theory has yet succeeded in giving a connected
account of the fundamental phenomenon of remembering and forgetting; in fact, the complete
analysis of what can actually be observed has so far scarcely been begun” (134).6 So while my
project briefly addresses Freud’s conceptualizations of memory and the psyche, I will center my
argument on theories of memory and cognition that have emerged over the last forty years. The
Cognitive Revolution revealed a wealth of information on the physiology of the brain—its
neuronal structures, its processes, its regions, its networks, its chemical and genetic makeup—such that how we conceive of memory has been fundamentally altered. I would like to focus on the current theories of memory that have emerged out of these discoveries because they offer a radical departure from Freud’s narrower, and scientifically primitive schema for identity, cognition, and memory.

2. Life Writing Studies and Cognitive Neuroscience

As Sidonie Smith observes, the modern autobiography has been written for centuries. It reaches back to the Enlightenment and to the rise of the rational subject, but even before this moment religious narratives examined a subject’s personal relationship with God (10). Captivity narratives, conversation narratives, frame autobiographies, faux autobiographies, political autobiographies, slave narratives, immigrant narratives, testimonio, and numerous sub-genres of memoir (which have risen to prominence over the past forty years) are just some examples of the types of life narrative that people have written and read for many centuries. Eakin suggests that expectations for the genre—that autobiography offers a truthful rendering of the “facts” of the author’s life—have largely remained the same over the years, although there are notable exceptions to this truth/fiction dichotomy, especially in visual autobiography (35). Graphic memoirs, which have only begun to emerge in full force over the past twenty years, are one notable example of the genre’s recent iterations and one that is most obviously mediated and constructed (Chute 453); however, visuality is an important element in contemporary written life narrative as well. This visual turn in current autobiography, perhaps illuminated most brightly by Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida, suggests a willingness to play with the earlier referential
certainty of the genre and to turn what is knowable about the self, the world, identity, and memory on its head. Important to his project is opening up new ways of understanding visuality as it relates to personal subjectivity and affect, all of these qualities, he suggests, are implicitly bound together for the theorist/viewer, yet somehow subjectivity often gets lost in the shuffle:

Hence I could not accede to that notion which is so convenient when we want to talk history, culture, aesthetics—that notion known as an artist’s style. I felt, by the strength of my ‘investments,’ their disorder, their caprice, their enigma, that Photography is an uncertain art, as would be (were one to attempt to establish such a thing) a science of desirable or detestable bodies. (Barthes 18)

Barthes links the aesthetic and the physical: art and bodies are not clearly delineated in his theoretical work. Barthes also describes how one’s affective response guides the individual’s interpretation of the visual: the visual, paradoxically, creates and subsumes identity: “I saw clearly that I was concerned here with the impulses of an overready subjectivity, inadequate as soon as articulated: I like/I don’t like: we all have our secret chart of tastes, distastes, indifferences, don’t we?” (18) In Camera Lucida, Barthes begins to develop a theoretical language of affective aesthetic thinking that recent cognitive theories of memory and perception can further shape. His project, and the current work being done in cognitive neuroscience, enlivens and complicates our understanding of the work of contemporary autobiographical projects and move critics away from what has been a rather narrow understanding of life writing as a combination of fact and fiction, text and image (Adams xi).
Life narratives produced before the second half of the last century have a complicated relationship to memory. Often displaying a kind of neurotic preoccupation with not being “true to life,” these narratives frequently included notes that reassured readers of the accuracy of the narrative. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* contains inter-chapters that speak back to Mary McCarthy’s memories and refute their truthfulness. McCarthy is acutely aware of the tension between fiction and fact in her writing. In “The Tin Butterfly,” she writes about her tyrannical uncle Myers, but in the inter-chapter, which is italicized, she interjects uncertainty into her narrative, wondering if she “made up” the details of his cruelty (such as framing her for stealing a tin butterfly to justify beating her). Eakin argues that the difference in typeface between McCarthy’s chapters (un-italicized) and inter-chapters (italicized) demonstrates different phases in the autobiographical act. At the cognitive level, however, there are more interesting implications underpinning McCarthy’s structure (11). McCarthy’s suggestion in the inter-chapter that she has “fused two memories” together—one true (she was wrongfully punished for stealing a tin butterfly) and one dramatically imagined (she ends a class writing project with Myers framing her for stealing)—is an example of reconsolidation: memory traces are given new meaning when subsequently recalled. Rather than thinking of the autobiographical act in discrete phases, we might think of it as dialogic: a conversation between two different selves, two different memories. Instead of foreclosing narrative inquiry through partitioning fact and fiction, as McCarthy herself does, we might think of how her text works within the uncertainty of memory and perception to come to the best and most representative narrative of her life.
McCarthy leaves herself few options beyond fact and fiction to conceive her project, which reflects the types of theories surrounding memory and perception in the middle of the last century. Still, her text’s internal structure and its preoccupation with memory and the circumstances surrounding its creative representation are proof of the story’s “sociocognitive complexity” in that it is preoccupied with the minds and memories of characters other than the protagonist. McCarthy’s creative exploration, however, tends to be foreclosed whenever she relegates her interrogation to the fact-checking structures present in her inter-chapters. Since the publication of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, however, the Cognitive Revolution has radically altered our thinking on how memory functions; were this memoir written today, McCarthy might have structured it quite differently. Today, we can move beyond thinking about how McCarthy remembered her uncle to considering why she remembered him in this multifaceted way. As Eakin observes, “Advances today in brain studies . . . make it worth our while to revisit self, the deep core of autobiography’s ‘I’” (64). Revisiting the core of McCarthy’s autobiographical process involves reclaiming her narrative structure as part of the memory process, not as a failure of autobiography to produce certainty. Soon after the publication of her memoir in 1957, the Cognitive Revolution, bolstered by advancements in computer science, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience, began to gain momentum. Cognitive scientists developed the structures and the language that we currently use to describe the workings of the brain and its neuronal activity. The schema that scientists use to describe cognitive mechanics could help to broaden our understanding of the aesthetic construction of
McCarthy’s narrative because it challenges the constraint of veracity that seems to plague her writing and the genre of life narrative more generally.

This project examines the mechanics underlying the process of recalling and constructing autobiographic memory: the underlying cognitive frameworks that participate in and guide the autobiographic act; the way a subject creates a sense of self out of the reorganization and re-clustering of memories that might widely differ from the original experience; the role of the senses, especially sight, in the organization of memories and meaning-making narrative structures. With McCarthy, and certainly with authors such as Bartók, Jordan, Bechdel, Spiegelman, and Wolff, the cognitive processes that underpin the creation of memoir, such as the construction of a mental image, are made explicit in autobiography through the specific aesthetic choices that contemporary artists and authors make. Elaine Scarry argues that unlike other artistic media (painting, sculpture, films etc.) the verbal arts contain neither immediate sensory content nor delayed sensory content. Interestingly, it is narrative’s mimetic content that allows for the reader to create a vivid perceptual account. Our visual perception gets activated when reading visual narratives. Zenon Pylyshyn makes a similar argument in Seeing and Visualizing: It’s Not What You Think but he broadens it to the visual system writ large, suggesting that what we “see” is actually abstract and conceptual as opposed to pictorial “mental images” (35). He uses the example of master chess players who are able to memorize patterns of pieces on a board much better than novice players. When confronted with a random pattern of pieces on the board, however, both master and novice chess players remember patterns about equally (32). From both Scarry and Pylyshyn, we can infer that there is no internal screen that plays back the image to us
flawlessly; rather there is a structure that allows us to remember an image based upon conceptual frameworks that have developed over time (35). How we remember what we see is based on our capacity for paying attention, arranging and seeing patterns etc. These questions of what constitutes a mental image (and whether or not image is really the correct term to describe what happens when we visualize) and Scarry’s notion of “deep perception” inform my examination of how and why authors create so many visual moments in their verbal art. Visuality and memory are deeply intertwined in all of these narratives, perhaps because of the referential uncertainty that they produce, even as they seek to represent a person’s past. Memoir is an ideal genre to observe a number of cognitive and perceptual functions of the brain, as they unfold in discursive time. Memory is the most apparent cognitive process that autobiography as a genre explores: temporality, identity, and meaning-making are all results of the memory processes in life narrative. From the vantage point of cognitive neuroscience binarial distinctions between fact and fiction in autobiography are irrelevant because memory—on which the genre and one’s identity are based—is a constant process of revision that is both recursive and dialogic, both accurate and constructed.14 The dilemma of life narrative can no longer be located in the tension between what is true and what is false; the dilemma is in our fundamentally flawed, or rather biased, ways of ordering memories and experience and how those flaws, or biases, affects the autobiographic form yet, paradoxically, drives the autobiographic impulse. What matters in the study of autobiography is how the mind assimilates, re-packages, and makes meaning out of past experiences in the text.
Like autobiography, photography has enjoyed a contested and controversial history. Marianne Hirsch argues that photography is an “instrument of self knowledge and representation” that one uses to continue and perpetuate memories (7). Although photography often seems to faithfully record events of the past, Timothy Dow Adams suggests photography and autobiography are similar media in that they are both problematically presented as verifiable and truthful renderings of past events. Similarly, Smith and Julia Watson argue that “artistic production of the autobiographical occurs at the interface of the domains of visuality (image) and textuality (the aural and written word, the extended narrative, the dramatic script)” (7). Yet both photography and autobiography are highly mediated and have what Adams terms an unstable referential status because they are on the “border between fact and fiction” (xxi). While these scholars identify photography’s and autobiography’s shared complexity in structure and reception, the ambiguous referential status that Adams identifies in these media goes deeper than a shared liminal position on the border between fact and fiction.15 Thinking about images in the context of “the social field of the visual” we can think about how images not only represent the social world but, to a large extent, actively constitute it (Mitchell 47). My research explores why images are intimately bound with the subject’s construction of the self and the world. Whether they are present or not in the text, photographs in autobiography signal absence and presence, wishful thinking and reality. Like memory they are both constructed and biased and claim some version of the truth. In fact, these media are reflective of a deeper ambiguity, one that can be located within the framework of our neuronal structure and in the way our brain processes and constructs memory. Photography, and the structure of the camera, mirrors the physiology of the
eye, much like autobiography mirrors the cognitive frameworks of memory, yet both seeing and remembering (in our brains as well as in our art) are inaccurate, biased, and limited. Still, these are the tools we have to understand the world, and the authors I examine struggle with relying on them to tell their narratives.

Seeing and remembering share similar physiological characteristics and are similarly deceptive. Our brains constantly revise the “facts” of our experiences in order to make new meaning out of them. Neuroscientist Yadin Dudai refutes older models of memory systems that regard memory as static and lodged in a storehouse, in favor of a cyclical model that views memory as plastic and behaves, to use a simile, like a phoenix: “Occasionally items in memory get the opportunity to be reborn again and again” (36). The plasticity and recurrence of memories suggest they are neither fact nor fiction but rather are updated and revised every time they are recalled and placed within new experiential contexts. Similarly, as Pylyshyn argues, the brain’s early visual system is not only deceiving in the way that it presents information to the brain for interpretation; it is also separate from cognition. So while we tend to link seeing with believing—visualizing with understanding—blind spots, faulty recall, issues with scale, and deficits in visual perception resulting from brain damage all suggest that seeing is not equivalent with the cognitive processes of understanding or believing (62). Like memory, our visual system is faulty. It fills in information for us; it makes us believe that we are seeing something that might not, in fact, be there; it malfunctions. In short, both memory and visuality are processes that can be unreliable, yet they are responsible for much of what makes up our understanding of the world and ourselves. Considering autobiographical projects within this framework of
uncertain, yet visceral, pre-cognitive and cognitive structures brings to the forefront the question of how the subject makes narrative sense of his or her life story, and how photography, and the process of seeing, fits into the sense-making act. Images complement textual memories; supplement the subject’s meaning-making process; and help the subject to formulate new memories, yet, inherently, seeing and remembering are faulty perceptual structures.¹⁶

3. A Roadmap of Memory and the Brain

Before the late nineteenth century, the study of the mind, or what is now called psychology, took place in a number of different disciplines and time periods. Reaching back as far as ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, philosophers, mathematicians, natural scientists, and physicians pondered the location of the mind, the laws of perception, the reasoning behind behavior, and the nature of humanity (Hothersall 30); the intellectual discoveries of ancient Greece and Rome are what we, in part, base our current scientific method, our system of ethics, and our language (30). When the ancient philosophers began to ponder human nature, the seat of the senses, and the influence of heredity versus environment, they also initiated the debates that would come to characterize the study of the mind for centuries: the influence of experience on the individual; the reliability of perception; and the nature/structure of the mind and body. For centuries, and until fairly recently with the turn away from behaviorism in the 1950s and 1960s, many scientists have argued that there was no way to satisfactorily study the internal phenomena of the mind.¹⁷ And as the popularity of phrenology in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (and leading into the early twentieth century), and spiritualism and eugenics in the nineteenth century suggests, there were a number of pseudoscientific movements that claimed to reveal the
internal workings of the self/mind based upon interpretation of external qualities of the subject/world. In short, before the establishment of Wilhelm Wundt’s psychological research laboratory in 1879, and his inaugural use of the term psychology, the field was multi-disciplinary and unruly, with physiologists and phrenologists, among others, vying to reveal the secrets of the human mind.

At first, Wundt’s experiments merged the subject and the experimenter in the form of experimental self-observation, an introspection technique (123). Experimental self-observation, attempted to “study the psychological processes by which we experience and observe the external world . . . [but the researchers could not] remove themselves from their objects of study since they [were] studying their own conscious processes” (123). A scientific relative of the concerns in memoir and autobiography, experimental self-observation and introspection exemplifies early psychology’s exploration of the role of the researcher in his or her research. Freudian psychoanalysis, one of the earliest forms of clinical psychology, is another sub-discipline where introspection was immensely important to the course of treatment. Freud insisted on the importance of the patient-therapist relationship and “the process of projecting emotions and images from past relationships onto the therapist as transference, and the therapist’s response as countertransference” (283). In 1913, J.B. Watson published “Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It,” which challenged the work of psychologists such as Wundt and Freud: “Prior to Wundt, argued Watson, there had been no psychology; after Wundt, there had been only confusion, controversy, and conflict” (467). Watson believed that that term consciousness was too nebulous and therefore a useless concept. He rejected introspection as too
subjective and flawed methodology. In its place, he argued for a “hard science” method that was objective and focused on the study of behavior in a methodical way: “psychology was no longer the science of the mind and had no further use for introspection” (468).

For the next fifty years behaviorism was one of the most popular psychological sub-disciplines, especially in the United States. The emergence of computers, artificial intelligence, and genomics in the second half of the twentieth century, however, gave rise to cognitive science, or what neuroscientist and memory expert Eric Kandel calls “the new science of mind” (11). Cognitive science studied “different kinds of thinking . . . under controlled conditions” (Thagard 7). Studies in memory, perception, intelligence, and mental imagery challenged behaviorism’s belief that the study of the mind was impossible. For example, George Miller’s memory chunking experiments explored the limitations of cognition and memory. His work demonstrated that committing lists of items to working memory becomes much harder after the list grows beyond seven items, and “proposed that memory limitations can be overcome by recoding information into chunks, mental representations that require mental procedures for encoding and decoding the information” (6). Thus, in many respects, cognitive science began with memory experiments, such as Miller’s, that demonstrated the limitations of human cognition, but also reevaluated our capacity to study mental processes linked to information storage, recall, and integration. The importance of this shift in how scientists studied and defined memory functions would eventually find its way into the literary and artistic work that gave rise to postmodernism and the current iteration of life narratives examined in this project. No longer considered to be mechanistic process that is obscured by the unconscious, the mental phenomena of the mind
unfold in and throughout cultural production as much as they did in the cognitive studies community. The Cognitive Revolution not only fundamentally shifted how psychologists, neuroscientists and cognitive scientists designed their empirical studies of the brain; it also gave rise to the “cognitive turn” in American literature, which shifted critical focus on literature to questions about how mind and perception influence narrative viewpoint and characterization; this “Revolution” also created a bridge between cutting-edge neuroscientific research and textual aesthetics. Indeed, the numerous factors that made the Cognitive Revolution so revolutionary, such as brain imagining technology (fMRI and PET scans) and the mapping of the human genome, also helped to define the 1990s as the “decade of the brain” (534). The elements that helped this period earn such large-scale descriptors also extended into literary studies of the period: the 1990s were characterized as the “age of memoir.” Such parallel, and flashy, figurations are not happenstance; they reflect how “the new science of mind” influenced current literary and critical preoccupations with the exploration of consciousness and subjectivity and the various issues with the mind-body split (11).

Kandel, who studies cognition at the molecular level argues that the mind-body split that we still maintain, to a large extent, has been challenged by the Cognitive Revolution, and the new (molecular) biology: “consciousness is a biological process that will eventually be explained in terms of molecular signaling pathways used by interacting populations of nerve cells” (9). He suggests that locating the impetus for human nature in biological roots, and the fact that our minds and the molecules that underlie our highest mental processes have evolved from animal ancestors, are potentially disturbing conclusions that his field has unearthed. Still Kandel’s
seemingly reductionist view of what makes us human and differentiates us (or fails to differentiate us) from our animal ancestors is not his whole argument. Scientists might need to study the brain cell-by-cell in order to find out how various brain functions operate; however, his creation of a lengthy memoir suggests that, paradoxically, Kandel finds answers to what comprises human consciousness not only in examining the smallest pieces of our biological makeup but also in examining personal narrative and memory. Transdisciplinary projects, such as Kandel’s, support my argument that the humanistic arts and the sciences take inspiration from each other. The third culture that E.O. Wilson, C.P. Snow, and others have advocated—a culture in which humanists utilize empirical methods and in which the rigidity of field-specific research gives way under the pressure of interdisciplinary research—seems quite plausible in our contemporary and collaborative moment.

Kandel’s autobiography, In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind, emerged out of a much smaller but equally important document: an acceptance speech for the Nobel prize in physiology and medicine, which he shared in 2000. Kandel has been able to watch the growth of the new science of the mind from its inception. Like many professional intellectuals, Kandel begins his autobiography with a story from childhood that propelled him on his long journey to studying the physiology of memory: “Memory has always fascinated me. Think of it. You can recall at will your first day in high school, your first date, your first love . . . Remembering the past is a form of mental time travel; it frees us from the constraints of time and space and allows us to move freely along completely different dimensions” (3). Eschewing more concrete and neurological language to describe his love of memory, Kandel allows for the
affective and introspective influence of memory on one’s current life. From here Kandel takes us back in time to 1938, when he was nine-years-old, to a memory of playing with a motor car he received for his birthday. A memory of the Nazis coming to his family’s home in Vienna, however, impinges on his memory of playing with the toy. Kandel recognizes these earliest memories from his childhood as “the most powerful memories of my early life” (5). It is only later that he learns the cultural context of his personal memories; they occurred during Kristallnacht, or the night of broken glass, which signaled the escalation of Hitler’s persecution of the Jews. Kandel’s autobiography recounts his migration from Austria to the United States during World War Two, his shift from medicine and psychoanalysis to the nascent field of neuroscience, and his illustrious career studying the biological basis of memory. His professional narrative is peppered with memories about his family, his colleagues and his friends. He also explores the ramifications of the Holocaust on the emergence of the new science of the brain. Many of the people he worked with at Harvard, Columbia, and in Paris were Jewish exiles from Europe during the Second World War. Although never explicitly stated, Kandel stresses the importance of this migration to the research that led to the emergence of cognitive neuroscience. Kandel’s memories shape his text, much like his desire to map the neurological structures of memory shaped his professional life; he ends his first chapter affirming that “The new science of mind holds out the hope that greater understanding of the biology of memory will lead to better treatments for both memory loss and persistent painful memories” (11). Given his personal experiences with painful memories, it is no surprise that his hope for the scientific movement he
has helped lead for over half a century is that it will ultimately eventuate in memory augmentation. His subjective experiences drive his intellectual passion.

Naively, but perhaps necessarily so, Kandel initially attempted to find the biological basis for Freud’s theory of the ego, id, and super ego, but quickly realized that to understand complex frameworks of consciousness, one must first understand the underpinnings of consciousness, that is, the nerve cell and its operation (59). To explain the structures I will be referencing in this project, I will provide some background on the make-up and operation of human neurology. The human brain is made up of approximately 100 billion nerve cells, or neurons; these neurons are connected to one another by nerve fibers in a network that pulses sensory, perceptual, affective, and behavioral information throughout the brain (McClelland 130). Neurons send information through an electrochemical process. When a neuron generates a large electrical impulse it fires that impulse though the nerve fibers to another neuron, triggering a chemical process that releases neurotransmitters into surrounding neurons. Because “neurons do not form connections indiscriminately,” they can communicate across large areas of the brain, thus forming a distinguishable, if not necessarily localized (i.e. in only one part of the brain), network (65). The space between the two nerve endings that transmits the chemical message is called the synapse; it is an intermediary between specific cells. In the 1940s there was a debate that Kandel playfully calls the “soupers versus the sparkers,” in which scientists argued for either electrical or chemical impulses as the triggers for synaptic transmission (96). Like most arguments in the new science, researchers would come to understand the importance of both properties to the transmission of information along the nerve fibers into other neurons: the spark (electrical...
impulses within the neuron) and the soup (chemical impulses that are transmitted via the synapse to another neuron) were both important.

For my own work, understanding the language and make-up of the brain, as best we can, will help to further critical and formal inquiry into how these structures are examined, interrogated, and utilized in contemporary American life narrative. Authors such as Mira Bartók and Art Spiegelman understand the language of brain science and utilize it in their narratives to explore specific issues related to their lives. Whether it is the problem of memory loss due to brain injury and a retreating sense of self (Bartók), or it is how unreliable and labyrinthine childhood memories can be (Spiegelman), these authors demonstrate the importance of the functions and the language of the brain in shaping meaning-making in life narrative.

In this project I am interested in the larger cognitive structures of memory, namely: what parts of the brain are responsible for long-term and short-term memory; how memory is subdivided into discrete frameworks; and some of the processes of memory that move it from short-term to long-term. Kandel, who has dedicated his life to understanding how memory functions at the micro-biological level, demonstrates that the biological underpinnings of the larger cognitive structures we understand as memory work in much the same way that they do at the macro level. For example, Kandel realized that learning actually changes the way in which neural networks are organized: when we experience and learn our micro-biology responds by re-ordering the neuronal networks connected to that information. Therefore, our brain responds to new experiences in a way not unlike how our personalities, or sense of self changes as we grow and experience the world. Cellular biology reconciles the rift between the mind and the body—
what happens at the neuronal level also happens at the psychosocial level—this is why Kandel wanted to understand memory cell by cell; it is the first step in understanding the networks and mechanisms that give rise to consciousness.

The human brain is a deeply complex organ, filled with specialized regions. These regions or lobes of the brain together make up the cerebral cortex, which is the outermost part of the human brain. The cerebral cortex plays an important role in memory, perception, thought, language, consciousness, and attention. There are four principal lobes of the brain: the frontal lobe, the parietal lobe, the temporal lobe, and the occipital lobe. The frontal lobe is at the front of our brain; it is responsible for short-term memory tasks, planning, reward, attention, and drive. The parietal lobe is behind the frontal lobe and above the occipital lobe, to the sides of the brain; it is responsible for spatial sense and navigation. The occipital lobe is at the rear of the brain; it is the visual processing center of the brain and does visual tasks such as color discrimination. The temporal lobe is beneath the frontal lobe and the parietal lobe and in front of the occipital lobe; it is involved with auditory perception, processing speech and vision. The temporal lobe also contains the hippocampus, which is important to long-term memory processing of which autobiographic memory is a part. Deep inside of the lobes are other parts of the brain such as the limbic system, which is responsible for emotion and the amygdala which controls fear response and is the punishment and reward center. For the purposes of this project the hippocampus and the medial temporal lobes (which contains the hippocampus and the areas around it)—the parts of the brain implicated in long-term episodic and autobiographic memory—are of primary importance because these are the parts of the brain that remember subjective experience and
translate it into a semi-coherent narrative. To a lesser extent the frontal lobe and the amygdala are also significant regions of the brain because of their separate roles in short-term memory, and memory persistence, respectively (Schacter 22-23).

Memory is a tricky cognitive process because it is, in reality, multiple related processes that occur in various regions in the brain; it is also famously unreliable, often following what one of the founders of modern experimental psychology, Hermann Ebbinghaus, identified as a forgetting curve in the late nineteenth century: “Memory . . . falls off quite rapidly immediately after learning, and then decays more slowly after that” (179). Since Ebbinghaus, forgetting curve experiments that focus on information “of considerable personal significance,” instead of nonsense information, have been replicated outside of a laboratory setting thus showing that the forgetting curve is “a core feature of transience,” which is the general deterioration of memory over time from specific recollections to more general descriptions (14). Ebbinghaus studied the effects of transience on learning new information and considered how likely he was to remember information that he previously learned. A century later, in the 1990s, psychologist Charles Thompson tested students’ forgetting curve for personal experiences that varied in significance (14). What he found was that the forgetting curve was not as sharp on these more autobiographic memories. Details of specific events, however, faded much more quickly than a more general sense of what occurred (15). Thus long-term autobiographic memory is more likely to be remembered in a general way than information involved with semantic memory.

Although in the late nineteenth century Ebbinghaus recognized that there was a distinction between prompted and sudden recall (termed explicit and implicit memory in the
twentieth century), and that there is a sharp retention curve associated with memorizing information, even in the twentieth century psychologists still understood memory to be stored as Augustine envisioned: in a central and localized place in the brain (Yates 46). In the 1920s psychologist Karl Lashley tried to find the parts of the brain responsible for memory storage. He trained rats to run a maze and then removed parts of their cerebral cortex to see how much memory of the maze they retained. He found that the larger the amount of the cortex—not what part of it—that was removed affected the rats’ memory of the maze. Studies like Lashley’s and the work of Wilder Penfield were, “Initial attempts to pinpoint a region of the brain responsible for memory, or even to delineate memory as a unique mental process, [that] failed” (124).

Thus, although the desire to understand the function, location, and storage site of memory are all centuries old, it is obvious from these scientists’ work that, “The relation between brain and mind has fascinated and frustrated scientists interested in memory for a long time” (Tulving and Lepage 217). The research of Brenda and Scoville Milner, who worked with the severely incapacitated epileptic H.M. beginning in the late 1950s revealed, however, the first evidence that the medial temporal lobes, which include the hippocampus, are vital to memory (127). Beyond distinguishing between short-term and long-term memory and its storage and retrieval processes, Milner confirmed what Ebbinghaus anticipated with his experiments: that there were two different ways of remembering information: conscious memory and unconscious memory, which is now called explicit (or declarative) memory and implicit (or procedural) memory. In an attempt to stop H.M.’s seizures, Scoville removed the inner parts of the temporal lobe on both sides of the brain, including the hippocampus, which “left him with a devastating memory loss
from which he never recovered” (127). H.M. was unable to form any new memories into long-term memories; however, he had good short-term memory and retained long-term memories from his childhood (128). H.M. differed from a person with no memories at all in that he had a sense of self. That sense of self, however, was stuck in early life rather than in the repeating feedback loop that Sacks describes. His memory was stunted and temporally dislocated. He couldn’t recognize himself as he aged. He only remembered what he looked like before the surgery, that is, before the removal of his inner temporal lobes. Because he did not have the parts of the brain that helped to produce long-term memory, H.M. had no stable episodic memories from his post-surgery life. However, he retained procedural memory that is unconsciously (or implicitly) employed, such as perceptual and motor skills, and could learn new skills such as simple drawing tasks and puzzles, which suggested that conscious (explicit) episodic memory and unconscious (implicit) procedural memory are housed in different regions of the brain because they involve different types of learned or experienced information (132). Brenda Milner learned a lot about the structures of memory from her thirty-year study of H.M. In fact, she and Scoville fundamentally changed the way scientists conceived of memory from a “unitary system” where all memory is stored and retrieved in similar ways, and parts of the brain, to “hierarchically” arranged memory systems where different types of memories get activated in different regions of the brain—and in different ways—and are stored differently (Mayes 193). Through their ongoing relationship with H.M., they were able to establish that there are separate memory systems for procedural tasks and autobiographical experiences and that some of these systems were deficient in H.M. (remembering his adult life, for example) and some were
functional (completing puzzles, for example). Such research has astounding implications for the field of life narrative studies, in that it shows how vital long-term memory is to the continuing development of self-concept over a lifetime. We can still perform tasks like tying shoe laces without access to long-term memory; however, without a specific region of the brain (the hippocampus) our identities become locked in a fixed position that cannot update with new experience, or over time.

When memory fails, it allows us to see what we have been previously taking for granted about the influence that memory has on the development and articulation of self-concept. Subsequent to this seminal case in the development of the field of memory studies, the scientific community explored other aspects of memory and the ramifications that this current research has on the construction of identity. In addition to discovering that there are different forms of memory and that these systems are located in different regions of the brain, Milner also realized that there are other regions in the brain (in addition to the temporal lobe and the hippocampus) that store long-term memory. Because H.M. was able to remember childhood memories, but not memories leading up to or following his surgery, Milner postulated that some of our early childhood memories are stored differently than more recent long-term memories. And, indeed, “we now have reason to believe that long-term memory is stored in the cerebral cortex . . . in the same area of the cerebral cortex that originally processed the information” (128). This argument is supported by current trends in research that say memory consolidation is an ongoing and cyclical process (McClelland, Silva, Schacter) involving reconsolidation. Again, the implications for life narrative are astounding in that we are now able to say, unequivocally, that
the process of remembering that involves long-term episodic memory is at its neurological core unreliable because each subsequent recall of a memory shifts that memory’s meaning within a larger web of association. This shift in how we understand the function and instability of memory over time demonstrates the need to meet the genre on its unstable terms; it also raises a number of questions about why, given such biological and epistemological uncertainty, the age of memoir is booming and life narrative is ubiquitous in our society.

Although short-term memory is consolidated into long-term memory through such tools as practice, recitation, and association, memories are also prone to changing with each new recollection (Silva 48). The process by which information becomes a memory begins with encoding, which is “the initial representation of incoming information” (194). The left frontal cortex becomes activated during the encoding process, which moves the information first into working memory and eventually, barring some type of interference, into long-term memory (Schacter 31). Once the information has been encoded, the second process that occurs is consolidation, which is the organization of the information in some type of meaningful way, such as association and practice. After consolidation, memory is stored and then retrieved (194). Mayes argues that we need to consider these processes as part of a network, rather than as distinct from one another: “the individual regions of each memory system work together in a concerted fashion to allow memory” (194). He also suggests that we need to find out more about the neural pathways that connect various systems of memory to each other and how they might work in parallel with each other (194). The work of James McClelland has started to answer some of Mayes’ questions about how memory systems function. Although there are different
types of memory that are stored in different parts of the brain, McClelland argues that there is a memory-pathway of sorts that allows for memories to travel between the medial temporal lobe and the neocortex when a memory is reconsolidated: “In brief, there are two-way fiber bundles connecting the hippocampus with all relevant areas of the neocortex and with other relevant noncortical brain areas” (146). The four steps of the memory process only discuss consolidation. McClelland, among other scientists, however advocates for reconsolidation as a fifth step in the process, and one that, paradoxically, occurs over and over again with the same information. The bi-directional connection that he identifies between the site where information is initially stored and where information is relegated when it is consolidated, suggests that memories are not as stable as scientists once thought: memories undergo storage processes (consolidation) each time they are recalled, thus memory reconsolidation changes the initial memory to fit into the context of new experiences and information (Silva 49). This fifth and on-going stage in the memory process offers scholars of life narrative a tantalizing lens with which to examine how memories shift when they are placed within a larger narratological context in autobiographical writing. Rather than dismissing or challenging memories that are treated again and again in the course of a life narrative—or throughout the career of a life-long autobiographical writer—and indicting the author as unreliable, we might come to understand the reconsolidation processes as one that is necessary to the meaning-making that occurs at the site of autobiographical writing. Tethering memories to one another within a web of associational and contextual information allows for the author to more deeply explore the significance of a particular life event in a way that the first, or the original, experience could not accomplish. Understanding how our brains store, access, and
make use of information allows us to understand both the biological and the referential motivations behind thinking and writing life narrative.

The consolidation and reconsolidation debates are important to my argument about memory’s function and purpose in life narrative. In my analysis of contemporary American life narrative the process by which information or an experience becomes a memory is crucial to understanding how and why authors often construct whole chapters around memories, only to question them, challenge them, or outright reconstruct them later. Such creative engagement with autobiographical memory and the generic structures of life narrative demonstrates a shift in how memories get told, and how they are positioned within the larger context of a life. So too does the problematizing of memory in life narrative offer up a non-reflexive mediation of the genre’s form and purpose that counters current reflexive responses to the work life narrative ought to do. Knowing the difference between short-term and long-term memory—they differ in the length of time that information is stored and is retrievable—and the consolidation process that moves short-term memories into long-term memories, helps to redirect current trends in criticism on life narrative by adding nuance to the different types of memory that we have, and explains how those different types of memory, and their functioning, affect narrative structure (210) While practice is one way to achieve memory consolidation—the more that a person practices a skill, recalls specific stories, and engages specific spatial knowledge, the more that these memories become written on the neural networks of the brain and can be recalled with ease—association is another way to consolidate memories. Association is a meaningful and systematic connection of new information to other well-consolidated information. As chapter one on Mira Bartók’s The
Memory Palace demonstrates, the use of mnemonics, consolidation and reconsolidation are crucial neurological functions that help authors to recall memories that might otherwise be inaccessible and to place those memories within a larger network of meaning. Without access to long-term memory, as the main character of The Memory Palace and H.M. demonstrate, a current and timely self-concept starts to slip away.

4. “Neuro” Life Narrative

The memory process, and in particular reconsolidation inform the construction of contemporary American life narrative. Memory is a topos that the genre returns to again and again in order to understand the self in relation to the world and because, as Schacter argues:

Human beings are storytellers, and we tend to tell stories about ourselves. Thinking and talking about experiences not only helps to make sense of the past, but also changes the likelihood of subsequent remembering. Those episodes and incidents we discuss and rehearse are protected, at least partially, from transience; those that we don’t ponder or mention tend to fade more quickly. (31)

The life narratives that we construct from our memories help us to think about the self in the present through thinking about the self in the past; this process, in turn, allows us to think about our future and plan accordingly. In many ways, it is irrelevant whether or not these memories display one or more of what Schacter calls the “seven sins of memory.” These “sins” or flaws are what make memory a dynamic, fluid and complex system and these qualities are reflected in the products that are an outgrowth of our memories: life narrative.
The “sins” or flaws of memory are similar in their operation to the functioning of our perceptual systems. And, as a number of neuroscientists have realized, our memory systems and our visual systems are intimately connected (Schacter, Kosslyn, Hollingworth, Pinker). It comes as no surprise that there are multiple edited collections that explore visual memory and its connection to language and memory (Toby J. Lloyd-Jones, Maria A. Brandimonte, and Karl-Heinz Bäuml). Furthermore, the fluidity and dynamics of memory and the process of reconsolidation aligns well with similar processes involving the interpretation and integration of visual stimuli. Like memory, seeing is plagued by a number of failings, as Pylyshyn points out. Seeing, however, is one of our most immediate sensory systems and like memory we rely on it to understand the self in relation to the world around us. Indeed, all of the authors whose work I examine in this project utilize visual media in innovative and complex ways. Whether through offering two distinct narrative arcs that demonstrate life narrative’s struggle with historical record and personal relevance (Art Spiegelman and Alison Bechdel), or the use of visual mimesis—but no visual media—(June Jordan and Tobias Wolff), or the reproduction of drawings, photographs, and paintings within an ever-changing memory palace (Mira Bartók’s memoir), these authors struggle with the imprecise, but nevertheless vital role that visuality plays in the construction and interrogation of long-term autobiographic memory. The dual referential uncertainty of memory and visuality, as these authors uncover, weakens the restraints that have held the genre’s authenticating structures in place for centuries and offers in its place a more complicated, but also less anxious, figuration of life narrative and its aesthetic and narratological make-up.
In this introduction I have aligned memory and visuality from a biological systems point-of-view; however, in the following chapters, I examine how memory and visuality align in their aesthetic deployment in life narrative by demonstrating how these elements have become twin-skin in the fight to loosen the genre from its referential and documentary bonds. Still, always present in my analysis is an awareness of how the fundamental biology of the human brain and the physiology of memory and perception in the age of the Cognitive Revolution have influenced the way that authors writing in the “age of memoir” construct their life narratives. For example, in the first chapter of this project, I discuss Bartók’s *The Memory Palace* (2011) and her struggle with memory loss after a traumatic brain injury. Bartók is not only highly conversant in current research and debates about memory in the field of neuroscience; she also uses the method of loci, or memory palace, in order to reconstruct her memories after the accident. The first chapter will offer a brief discussion of the history of mnemonics and further ground the connection between memory and visuality through Bartók’s text; so too will it demonstrate that the language of neuroscience permeates the narrative and assists in its articulation in a way that earlier autobiographical writing styles would be unable to do.

Chapter two argues that Jordan, in *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood* (2001) adapts James Kulik and Roger Brown’s concept of flashbulb memory to poetic ekphrasis. What results is a stunningly visual, yet contained narrative about the first twelve years of her life. Through a reliance on visual memory, but, paradoxically, not photographs, Jordan refuses to verify her story or confine it to official historical record. The brief, yet powerful, sensory information that she includes in her memories of childhood emulate flashbulb memory in that they reproduce the
fine details of shocking or traumatic events, such as instances of her father’s abuse. These ekphrastic moments lend immediacy to Jordan’s memories, while the absence of photographs and other images challenges life narrative’s evidentiary status.

Chapters three and four analyze graphic narratives. Chapter three argues that Bechdel, in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) relies on memory’s flaws to tell the story of her father’s death. Through such vehicles as bias, forgetting, and retrospection, she pieces together a case for arguing that her father’s death was deliberate and directly related to the disclosure of his queer identity. Bechdel pieces together her family’s history, and her memories of her father, like a collage. Her admission that this is her story to tell and that certain accounts are remembered incorrectly, demonstrates that contemporary authors of life narrative are less anxious about “getting the story right” than creating a personally meaningful narrative. There is still, however, a marked tension between veracity and subjectivity, as Bechdel’s quest for her mother’s approval of her memoir demonstrates.

In *Maus* (1991), chapter four, Art and Vladek Spiegelman fight for control over the narrative, and, by extension, for control over historical record. Confronted with writing his father’s story, and creating an accurate account of the Holocaust, Spiegelman relies upon images’ multiple registers to tell his story. Through such temporally dislocating strategies as placing characters in two time periods at once, or overlaying events from World War II with events from the 1970s and early 90s, Spiegelman demonstrates that time is experienced differently depending on the context of the situation. Traumatic events, such as the Holocaust, might slow down, or speed up, one’s grasp of time, which fundamentally shifts a narrative’s
vantage point. Maus demonstrates David Eagleman’s notion of “brain time”: that traumatic events will register differently in one’s memory than non-traumatic events.

In Chapter five, about Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life* (1989), I argue that the conventionality of the narrative and its alignment with more classical figurations of autobiography (a single author speaking “truthfully” about transgressions and reformation) obscures its experimentation with future-oriented thinking and imaginative scenario construction, which neuroscientists are coming to understand as counterparts to memory processes. Framed as a confessional narrative about the protagonist’s misbehavior, Wolff’s story is about radical and frequent self-reinvention. Narrated by Jack, a self-confessed liar, this story fails to uphold the confessional frame and, at the end, the protagonist is unable to be redeemed. Still, he manages to escape his abusive father and set out Eastward to attend private school. More interested in mind and affect than social capital or historical record, *This Boy’s Life* is one of a growing number of texts that consider the transformative potential for creating life narrative, and the perceptual and mnemic inconsistencies that arise in our narratological configurations of the world.

The project concludes by theorizing the ethical implications of writing life narrative for personal relevance instead of historical account and argues for the importance of a “third culture” that bridges the humanistic arts and the sciences. Thinking through the ramifications of applying a neuro-bioethical lens to many current texts that utilize memory to further plot and narrative structure, I argue that “folkish” understandings of memory and its functions are detrimental to not only to critical work on memory, but also obscure contemporary debates about the role of memory augmentation via chemical, surgical and technological methods.
As I gathered the many and varied sources for this project, I realized that in both neuroscience and literary studies people frequently bring their personal experiences and memories into their intellectual work, be it Kandel’s experiences with Nazis during World War Two, or David Eagleman’s memory of time slowing down when he fell off the roof of his parents’ house as a child, or Bartók’s discussion of her childhood living with her paranoid schizophrenic mother, or Bechdel’s memories of living with her sexually closeted father. Our memories of our past, and especially our childhood, profoundly affect the adults that we become. The deep and abiding respect for the untold secrets of the human mind, which I have encountered as I have read current research in brain studies and current literary criticism on life narrative, suggests to me that the study of memory and perception, and its influence on life narrative, is just starting to be explored. I am both excited and humbled by this body of work and the place my project may claim within it.
Chapter 1

The Subterranean World of Memory:

Mira Bartók’s Struggle for Articulation in *The Memory Palace*

1. Brain Trauma and Mnemonics-Based Narrative

After a serious brain injury resulting from a car accident, Mira Bartók, an artist and author of children’s books, had to literally re-work her brain’s cognitive systems. Her 2011 memoir *The Memory Palace* is a narrative arranged visually and spatially, because the damage that the car accident caused to her brain affected regions implicated in working memory as well as parts of long-term memory:

In an accident like mine, a *coup-contrecoup*, your brain rings back and forth like a bell inside your skull. As a result, the back and front of the brain can get serious contusions, causing a cascade of problems. The prefrontal cortex is the seat of executive functioning, problem-solving, emotions, and concentration. This is one part among many that isn’t working. (260)

In order to circumvent the damage to her prefrontal cortex—one of the regions heavily involved in planning, abstract reasoning, impulse control, and short-term memory—Bartók arranged her memoir using the method of loci, or mnemonics. Mnemonics, a cognitive device that allows its user to remember large amounts of information with ease, encourages the linking of visual and spatial information with otherwise unassociated information (Yates 3). Bartók constructs a memory palace with rooms that are full of memories from her life. Conversant with current neuroscience research, she talks about her brain injury, her mother’s schizophrenia, and her
feelings of guilt and longing, all in the language of memory science: “Neuroscientists now suggest that while the core meaning of a long-term memory remains, the memory transforms each time we attempt to retrieve it. In fact, anatomical changes occur in the brain every single time we remember” (19). Here, Bartók demonstrates her understanding of the processes of consolidation and reconsolidation and their importance to writing life narrative. As noted in the introduction, consolidation is a process that stabilizes a memory trace. Reconsolidation is a process in which these “stable” long-term memories become re-activated, which renders them malleable and susceptible to change (Dudai 31). The neuroscientist Yadin Dudai has postulated that the purpose of reconsolidation might be to “update memory” (32). The reconsolidation process reveals the lability of memory traces, suggesting that memories are subject to change with each new recall. Furthermore, the re-activation of long-term memory can help to form associational links between a new memory trace and an old one. By tethering a new memory trace to a previously stored one the chances of the new memory making its way into long-term memory storage increases. In an uninjured brain, new information stored in working memory is likely to become consolidated into long-term memory, which then gets reconsolidated with subsequent recall. Bartók’s brain damage, however, prevents her from integrating new information into long-term memory because her consolidation system does not fully function. Her use of a memory palace tries to compensate for the impairment of cognitive processes such as memory retention and information consolidation, damaged in the accident. In creating a memory palace, Bartók bypasses the damaged parts of her working memory. The palace acts as the “mnemonic glue” that allows working memory to retain new information long enough for it
to be transferred into long-term memory (Schacter 96). For Bartók, the process of consolidating new information is especially vital because, as she writes in her memoir, her mother is dying. Without a functional short-term memory, it is likely that she will forget many of the details of her mother’s final months alive. Thus the damage to the anatomy of the memory process reveals the stakes of remembering in this life narrative.

According to Eakin, there are a number of reasons why a person tells or writes his or her life story, three of which are the following: writing life narrative is a deep and uncontrollable compulsion; we are socialized into telling stories about ourselves at a young age; and telling stories about ourselves plays a vital role in the mind’s shaping of identity (152). There are other biological reasons that we tell our life narratives: “the body’s story not only serves as the substrate of the identity narratives we tell and write, but provides as well important insight into their function and value as maps of our lives in time . . . Our bodily existence is the central fact of our mental life” (153). If, as Eakin suggests, our mind and our body are enmeshed at the site of identity, then Bartók is engaged in the rather unusual task—given her brain injury’s effect on her capacity to remember—of preserving memories of her past, especially those about her mother, that her injured brain will otherwise discard. For Bartók, the act of writing memoir calls to the fore her battle to conquer and control her damaged body (her brain), even as her mental life (her mind) deteriorates.

The mind-body problem has a long history. First identified by René Descartes, but addressed by pre-Aristotelian philosophers, the mind-body problem asks, in part, how “meaning, rationality, and conscious experience are related to a physical world” (Lagerlund 1); it is actually
a set of problems, which include: how the mind and the body interact, how the mind and the body cohabitate, how the mind experiences the physical world, and how the material world can be reconciled with the mental and spiritual world (2). While Bartók does not try to solve these problems, she does try to reconcile her own mind-body dilemma, which was brought about by her mental life being impinged upon by bodily (brain) injury, through exploring these various questions. She examines the distinctions between the mind and the brain, and how they are intertwined at the site of memory and identity. For Bartók, consciousness and self-awareness—the cornerstones of identity and, consequently, autobiography—are dependent on the notion of an embodied mind: a mind rooted in the physical body and vice versa. Bartók’s neurological damage, which gives rise to her mind-body struggle, is frightening. Writing life narrative, however, is a way for her to assuage the fear of memory loss and to take control of an otherwise uncontrollable situation. She brings the tensions between the mind and the body to bear on the architectural design of her memory palace. Taking inspiration from the physical construction of human memory, she orders the palace and her narrative like a neural network: associative, distributed, and non-linear.21

There are two major impetuses for Bartók’s memory-inspired narrative journey—her sudden brain trauma, which damaged her ability to store and recall memories, and her schizophrenic mother’s death in 2007. Because of their simultaneity, and their interrelatedness, she works hard to connect these events. Visuality is an aid that helps Bartók to formulate and organize her memories. The memoir begins with Bartók receiving a message that her mother is gravely ill and has little time left to live. Over Christmas, Bartók returns to her childhood home
in Cleveland to visit her mother, who is now in the hospital. When we first meet Bartók’s mother, Norma, she is dying of cancer. She hasn’t seen her two daughters in over seventeen years. To escape her, Myra née Mira and her sister Rachel née Natalia changed their names and home addresses, but they still live in constant fear of being “found” by Norma. Yet there is tenderness for her mother that Bartók reveals through her descriptions of Norma’s U-Haul storage unit and her use of excerpts from letters that they have sent to each other over the years. Despite their estrangement, Bartók and her mother have been living parallel lives that take on eerie similarities, many of which Bartók works diligently to highlight in her memoir. A few of these similarities are vital to understanding the structure of Bartók’s memoir and the emotional task that she is engaged with when she writes about her mother. They are both artists—Mira is a painter; Norma is a musician. They are both researchers—Mira for her work on children’s literature and Norma on botany, ancient languages, and art. They both suffer from cognitive disorders—Mira’s memory loss, Norma’s schizophrenia. And they are both voracious travelers—Mira goes to Italy, Bosnia, Israel, and the North Pole: Norma travels across North America, to Cleveland, Boston, and LA—who record their experiences in diaries and letters. These similarities, as well as the differences between them (namely that Norma is homeless and receives intermittent treatment for her paranoid schizophrenia while Mira strictly orders her life, especially after her memory loss) fuel the fire of Bartók’s journey to reclaim possession of her memories, and by extension, her identity. Throughout, the text’s images function like signposts leading her ever-onward in her process of self-exploration.
Although she is aware of current neurological research on memory and its disorders, and utilizes mnemonics to guide her autobiographical journey, Bartók does not make explicit the fact that her narrative is structured like a network in which memories are linked through associations. A neurological network model is one schematic that explains how memories are organized and connected to one another. As Kurt Danziger notes:

[n]eural networks extend over an area, conceivably a very large area, that they share with other networks. The memory trace is constituted by a certain pattern of activity in the network, and its location is therefore as broad as the network itself. Moreover, the same distributed network is capable of storing different traces in the form of different patterns of activity. (233)

In a network model, the same parts of the brain that process incoming information are also responsible for storing information: “The same units, the same machinery, one might say, will assimilate whatever input reaches the system into its own activity and in doing so will preserve a trace of what has happened in its changed activity” (234). The brain, then, is full of neural networks that information relies on to be encoded as well as stored. Given the distributed quality of the memory network, however, different patterns of interrelated memories form when new information is experienced or learned. Mnemonics, or the art of memory’s arrangement and rearrangement of information, is based upon association and, in this way, mirrors a neurological network’s processes for ordering and arranging memories.

Bartók draws from current neurological research on the structures of human memory systems in her memoir and the text’s structure emulates a memory network with similar
processing and storing apparati as those found in the brain. By linking older memories with new memories, she is better able to recall new information that might otherwise be lost because of the damage to the part of her brain responsible for making and storing new memories. In short, she creates an analogue to the physiological structures of memory consolidation and reconsolidation in her textual rendering of the architecture of her memory palace. The rooms in the palace are part of a network that leads to associated memories. Bartók, however, constantly rearranges the network by redesigning the rooms to account for new interpretations, recently recalled information, and newly formed memories. She identifies the plasticity of long-term memory, observing, in the words of neuroscientist Dudai, that memories “are prone to change either upon their reactivation in retrieval . . . or even in the absence of such explicit reactivation” (36). In other words, memories “get the opportunity to be reborn again and again” in *The Memory Palace* (36).

In the palace, memories have one meaning and then are associated with a completely different meaning, which demonstrates memory’s fluidity and the importance of re-contextualization in the process of more fully understanding one’s life narrative. Bartók tries to create a number of associational hooks between her long-term memories and new information that is being processed in short-term memory. Often, these older memories contain visual images such as paintings, drawings, or photographs that ignite the associational spark between old and new information. With the aid of mnemonics, and the engagement of her visual memory, she increases the possibility of remembering experiences that occurred after her injury, such as her mother’s illness and death. Bartók’s use of a memory palace as a structuring device for her
narrative calls attention to long-term memory’s associational, yet distributed, qualities. Her narrative structure also recognizes the relationship between short-term and long-term memory and interrogates how a new memory is linked with an old one during the reconsolidation process.

Mnemonics, or the art of memory, has a long and storied history that reaches back to ancient Greece and Rome; it is a technique first popularized by Simonides of Ceos (2). Greek and Roman orators studied mnemonics because it allowed them to memorize entire speeches “with unfailing accuracy,” not by rote memorization but by systematic arrangement and linkage of information, which makes recall easier (2). Simonides was a Greek poet who was paid for performing odes. On an occasion where he was hired to chant an ode, in honor of the nobleman Scopas of Thessaly, a disaster occurred. The banquet hall where Scopas and his guests were celebrating collapsed. Simonides, however, remained unharmed because he was called outside by a servant moments before the accident. The bodies of the party-goers were so badly mangled that they could not be identified by their physical features, but, amazingly, Simonides was able to identify all of the guests. Using his visual memory, he recreated the hall and the arrangement of the guests seated at the banquet table. His connection of loci (places) with imagines (images) allowed him to discern the arrangement and therefore the identity of over a hundred guests. Simonides gave the partygoers their identities back through the use of mnemonics.

“In The Memory Palace, Bartók is engaged in a similar project of identity reclamation, of preserving memories from the wreckage of her damaged mind. A memory palace is a theoretical construct that helps the thinker
to recall information with precision and ease. Often this linkage is cemented by the user imagining specific *loci*, or places, and then associating those loci with specific visual and verbal information (3). The *loci* frequently take the shape of an architectural structure such as a palace, or a hall, with various rooms contained inside (3). Today the art of memory is practiced in a number of different cultural spaces such as in the education system, in the self-help industry, and in the gaming industry.\(^{24}\)

Mnemonics is also studied in the scientific community. Recently, neuroscientists have discovered that the parts of the brain that light up with activity when ordinary people are involved in committing information to memory are different than when trained mnemonicists engage in memory tasks. In particular, a mnemonicist’s visual cortex is more active than that of a regular person when he or she is engaged in the process of remembering (Foer “The End of Remembering”). For Bartók, mnemonics, and the memory palace in specific, helps her to cope with her brain injury and her growing fear that, given her brain trauma, certain important memories will remain unrecoverable: “Above my desk are lists of things I can’t remember anymore, the meaning of words I used to know, ideas I’ll forget within an hour or a day . . . memories I’m afraid I’ll forget” (5). To cope with her memory loss, and the threat it poses to her identity, Bartók constructs a memory palace where she can form associational links between memories and images, “My mind was full of so many pictures— with each one I could build a different room, each room could lead me to a memory, each memory to another” (32). Images are like the synapses that bridge related memory neurons: each image is an electrochemical spark that pulses through the gap between two neurons and causes a connection to be born: with the aid
of the memory palace, Bartók is more likely to retain short-term memories and process them into long-term memories, because she can connect new information to her active visual and spatial memory. Her use of the method of loci, which engages the visual cortex—a region of the brain that was not injured in the accident—is an ideal strategy for retaining and recalling her life narrative and one that gestures to the “cognitive turn” in contemporary iterations of the life writing genre.

When Bartók discusses how to practice mnemonics she refers to the Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci, who was renowned for his mnemonic powers and traveled all over the world to teach “scholars how to build an imaginary palace and how to keep their memories safe” (31). She claims that with the aid of current scientific research on memory she will be an even more talented mnemonicist than he was: “Since I know what Ricci didn’t at the time, that memories cannot be fixed, my palace would always be changing. But the foundation would stay the same” (32). For Bartók, the scientific discovery that memories are fluid, unreliable, and biased is liberating because it allows her to re-conceptualize memory using images that are mutable and flexible, yet still reminiscent of past experiences: “The part of my brain that stores art and all the things I loved to look at and draw is for the most part intact. Perhaps the visual part of my brain can help retrieve the events that are lost” (29). Bartók creates a palace full of photographs, paintings, sculptures, and music. She builds her memories through the senses and connects them explicitly though visuality. Images are the connecting mechanism between her memories—the associational hook that makes the recall of information more fluid.
In part, Bartók solves the dilemma of “arriving back at her own past” through images (30). She works around her brain injury and the damage to her short-term and long-term memory by training her already active occipital lobes to compensate for the shearing of her neural pathways and the misfiring of her synapses (5). She relies on the power of visual imagery for memory recall and uses its sensory power to link memories and recall more information: “We look at something—a picture, a stone, a bird—and a memory surfaces, then that memory carries us to another, and another. Memory isn’t just mutable, it is associative” (30). When Foer interviewed “mental athletes” who use mnemonics in order to learn and retain large amounts of information for memory games competitions, he found that the more varied visual and intellectual information one has to draw from, the more likely one is to form associations between old and new information, which enables the recall of new information with more ease (10). As a collector of curiosities, and an obsessive researcher of obscure information—much like her schizophrenic mother—Bartók is ideally suited to use mnemonic’s intensely visual and incredibly associative structure to shape her life narrative. In addition to the circumstances arising from her brain injury and subsequent memory loss, her rich visual and intellectual life allow her to form connections between seemingly disparate information, which, in turn, creates a synthetic “mnemonic glue” that allows her to hold onto her short-term memories.

At the beginning of chapter two, Bartók discusses the first two visual objects that she places in the memory palace: a photograph of her mother Norma before her first psychological break and a painting by Caravaggio of the Medusa. Both of these objects lead Bartók back to one of her earliest memories of Norma’s psychosis: “My sweet beautiful mother merges with
Medusa—they meld into one another, pull apart, and come together again, morphing into other restless creatures” (37). Later the same Caravaggio painting of Medusa will reappear in the memory palace, but this time it will speak with her mother’s voice, condemning Bartók’s decision to move to Italy: “In another room I find Caravaggio’s painted shield. Medusa’s eyes glare at me; her serpentine curls hiss: *How could you leave me? I sleep on benches, on bridges, on cardboard and leaves.* Will I ever let down this burden of guilt?” (165). In these instances, Bartók blends the Medusa with her mother: both are powerful women who are potentially deadly, yet Bartók’s drawing of Medusa is complicated by its close proximity to the drawing of her mother, who is smiling. For Hélène Cixous, Medusa is a symbol of misunderstood female sexuality and power that, counter to myth and popular belief, is not necessarily dangerous: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (255). Cixous invokes the Medusa, tellingly, in her argument that women must write about themselves and other women; they must put themselves “into the text—as into the world and into history—by [their] own movement” (245). Without writing, women’s identities aren’t fully formed.

Bartók’s reconstruction of her childhood memories of her mother’s mental illness is framed by a wealth of historical information, personal experience, and myth. She struggles with depicting her mother and her mother’s schizophrenia, so she settles on a composite image that places the dangerous Medusa in close proximity to laughing Norma. Bartók echoes Cixous by engaging in the process of re-embodiment; of shaping and preserving her identity, much of which is deeply entwined with her position as a female and, more specifically, as a daughter. She
writes herself—and her homeless and mentally ill mother—back into existence after her brain injury, and she does so using both textual and visual tracks. Her narrative, then, emulates the structure of neural pathways that connect memories and form associational networks: one image activates one memory and then that memory activates another and then another. Visuality, then, is the stimulus for the memory impulse in *The Memory Palace*.

2. Of Icons and Illuminations: The Authority and Malfunction of Bartók’s Images

“Chapter 2 Medusa”

Bartók prefaces each of her chapters with a drawing, such as the one featured next to this sentence. Situated at the beginning of the first paragraph, these drawings emulate the placement and style of illustrations in illuminated manuscripts. Often the images are ones that she sees as central to the construction of a room in the memory palace; each room containing one or sometimes two images. Every so often, an image will consume a room—vines covering a hallway passage, water submerging an entire space, a desert’s sand spreading over a tiled floor—but, for the most part, each drawing is a contained and central feature within the chapter’s larger memory cluster. For example, in chapter two, titled “Medusa,” Bartók includes a drawing from a photograph of her mother that was taken in 1959, shortly after she gave birth to Mira (above). The drawn image is cropped and, as Bartók notes, deceptively limited in its depiction of Norma: “Her face is soft and demure . . . and a little startled. If you could see the entire picture, you would notice me on my mother’s lap looking up at her, smiling. What you can’t tell from the photo is that not long
after it was taken, my mother tried to fly out of a second-story window” (33). Images function as a roadmap through Bartók’s memories. They are, however, limited in the narratives that they offer. In this instance, a photograph fails to offer insight into what happens beyond its frame and so Bartók describes (but does not include) an image of the Gorgon Medusa, in chapter two. Still, she does place an image of the Medusa in the memory palace—at the end of her book—across from her mother’s photograph because these images are intimately connected to Bartók’s earliest childhood memories of her mother’s psychosis. Shortly after the photograph of Norma was taken, she—perhaps transfixed by Medusa while in her psychotic state—tried to jump out of a window. In a similar vein, Bartók dreamed for many years that she was a winged horse that watched her “mother’s serpentine head float away from her body” (33). The boundaries between the image of Norma and the image of the Medusa blur in Bartók’s memories—these images allow her to describe and come to terms with her mother’s illness, as an adult—however, as a child, it might have actually seemed that some other-worldly being possessed Norma while in the throes of her psychosis. As a child, myth and fairy-tales seem real to Bartók; it is not surprising that she relies on the lore of a mythical creature to describe her mother’s behavior, for the world of fantasy and the world of reality are constantly threatening to collapse and engulf her in the story.25

Although the two images at the beginning of the “Medusa” chapter allow Bartók to recall two specific memories related to the manifestation of her mother’s illness, during Bartók’s childhood, these images also spark other childhood memories that are only loosely associated with her mother. Towards the end of the chapter, Bartók recalls a boy with developmental issues who hit her with a pole so violently that she had to be hospitalized. This memory might be
related to her mother’s illness thematically, in that it is another experience where she felt pain at the hands of an outside agent. Bartók, however, also takes detours between memories of her mother and memories of her childhood in order to tell her more recent life story. Many of her memories can be traced back to a chapter’s opening image; however, not all of the chapter images are drawn from photographs. Other chapters contain drawings that were inspired from paintings, films, myths, and objects such as toys or teacups. Attached to each image is a specific memory and its narrative, but from each memory Bartók is able to recall other experiences that she then explores in her narrative. Her imagistic structure is an alternative to what Eakin calls “temporal tracking,” or the time-based organizational structure of autobiographical narrative, which relates memories in a sequential and not necessarily associational order (3). Such imagistic non-sequential figurations of life narrative are becoming increasingly present in the genre, as the rise of autobiographical graphic narratives such as *Maus* and *Fun Home*—both of which I will discuss in subsequent chapters—and multimedia projects, like Bartók’s, demonstrate.

The images and the memory techniques that she employs allow Bartók to traverse through her life across a web of associations. Her memories are often heavily associated with images and places, which bypasses a more traditional, cause-and-effect, autobiographical order. In the “Medusa” chapter, Bartók writes about her childhood understanding of her mother’s illness, a school-yard fight, playing with her sister, and her mother’s increasingly violent behavior. In the same chapter, however, she also reflects on her mother’s psychological state on the day that she gave birth to her, ponders the origin of psychosis as her five-year-old self, and
considers what her neighbors might think if her mother tried once again to jump out of a window.

As a mnemonicist, Bartók can begin at any locus in the memory palace, and connect her memories accordingly (7). Focusing on imagistic and locational memory cues encourages Bartók to move freely between time periods and analytical points-of-view: collaged images, rather than linear and sequential ones, are a map for her memories.

“Palimpsest Part III”

In *The Memory Palace*, images are ever-present and are often powerful symbols of Bartók’s affective experiences. Bartók’s religious upbringing is singular in that her grandfather is Eastern Orthodox and Hungarian, and her grandmother is Jewish. This admixture is reflected in the various secular and non-secular traditions that her art takes inspiration from.

Bartók is a painter, a viewer of religious Eastern Orthodox religious iconography and Medieval illuminations, and a lover of art museums. As a child she makes frequent visits to the Cleveland Museum of Art simply to view a fifteenth-century book of hours. Bartók is fascinated by medieval illuminations, and as an adult almost unwittingly forges one for an Italian art dealer. Although the holiness of icons and illuminations fascinates her, the thing that draws her to religious iconography is not the holy image that graces the center of an illumination, but the naturalistic border of flowers, birds and other wildlife that surrounds it, “Each tiny bloom, wing, and beak looked so real and was rendered in such detail I felt I could crawl right inside the page” (177). Her desire to crawl into an image is a wish that she articulates a number of times in the text, and which she attributes to images’ holy power. They are a “kind
of language” in which Bartók intuitively communicates (8). In chapter three, “Passionflower,”
the holy power of religious iconography comes to the fore when Bartók places an image of a
passionflower, which she drew for her mother after September 11th 2001, in the memory palace.

In my palace, I leave Medusa and my mother behind and pass through a pillared hall of
shadows. I enter another room. The ceiling is high and arched like the nave of a small
church; the walls are a pale and lustrous gold. On the wall, a passionflower, glowing like
an icon . . . If you saw the flower from a distance, you might think it a portrait of a saint.

(40)

Bartók blends naturalistic images, such as those of flowers, with holy images, such as those of
saints. Yet the room that contains the passionflower only seems like a church and the
passionflower only seems like a saint. Bartók plays with the various functions that images can
have, emphasizing their mystery and their power. From a young age, Bartók uses images to
protect herself, to control her life, and to alleviate the pain of others, especially her mother. Yet
images, as the text demonstrates a number of times—notably in “Medusa” where the photograph
fails to account for the events that come before or after its taking—are also unreliable. Still,
Bartók wonders, “Can a painting save a person’s life?” (53) The paintings she creates for her
homeless mother, and the illumination-like images that grace the beginning of each chapter of
her memoir, suggest that she remains faithful to the holy mystery and power of images; they are
evidence of her devotion to her mother—also a lover of art and an artist—and a manifestation of
her guilt during their seventeen-year estrangement.
While visual archetypes, religious iconography, and cognitive dissonance are some of the subjects that are often discussed in psychoanalysis, this project analyzes them not as examples of repression or other defense mechanisms, but, as cognitive psychologists would say, as tools that allow Bartók to organize and take control of her life. She uses the visual, the religious, and uncertainty to frame her narrative and to order and make meaning out of her memories. For Bartók the symbolism of the religious icon is less important than the actual power that, as a child, she attributes to it. Indeed, as I note in my introduction and reiterate here, psychoanalysis’ figuration of memory is inadequate because, as psychologists Porter and Reisberg note, its belief in repression is hostile to autobiography. If all memories are manifestations of defense mechanisms and not actual memories, then we are unable to treat autobiography without suspicion; instead, we are bound to search for the screen memories and the defense mechanisms behind the narratives we tell (61). A psychoanalytic approach to autobiography is yet another way to exercise referential authoritarianism on the genre: an attempt to parse the fiction from the truth, rather than respecting the narrative as a complete and self-sustaining entity. Freudian constructs of memory have been falling out of favor with psychologists over the past couple of decades, especially in the face of neurological discoveries of how memory functions (61). In “Autobiography and Memory,” Porter and Reisberg “ask how prominent is the role for self-defense in our recollection?” (62) They have found that emotionally positive and emotionally negative events are more likely to be remembered because they are meaningful or important to the subject (62). Our brains do not frequently screen traumatic memories from us via defense
mechanisms such as repression; in fact, we are more likely to remember traumatic memories all too well.

Even before Norma becomes homeless, Bartók creates drawings and paintings to make her mother feel better. One fall, when Bartók is still a child, Norma is sent to Cleveland Psychiatric Institute where she is hospitalized for a prolonged period of time. Bartók and her grandmother visit Norma in the psych ward, a dangerous place where a patient mistakes Bartók for someone who owes her money. Even at a young age, Bartók recognizes the danger of mental illness, the fragility of her mother, and her own desire to “cure” Norma of her delusions:

“Grandma and I go up to my mother and I hug her carefully, as if she were made of glass. She looks up, then quickly looks away, like she is looking for someone who didn’t come” (57). During Norma’s ramblings about camera tricks and microphones, Bartók hands her, “a stack of drawings—bunnies, flowers, horses and dinosaurs, Snoopy and Charlie Brown” (57). But when she realizes that her mother is ignoring the pictures, instead talking about lobotomies and forced sterilization, Bartók regrets the types of paintings she made for her mother: “I wish I had painted a tiny icon she could wear around her neck—a golden saint lifted up by birds or a Madonna with a wreath of flowers around her head” (57). As her mother continues to give voice to her paranoid delusions, young Mira wishes she drew her “towering walls of luminous saints and flowers, a hundred vats of rosewater, a thousand pots of magic tea” (57). Bartók will draw or paint her mother countless “protective” images, but, as this early childhood memory suggests, no painting will help Norma to dispel the Medusa living inside of her brain. Art and music are important aspects of both Mira’s and her mother’s lives. They seem, however, to express their
artistic passions in parallel and separate ways: “For years to come I will make pictures and bring them to the hospital, but her smile, when she sees them, will be ever so brief” (57). A painting might not be able to save Norma’s life; still, it is one of the only non-destructive modes of communication between mother and daughter.

There are a number of scenes in which Bartók describes how similar her life is to her mother’s, despite the different circumstances they find themselves in. After Bartók’s traumatic brain injury, the similarities between their lives become even more apparent. What is remarkable about these similarities, however, is that before their reunion in late 2006—shortly before Norma dies from stomach cancer—they have not seen each other, or spoken directly in seventeen years. Instead, Bartók set up a circuitous letter-correspondence scheme involving a post office box in a friend’s name, in a state where Bartók doesn’t live. The decision to cut off contact with her mother took Bartók many years to finally make, and she did so only after Norma’s behavior became dangerously violent and erratic. Unlike her sister Natalia, however, Mira cannot fully sever her relationship to her mother; instead she keeps her at a safe distance. She controls the type of interactions she has with Norma, much like, as a child, she used images (her art) to try and control her mother’s illness. Bartók and her mother preserve the results of their controlled communication: a vibrant correspondence full of drawings, letters, exhibit catalogs, and various other ephemera. Some of these letters make their way into The Memory Palace as small inter-chapters written by Norma that act as a bridge between Bartók’s full chapters. Unlike the inter-chapters in McCarthy’s memoir, which serve the purpose of challenging the veracity of the material in the full-length chapters, Bartók’s inter-chapters add nuance and complication to her
story. Such complicated points of view and expansive plot arcs are enabled by Bartók’s engagement with neurological memory. By admitting to her memory’s malfunction, she frees up her autobiographical lens to focus on her mother’s writings and experiences as much as her own. Instead of answering the siren call for referential certainty, Bartók’s memoir builds a visually inspired and multi-layered narrative out of her memory’s flaws, malfunctions, and gaps. What results is rich in content and aesthetic detail.

Strikingly, Norma’s letters echo, parallel, and sometimes sound like Bartók’s writing and vice-versa. Mother and daughter are bound through their correspondence and the art they produce and share, but also through their experiences and the way they write. At times they even live in the same city and view the same art: “When she lived in Chicago the same time I did in the early nineties we even went to see the same exhibits. I’d always wear dark sunglasses and tuck my hair up in my hat just in case” (61). In spite of her fear of confronting her mother face-to-face, Bartók is able to communicate her love and concern for her mother through letters and art: “Each year for her birthday on November 17, I sent her a museum date book. I found most of them in her storage room at U-Haul . . . She also copied the pictures with oil pastels or colored pencils and glued them onto large collages she called her ‘posters of intent’” (61). In chapter four, “The Eye of Goya,” where all of these memories come from, Bartók includes a number of excerpts from Norma’s letters, most of which demonstrate the communicative power of art and the visual, in some way. Mira and Norma share their art and the art of others in an attempt to communicate their day-to-day experiences, as well as their creative aspirations to one another;
images allow them to bond in a way that face-to-face interaction, or even spoken conversation would forestall. Art is their emotional conduit.

“Chapter 10 Rider”

Although Bartók relies on images to order her world—as evidenced by the stack of drawings that she creates for her mother when she is institutionalized and her desire to bestow on her mother protective religious icons—the moments when images fail to protect or lose their power, are more telling of Bartók’s struggle with articulating her memories and her emotions: they also tell us more about the elusiveness of memory. There is one such moment where images fail Bartók, in chapter ten, “Death, the Rider.” In this chapter, Bartók paints, “a white stallion leaping across an indigo sky,” with the inscription Help is on the way, for her mother in 1981 (142). By 1988, her mother’s mental state, as well as her relationship with her own mother, who has Alzheimer’s disease, is deteriorating and Mira has to go to court to legally separate them. For the first time, Norma is living on her own in her parents’ house and her surprise visits to her daughters, as well as her violent paranoia, increase dramatically. Mira and her sister decide that they need to persuade their mother to move into a group home or a treatment facility, so they and their boyfriends go to Cleveland to confront Norma. They find Norma living in filth—dirty dishes all over the kitchen, the bathroom toilet clogged and overflowing. Before Mira and her sister can speak with their mother, Norma breaks a bottle and chases Mira throughout the house. When their boyfriends come back from the store, they all run away from Norma. The next day they have her hospitalized so that they can go
through the filthy house. Mira and her sister sort through their mother’s letters and photographs of her as a young teenager. But before they can accomplish anything, Norma returns and another fight ensues. Mira’s boyfriend Agostino tells Norma that she doesn’t deserve the painting of the white stallion: “They both grab on to the picture and pull . . . I can hear my drawing starting to tear but the paper is tough and maybe will withstand the fight. Agostino and my mother give it one more tug, shouting back and forth, while I sneak into the dining room” (159). As the fighting continues Mira seems to fade into the background of the conflict. Silently, she steals a handful of photographs and then commands the others to run away. Photographs and paintings lurk in the background of this traumatic memory, punctuating its nightmarish qualities. Despite Bartók’s best intentions, images consistently fail to help or heal Norma and, in fact, are a major source of focused tension (as the fight with Agostino demonstrates). Images cannot help to order Norma’s life; instead they become tangled up with her psychosis. At the end of the chapter, Mira realizes that the images she “rescued”—a notable word here when we think of the way she uses images to exert control in her life—were photographs of people she doesn’t know (159). Bartók’s failed attempt to rescue her mother from the squalor she has been living in is mirrored in her failed attempt to rescue photographs of her family and its legacy. Images fill in for emotional loss and longing, they often provide insight into Norma’s life before her illness took control of her, and they are substitutes, or cues, for memories in the narrative. Still, images fail to consistently exert power or control in chaotic situations, thus demonstrating the referential uncertainty of images and their suspect place within the genre of life narrative.
At the end of The Memory Palace, the images that grace the beginning of each chapter are placed together to form the portico of Bartók’s memory palace, depicted above. The drawing of the photograph of Norma is in the center of the structure, above it is an image of Medusa, and below it is the image of the passion flower that resembles a Saint. Vines creep up a pair of columns on either side of Norma’s image, and tiles with a recurring image of a running horse extend across the bottom border of the portico. Death, mounted on a pale horse sits atop what looks like a small open-faced cabinet outside of the central structure, to the right. Pelicans perch on large Doric columns on either side of the portico. Although the image at the end of the book is in black and white, Bartók includes a full-color image of the palace on her website that more fully represents many of the textual descriptions of the individual images, which make reference to celestial blue, deep vermillion, and dull gold; all colors one can find in the art of religious
iconography, especially relating to the Saints or the Virgin Mary. Interestingly, the final image of the memory palace does not reflect Bartók’s verbal descriptions of the palace, which portray a more traditional mnemonic structure with rooms and hallways of varying design. In this image, there are no demarcated rooms, windows, or doors. Instead the image looks like a cross-section of a portico that is only vaguely reminiscent of an entryway. Any one of the images in the center of the edifice could be a door or a window into the larger structure, or they could simply be all that is contained within the memory palace. The images then are depicted as an optical illusion; either full or shallow; the memories inside the portico are not easily demarcated.

The various architectural designs that the structure takes inspiration from—a Greco-Roman Hall, a Curiosity Cabinet, a Church altar—call attention to the mutability and mystery of the memory palace. Furthermore, the presentation of particular memories, but the obfuscation of the entryway in the drawing, mirrors the accessibility and inaccessibility of memory: there is only so much depth that one can produce in a book about memories. The design of the concluding image of the memory palace seems to more closely resemble a curiosity cabinet rather than a palace, so it is fitting that the final chapter of the narrative is called “A Cabinet of Wonders.”

In the last chapter, Bartók creates a memorial in her studio. On a shelf she places, “things I had collected from my mother’s wunderkammer: a bag of hair, a set of her teeth, my plastic pony with the broken leg, a child’s book about owls. I place a framed photograph of her in her favorite red-flowered dress, smiling, her arms outstretched toward the viewer” (300). Next to the photograph she places her mother’s paint box, a prayer card for St. Jude (the patron saint of
hopeless and difficult cases), the seventeen keys her mother owned, and her mother’s ashes. One can see the visual structure of the memory palace emulated in Bartók’s memorial shelf—each of her mother’s objects is placed in a specific location because it has a particular and meaningful relationship to the objects around it—each imagine, by virtue of its placement, encourages Bartók to remember her mother. The memory palace is an exercise in associational memory. The design of the structure that she creates, however, can be interpreted as emulating a number of different structures. Whichever architectural inspiration one chooses to see in her art, the motivation behind its production remains the same—that is, to create a personally meaningful, and devotional, rendition of her memories of her mother’s life and death. She skirts her damaged memory systems in search of the wonder and the mystery of experience: “Memory is the enemy of wonder, which abides nowhere else but in the present. This is why, unless you are a child, wonder depends on forgetting—on a process, that is, of subtraction” (290). Her memory palace contains lineage, cultural and familial history, and modified family portraits; it condenses countless memories into accessible and associated moments and is, quite literally, a site for honoring and preserving what is left of memory. The slippage of mnemonic constructs in this text is a testament to the elusive quality of cognitive structures, memories, and emotional states, yet the presence of a visual and textual repository of memory demonstrates Bartók’s triumph over such uncertainties.

By the end of the story, when the memory palace has been fully constructed, it is evident that images help to focalize what might otherwise be chaotic and messily conveyed memories. Bartók’s brain injury prevents her from relying on her memories as a framing mechanism.
Because of the damage to her prefrontal cortex, her attention and reasoning are inhibited. Thus, she must find a new way in which to recognize certain events as significant, and detail them as such in her narrative. Her mother’s illness and approaching death lend urgency to this task, as does her own struggle with brain injury. Mnemonics and art help her to create a life story that coheres; however, what we can surmise from the prominence, but also the malfunction of images, in the text, is that Bartók is unable to produce a panacea for her mother’s illness, or for her own. Icons and Illuminations might act as sign-posts in this memoir, but even they are limited in the guidance they can offer during a journey to “find” memory.

3. The Death of Memory? Technology’s Interface with Literacy and Knowledge

   Like written language, mnemonics is a technique created for learning, storing, and accessing large amounts of information. Both techniques alter a person’s relationship to his or her memory system. Yet at one point, both written language and mnemonics were “new technologies” that challenged earlier ways of learning and storing information. For over two millennia, critics and scholars have decried new technology and its effect on the possession and use of knowledge. Approximately 2,500 years before Joshua Foer—modern-day mnemonicist, memory games champion, and journalist—gave a presentation titled “The End of Remembering,” Socrates argued that written language would ruin our capacity to remember and diminish humanity’s access to knowledge. At almost the precise moment when the art of memory (mnemonics) was created in ancient Greece, 5th century BCE, written language was becoming popular (Foer 130). Mnemonics was an attempt to uphold and preserve Greek oral culture; it placed emphasis not just on mechanically memorizing information, but creating
associative links between seemingly disparate information. In *Moonwalking With Einstein*, Foer researches both the science and the art of memory. What Simonides intuitively understood when he connected visual cues and textual information to identify the mangled bodies of the party-goers, Foer explains in psychological and neurological terms: “The more associative hooks a new piece of information has, the more securely it gets embedded into the network of things you already know, and the more likely it is to remain in memory” (165). Even as written language seemed to threaten internal memory systems, as well as Greek intellectual culture, practitioners of mnemonics approached memory and knowledge schematically and visually, which allowed them to connect and therefore learn large amounts of information in relatively short periods of time. Mnemonics prompted rhetoricians to rely on their internal memory systems more so than the externalizing processes of writing. Some philosophers, like Socrates, argued that the art of memory allowed scholars to learn information more deeply and truly than written language ever could. According to Socrates, even in ancient Greece, we were already in an age where a human’s memory capacity was in danger of waning.

Over two and a half millennia later, Socrates’ fear of technology’s adverse affects on how we learn is still a major concern among educators, cultural critics, concerned parents, etc. For thousands of years memory has been a crucial component to understanding knowledge and experience, yet only recently have we started to unravel the mystery of brain physiology and the parts of the brain implicated in learning and retaining information. What emerges when we peel back the layers of how the brain operates when it is engaged in mnemonic or linguistic tasks is that they are very much interrelated and that synthesis between the two cognitive processes
produces rich cognitive output. Mnemonics is a creative cognitive schema that, unbeknownst to its early practitioners, utilizes large areas of the occipital lobe—where most functions related to vision take place, such as the visual cortex—to create a mind map of textual and conceptual information. Reading, on the other hand, heavily utilizes the executive attention network, which “lies below the deep fissure between hemispheres in the two frontal lobes” (146). Both systems rely on memory and association in their processes.

As in mnemonics systems, which require the practitioner’s short-term attention and retention of information, working memory is a crucial part of reading processes. The parts of the brain where working memory is housed are located within the frontal lobe. Working memory is important to reading comprehension because it allows a person, “to hold on to information briefly, so that we can perform a task with it . . . working memory ensures that we can keep the initial visual identification of a word in mind long enough to add the rest of the information about the word (such as meaning and grammatical use)” (147). Working memory is organic “mnemonic glue” that allows a person to pay attention to newly encountered information, whereas mnemonicists work to create synthetic “mnemonic glue” by pairing images and places (and long-term memories), with new information. Bartók’s brain injury was in the frontal lobe—the site of the executive attention network and working memory—which means that her ability to retain information was incapacitated because the parts of the brain that carry out short-term tasks involving concentration, retention, and critical thinking were damaged. Instead of relying on her frontal lobe to produce organic “mnemonic glue,” she relied heavily on the occipital lobe and mnemonics to produce synthetic “mnemonic glue” that hooks onto and holds new information
long enough to become part of long-term memory (96). She benefited from the open architecture of the brain, which allowed her to redirect the processes by which she learns and retains new knowledge.

Interestingly, the changes that occurred in Bartók’s memory systems after her brain injury are similar to the reorganization process that occurs when novice readers become expert readers. Expert readers rely more heavily on “all the cognitive expertise described in the time line for words, but also the impact of life experiences (156). When expert readers try to understand the more abstract concepts of a text and evoke general background knowledge, they activate their long-term memory systems (159). The process by which readers become experts suggests that the more we experience in the world, the more we learn, and the more adept we become at comprehending what we read. Both mnemonics and reading, at the expert level, rely, to a large extent, on short-term and long-term memory. They are also both methods for learning significant amounts of information. In fact, mnemonics and written language are quite similar in that their end goal is obtaining and understanding knowledge, and often they are synthesized as in the mnemonic system of Gregor Von Feinaigle—the late eighteenth century mnemonicist (Peterfreund 408). Bartók also relies on both written language and the art of memory in her narrative. The schema of mnemonics might be underutilized for ordering and associating information, but, as Yates argues, it is a useful system for learning—for coming to a deeper understanding of the relationship between different points of information—that functions in very similar ways to written language.
The art of memory is like an inner writing. Those who know the letters of the alphabet can write down what is dictated to them and read out what they have written. Likewise those who have learned mnemonics can set in place what they have heard and deliver it from memory. For the places are very much like wax tablets or papyrus, the images like the letters, the arrangement and disposition of the images like the script, and the delivery is like the reading. (6)

Like reading, mnemonics is a process that is strengthened by making insightful connections between information in long-term memory and new information. Additionally, mnemonics and written language can be crucial devices for understanding the self in the world because they engage long-term autobiographic memory, as well as the executive attention network, which is important for logical reasoning. The continued use of literacy and mnemonics suggests that we have not reached a moment in time where we are at the end of remembering; rather we are at a moment where the various ways in which we remember information are becoming synthesized, especially with the aid of new technology. Bartók synthesizes mnemonics and written language, internal and external memory systems, visual and textual elements. She draws her memory palace and writes about her experiences within its structural framework in order to cope with her traumatic brain injury and its resulting memory loss. Both mnemonics and written language, and accompanying visual and textual ephemera, help her to arrange her memories and come to a deeper understanding of mental illness, love, family, and loss.
4. “A Baby of the War”: The Collapse of Cultural Memory and Personal Memory

Memoirists often single out personal events that are particularly influential on their narrative and write about them. Cultural and historical events, however, often act as framing devices that help the memoirist to contextualize personal events. For example, at the beginning of Sylvia Plath’s autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood discusses the trial and public execution of the Rosenbergs: “I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn’t get them out of my mind” (1). The Rosenberg trial was a public spectacle that captured the nation’s attention during the summer of 1953—the height of the red scare—Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were tried and convicted for espionage and executed. At the time, Esther is living in New York City, working for a popular ladies’ magazine. Upon arriving in New York, Esther becomes horribly depressed. Narratively, Esther links the beginning of her depression with the Rosenbergs’ execution:

I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I’d been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I’d totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue (2).

Esther conflates the public death of two spies with her own feelings of failure and alienation. The subject and corresponding imagery of the Rosenbergs’ execution reemerges in chapter nine when Esther and another intern discuss the event:
So I said, ‘Isn’t it awful about the Rosenbergs?’ The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night. ‘Yes!’ Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat’s cradle of her heart. It was only as the two of us waited for the others in the tomblike morning gloom of the conference room that Hilda amplified that Yes of hers. ‘It’s awful such people should be alive.’ (100)

In the chapters that follow this conversation, Esther leaves her internship and returns to her family home in Boston. Her depression, however, becomes more acute and she attempts to kill herself a number of times. The shock of the particularly brutal public execution of the Rosenbergs is a cultural moment that becomes intertwined with Esther’s personal struggles with depression and its treatments, such as shock therapy. Although she doesn’t consciously understand why she is obsessed with the Rosenbergs, her description of their electrocution suggests a subconscious connection, nonetheless: “It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves” (1). In the second half of the text, Esther begins, in earnest, her quest for death when she overdoses, after which point she undergoes shock treatment (ECT)—a procedure that she describes in uncannily similar ways to her description of the Rosenbergs’ execution, which is further evidence that Esther is associating her personal experience with the cultural memory of the widely publicized execution.30

*The Memory Palace* is also set in the post-World War Two period and the protagonist also struggles to understand and connect momentous cultural events such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Bosnian War, with personal memory. Like *The Bell Jar*, it
features a prominent character whose psychological disorder is frequently connected to cultural events that take place around the time when the character begins to manifest symptoms of her disorder. Esther traces her disaffection and her anxiety to the red scare and the brutality that American citizens demonstrate when they voice their opinions about the Rosenbergs. Similarly, the events of World War Two permeate Norma’s paranoid delusions. *The Memory Palace* is replete with references to World War Two, the Holocaust, Nazi experiments, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Atom Bomb. In fact, while the text is told from Bartók’s viewpoint and captures many of her personal experiences, it also traces the emergence of her mother’s psychosis to the day that the United States dropped atomic bombs on Japan and frequently makes allusions to the Holocaust and World War Two when describing the circumstances surrounding her mother’s illness. This section will examine some neurological explanations for the intimate connection between cultural events and private memories.

In *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories: How unforgettable moments help us understand the meaning of our lives*, David Pillemer suggests that particularly memorable (and often traumatic) events profoundly impact the lives of individuals and that the telling of personal narrative is a vital part of the healing process. The narrative movement—which encourages patients to tell their life narratives in a therapeutic setting, and to heal through autobiographical discourse—has become widely popular in psychological communities, but there is a debate over whether the truth of a narrative matters to the patient’s therapeutic process. Pillemer makes the distinction between narrative truth and historical truth: conviction is linked to narrative truth, while facts are linked to historical truth: “When we arrive at the historical truth, our description
of a prior event is based on the ‘facts’; when we arrive at the narrative truth our explanation carries ‘conviction’” (10). He places primacy on narrative truth—even though it might not be a perfect representation of the historical past—because it “‘depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality’” (10). Psychologists who follow the narrative movement focus on autobiography and subjective narrative truth, rather than objective historical truth, because they believe that autobiographical memories ought not to be analyzed for their historical accuracy; instead, “memories of specific life episodes are psychologically real entities that are worthy of study independently of their objective truth value” (11). Life narrative and its accompanying memories have their own narratological structure that, when examined, illuminates the experiences and thoughts of the subject, regardless of how inconsistent it might seem with broader historical or cultural information. The use of narrative as therapy in cognitive psychology has its roots in psychoanalysis; however, while Freud argued that there must be some historical truth in a subjective narrative, theorists working during the Cognitive Revolution (Jerome Bruner, George Miller), “endorsed the study of lives through autobiography . . . in which belief rather than accuracy is the primary consideration” (11). Life narrative, then, carries therapeutic weight, in large part because of its subjective and biased qualities: cognitive psychologists lifted life narrative out of its confines of referential truth and managed to change the expectations with which they approached peoples’ life stories. Literary critics ought to take a similar approach to life narrative, where the analysis of subjective truth and narrative structure are given priority over what psychologists consider to be an unobtainable historical truth.
Of course, Pillemer is also careful to point out that major cultural events can also profoundly affect how people shape their private memories. He uses the example of a woman, Lenore Terr, who recalls a traumatic childhood experience where she watched a newsreel of the Atomic Bomb being dropped on Japan. Terr vividly describes the experience, recalling visual stimuli from the film. She also clearly describes her physical and mental states while watching the devastating after-effects of the Bomb on the Japanese. Pillemer suggests that although Terr did not physically experience the bombs being dropped on Japan, this moment was profoundly influential and continued to shape her well into her adulthood, especially in her profession as a psychiatrist who researches early childhood trauma (26). Secondhand experience of cultural events can deeply affect people, especially if a cultural event is meaningful in an extraordinary way: “The distinction between public and personal newsworthy events is further blurred by the fact that reactions to, and memories of, a public tragedy are colored by the strength of one’s perceived personal connection to the target event” (36). In memoir, cultural memories are often deeply embedded in narratives about personal experience, but what happens when, as with Bartók’s mother Norma, psychosis prevents a person from distinguishing between cultural memory and personal memory? What happens when schizophrenia causes a person to see personally relevant patterns in all types of cultural events?

Mira Bartók’s mother Norma is a paranoid schizophrenic. From a young age, Bartók is aware, at least viscerally if not intellectually, of her mother’s mental illness. She watches her mother’s manic highs and depressive lows: her delusions and her irrational fears; she watches her mother become the Medusa, slicing a knife through the air while laughing uncontrollably.
Although Norma displays schizophrenic tendencies well before Bartók was born, the author attempts to pinpoint the origin of her illness. Bartók links the moment when the United States dropped the Atom Bomb on Japan to the emergence of her mother’s mental illness.

I never realized until then that my mother lost her mind the year we dropped the bomb. Seven months after she graduated, in August 1945, America obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Shortly afterward while on a bus coming home from a movie with her father, the voices inside my mother’s head arrived unannounced, in all their terrible glory. (22)

Bartók recognizes the trauma of witnessing, even at a remove, the destruction of two major cities and the deaths of so many hundreds of thousands of people, and so she identifies this as the moment that pushed her mother over the edge of mental stability into a world of unfettered paranoia and delusions. Later in the text, Bartók will again make reference to this moment when her mother “lost her mind”: “I didn’t know at the time that it was the place where she had had one of her first psychotic breakdowns in 1945, not too long after American dropped the bomb” (148). In this instance, Bartók links her mother’s mental illness not only to a momentous cultural event (the dropping of the Atom Bomb) but also to a physical place (a transient women’s residence in Detroit) and a personal experience (her mother attending a music conservatory after high school). Interestingly, this cultural event seems to displace some of the other potential contributors to Norma’s psychosis, such as her age (she was eighteen or nineteen when she first showed signs of being schizophrenic), the abuse she suffered at the hands of her tyrannical father, or the sexual abuse her psychiatrist inflicted upon her during their weekly sessions. All of these other possible explanations for her mental illness are noted and discussed but never directly
linked to the first moment that she became ill. Bartók argues that violent historical events profoundly and irrevocably shape personal identity. Cultural memories haunt personal memories, especially in the mentally ill who often cannot distinguish between their personal experiences and events that take place in society.

Schizophrenia is a cognitive disorder often accompanied by paranoid delusions: it also impairs logical thinking, emotional response, and social behavior. Neuroscientists Carol Tamminga, Ana Stan, and Anthony Wagner have found that the hippocampus of a schizophrenic is very different than in that of a normal person: “In schizophrenia, alterations in hippocampal anatomy, perfusion, and activation are consistently reported; impairments in declarative memory function, especially in the flexible use of event memories (e.g., in the service of memory-based inference), are common (1178). In other words, the schizophrenic’s hippocampus is damaged and therefore less active than that of a person with a normally functioning brain. This damage affects the subject’s visual and verbal declarative memory—the memory system that recalls events and facts—as well as pattern recognition, working memory, and processing speed (1181). The most profound impairments to the schizophrenic’s hippocampus are to visual and verbal declarative memory, which include “impairments in the flexible (inferential) use of learned knowledge and 2) greater deficits in recall relative to item recognition, memory for the source or context of an experience relative to item memory, and recognition based on the recollection of event details relative to perceived item familiarity” (1182). This is important because it suggests that the psychosis and cognitive dysfunction that schizophrenics display is linked through the impairment of declarative memory (1181). In a working brain, the hippocampus is a vital part of
learning and memory. In particular, the hippocampus “includes two necessary but opposing functions: 1) pattern separation at initial memory storage (to render stored memory patterns distinct from each other and [to] avoid ‘spurious blending’” and 2) pattern completion at memory recall (to recover a full, or more complete, memory from a partial cue)” (1185). A schizophrenic’s hippocampus is constantly making patterns out of information, but often these patterns are inappropriate associations and “false or illogical memories, [that] create a susceptibility to psychosis” (1185). A schizophrenic brain also has trouble encoding and recalling information from declarative memory, because of the abnormality of the hippocampus’s anatomy. Schizophrenics, like Norma, cannot distinguish between what they have experienced and what others have experienced because they cannot accurately recall patterns of information connected to an experience. Norma’s hippocampus is in over-drive, trying to form associations between experiences that are otherwise, such as in a non-schizophrenic’s brain, unassociated. Even as her declarative memory fails, she sees patterns that reflect her personal experiences everywhere: in music, in art, and, especially, in cultural memories.

Bartók’s mother searches for “prophetic signs” everywhere: in television shows, books, music, and art. Oftentimes, her search for patterns affects her children: “My mother sometimes takes me out of school to see James Bond films with sexy lady spies and masked men in speedboats shooting guns. There are signs embedded in the Bond films—symbols laden with meaning, clues that can unlock a code she’ll decipher later on” (73). Norma’s recurring paranoid delusions are about rape, murder, physical experimentation, and various forms of subjugation.
When she reads Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, she fears that men with guns will kill her family while they sleep (48). When Mira begins dating a boy with the last name Heilman, she thinks he is a Nazi, “A man who salutes Hitler” (106). The delusional patterns that Norma makes out of various signs allow her to organize her life. Often the paranoid delusions that she has are a collection of signs that are connected back to a personal memory. For example, when she continually asks her daughters if they have ever had sex with men, or been raped, her paranoia harkens back to when she was sexually abused by her psychiatrist. When she demands that her adult daughters move back to Cleveland to live with her, she is trying to reenact and change the experience of her husband abandoning her. Many of the patterns that Norma sees as omens of death and suffering are rooted in her lived experience; they are, however, distorted and falsely aligned with unrelated information, such as movies, surnames, and art.

One recurring set of delusions that Norma recalls throughout the narrative is of undergoing experiments by the Nazis. Although Norma is Jewish, or at least her mother is Jewish, she is not a survivor of the Holocaust. Still, she makes a number of references to being persecuted and harmed by Nazis and other conspirators. In the chapter, “The Vigilance of Dolphins,” Norma refuses to let Mira go on a date with John Heilman: “He’s a Nazi. You can tell by his name. John Heilman. Heil Mann, my mother said. See? A man who salutes Hitler. It’s right in front of your eyes. My mother could break the secret code for just about anything” (106). In response to her fears of Nazi persecution, and as a means of protecting her family from her imagined assailants, Norma buys a gun and conducts target practice in the backyard. When Mira tells her that she could kill someone Norma dismisses her fears: “You’re so naïve. We’re Jews.
There are those who wish us dead” (106). Norma’s paranoid delusions dictate her life; they tell her when she should roam the country in search of daughters who need protection, and they tell her when to arm herself against her imagined enemies. Frequently, her enemies are Nazis who do bizarre things, such as kidnap her to do experiments on her heart (78, 130).

The pervasiveness with which the Holocaust and Jewish persecution make their way into Norma’s paranoid delusions suggests that the cultural memory of World War Two is not only important for Bartók’s contextualization of her mother’s mental illness, it is also an important component of Norma’s personal memories. Norma’s declarative memory has been damaged as a result of her mental illness, yet she constructs a narrative about external forces that have stolen her memories to account for her memory loss (23, 114). However, Norma also admits that she sometimes simply cannot recall her own memories. In an excerpt from one of her letters to Bartók, she says that she is keeping a journal because: “there is always the continuous anxiety of blanking out again” (60). Norma needs to remind herself constantly to remember, yet, interestingly, she notes: “One can’t always rely on who was there, but on oneself” (60). Her distinction between witness and self suggests a fissure in her conceptualization of identity: she might be present to experience an event; however she might be unable to recall that event later on. Often schizophrenics display disassociation between experience and selfhood: there are times when Norma says that she is watching herself, or “the movie version” of her life, rather than experiencing the world as a complete and fully rendered ‘I’ (142). Her reliance on cultural memories about the Holocaust to explain her personal experiences demonstrates her inability to distinguish between what has happened to her and what has happened to others. The cultural
memories of World War II and her personal memories, however, seem to be related enough for her hippocampus to form an associative pattern: “spurious blending,” as Tamminga notes, of declarative memory and cultural memory is the result (1185).

The breakdown of Norma’s cognitive reasoning, and the breakdown of her declarative memory system results in paranoid delusions of Nazis and masked gunmen. In patterns of otherwise unrelated information, vital clues tell her how to secure the safety of her family and of her life. It makes sense that narratives from World War II make their way into Norma’s life narrative—into her personal memories, many of which seem tinged with exploitation and abuse—however, what do we make of Mira Bartók’s use of similar cultural memories in the narrative? How do we understand her use of these tropes in the framing of her life narrative? Bartók’s use of World War II metaphors is a complicated, but important component to her autobiographical project.

Because of her injury, Bartók is able to understand her mother’s memory loss and the accompanying anxiety that she has. Both women are worried about losing their memories: Norma of her day-to-day experiences and Bartók of her mother. Both women, therefore, engage in writing life narrative in order to somehow “pin down” and order their memories. While Norma’s memory loss is also accompanied by paranoid delusions, Bartók’s is not. Mira centers her narrative on the crucial loss of her memory, but also on the loss of her mother. So when she uses World War II metaphors to describe her mother, her memories of her mother, and her feelings towards her mother, she is actually memorializing her mother. Bartók is preserving the past, and her mother’s memory, by uniting it with one of the most memorable (and ironically
unfathomable) traumatic memories in the world’s recent past. Through personalizing Holocaust metaphors, Bartók is engaged in the process of understanding her mother’s delusions, and also in understanding the nature of persecution, subjection, and, ultimately, how the human spirit confronts hardship. This book is Bartók’s memorial to a woman whose experiences with psychosis, homelessness, and abuse she can only ever partially understand and represent.

At the beginning of the text, Bartók makes the first of many references to the Holocaust. After a long period of estrangement, she visits her dying mother, whom she describes as a victim of the Holocaust: “‘How is she? asked Natalia. ‘Don’t be shocked. She looks like a survivor from the camps’” (15). Bartók’s analogy, which likens her dying mother to a camp survivor, is an exercise in inarticulation: unable to cope with the reality of her mother’s terminal illness, she reaches for a handy, if somewhat cliché, descriptor of Norma’s frail state. Even as she is landing in Cleveland to visit her mother at the hospital, Bartók envisions Norma as much younger and stronger than she is: “Even though she was not elderly, in my mind she was still the madwoman on the street, brandishing a knife; the woman who shouts obscenities at you in the park, who follows you down alleyways, lighting matches in your hair” (7). She cannot reconcile the memories that she has of her young and vigorous (and violent) mother, with that of the dying cancer patient whom she is visiting. Wracked with guilt over their estrangement, but also harboring lingering fear of her mother, Bartók is unable to conceptualize her mother’s current state except in the most abject way. So she reaches for the closest approximation to her mother’s state, which is that of a Holocaust survivor. Narratively, the ever-present Holocaust analogies heighten the tension between Bartók and her mother. They are a constant reminder of the
victimization that Mira and her sister faced at the hands of their mother, but Norma’s victimization is also called to the fore through these analogies. In many ways, likening the relationship between a mentally ill mother and her daughters to that of genocide survivors reminds us that there are many different types of victims in violent and tragic events. Even aggressors can be victims, as Norma so clearly demonstrates.

There are other moments in the text where Bartók likens her memories of her mother to those of participants in World War II. For example, when Mira and her sister return to Cleveland to try and gain power-of-attorney over their mother, they and Norma have a fight where Mira is threatened with being stabbed. During the time when the sisters think they have had their mother committed, Bartók describes them cleaning out their house as if it were a scene in a World War Two movie: “As the men scrub, my sister and I rummage through boxes and drawers, searching for things to take back. We are partisans on the move during World War II, ready to spring at the slightest sound. Every time the heater kicks on, Rachel and I jump” (156). Mira likens herself and her sister to partisans who, during World War II, were clandestine groups of freedom fighters who engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Axis. The partisans were incredibly mobile; often they had to pack up their operations in a pinch and relocate. The situation that Mira describes as a partisan rendezvous is fraught with tension. Bartók is ready to escape upon hearing the lowest sound: the slightest hint of danger sets her flight instinct into overdrive. Together, she and her sister search the house for documents that are meaningful: documents that tell them something about their mother and their family history. Information, in this situation, is vital to their agency in the face of their mother’s increasingly violent behavior, so when they search the
ruins of their grandmother’s home, they look for clues that might betray secret information about their mother’s life. Again, this analogy seems a bit too handy, a bit too cinematic, to be realistic; Bartók and her sister are not fighting a war. Their lives are in danger; as the next scene demonstrates when Norma returns to the house and once again brandishes a knife. The emotional atmosphere in the house is tense, and they are rushing to complete their task before their aggressive and dangerous mother returns.

One main objective for partisans during World War II was to successfully obtain information about the enemy that they could share with their allies. Mira and her sister have a similar objective. When they enter their mother’s house, it is under the pretense of cleaning; Both women, however, are engaged in a search for more insight into their mother’s illness and the life she lives. Although their mother is not their enemy, her illness certainly is, so they search for information. In one drawer, Mira finds carbon copies of letters that her mother sent to the psychiatrist that she claimed sexually abused her.

I start sifting through my grandmother’s bureau in the dining room. The first drawer I pull out is stuffed with carbon copies of letters my mother wrote to the psychiatrist in California. I wonder if he ever read them. I always thought he was one of her delusions, but a year before our grandmother started showing signs of Alzheimer’s, she told me that the story was indeed true, that the doctor had really raped our mother, even sodomized her. He had threatened to perform a lobotomy on her if she told anyone that he forced her to have sex with him every week . . . the doctor wrote a letter admitting to some of the things he had done. (156)
Using the imagery, and the tactics of World War II partisans, Bartók is able to trace the genealogy of one of her mother’s recurring paranoid delusions, that of her daughters being raped, and their wombs stolen. Through the covert infiltration of her mother’s house, the daughters are able to also infiltrate their mother’s illness. In the process, they come to understand a major piece of her paranoia, and the exploitation that she faced as a young mentally ill woman in the early 1950s. The doctor’s threat of lobotomizing Norma is perhaps one of the causes of her mistrust of healthcare providers and an explanation for why she refused to sign over her legal rights to her daughters. It is no coincidence that she calls them traitors and part of the Gestapo when they have her hospitalized so that they can clean the house (154). World War II metaphors are useful frames of reference that always already—by virtue of the pervasiveness of the cultural memory—explain traumatic emotional states, violent physical experiences, and devastating loss.

5. Towards a Transdisciplinary Third Culture

When I first begin tracing the contours of this project, I was deeply inspired by Mira Bartók’s *The Memory Palace*. Her work represents, through its structure and content, what I see as representative of memoir in the age following the Cognitive Revolution. At once highly conversant in cutting edge neurological research on memory loss and aesthetically aware of the tenuousness of memories as they are recalled and articulated in life writing, Bartók evokes many of the concerns with memory and representation that my project addresses. She examines memory from a number of different perspectives—the cultural, the scientific, the personal, the ontological—and while no one perspective affords her a complete understanding of how memory is bound up with identity and repackaged in the form of life narrative, all perspectives lead to a
fuller picture of memory’s role in the genre. That she is coming from an unusual circumstance (she is does not have a Neurotypical brain) where her injury has prevented her from writing and structuring her narrative in a more conventional way only emphasizes the qualities that are present in many contemporary life narratives. Some of these qualities include: a heavy reliance on visuality in narrative structure, a preoccupation with memory that is tinged with mistrust, and a desire to tell one’s life narrative in spite of the collapse of the referential certainty of memory, and also of the visual. This last part, about the importance of visuality in life narrative, is not only an aesthetic or narratological decision about form; visuality is an opportunity for people who otherwise do not have the verbal skills necessary to express life narrative. For the number of people with cognitive disorders that affect their capacity to speak, write, and remember the visual offers an alternative means of accessing thoughts and feelings. In short, visuality offers not only a new mode of aesthetic structure, and form, for the genre of life narrative, but also a different means to express the self. And, as a number of graphic artists—Marjane Satrapi, Joe Sacco, Lynda Barry, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Ellen Forney—demonstrate, the visual offers a second narrative track that often diverges from, and nuances, verbal life narrative.

Reading through Bartók’s memoir gave me a clear sense of the artistic analogue to the critical work in which this project is engaged. When one observes a memory take shape in one chapter, only to become embedded with a different memory in another chapter, and then to be completely reframed in a third chapter, such a sequence demonstrates the fluidity of memory’s place in life narrative and the importance of personal significance over historical accuracy. If Bartók’s life has become a palimpsest, “a piece of parchment from which someone has rubbed
off the words, leaving only a ghost image behind,” or a piece of paper that has been written on and erased a number of times, as she says at the beginning of the text, then writing and re-writing life narrative is crucial to her ordering of her memories and experiences (4). Without life narrative, Bartók’s experiences and memories would be ephemeral, leaving only faint traces in their wake. Without memories her identity would be caught in a repeating feedback loop—the very loop that I refer to in the introduction when I discuss some of the effects of memory loss on identity that Sacks has observed. Her book is not only an artistic undertaking but also, as Eakin suggests, indicative of a biological imperative to write and speak life narrative. The limitations of her brain, paradoxically, intensify her need to dictate and record the self.

The biological need to tell life narrative, however, is also bound up with instances of death and danger. Bartók’s memoir is constructed around two events that speak to her sense of mortality: her bodily injury and her mother’s illness and death. Reminders of mortality, and mortality itself, spur the telling of life narrative because apparently, our compulsion to understand the self and to memorialize the self becomes stronger as we reach the end of our lives. When faced with death, as the psychiatrist Harvey Chochinov noted during an interview with National Public Radio, patients feel compelled to speak about their lives, and he argues, this need ought to be attended to: “If the idea of having something that will outlast even you matters for patients that are near the end of life, then we need to do something that will create something that will last beyond . . . the patient” (par. 8). In other words, a person who is close to the end of her life, and who tells life narrative, engages in one final and meaningful task. She also has the opportunity to tell a different version of the story, as Chochinov says, “When you are standing at
death’s door and you have a chance to say something to someone, I absolutely think that that proximity to death is going to influence the words that come out of your mouth” (par. 11). One’s awareness of being in the final stages of life, or being aware of a loved one being near death, such as Bartók, encourages growth and change, which manifests in re-framed end-of-life narratives. The psychological and biological impulses that drive our compulsion to tell life narrative also help us to re-imagine our lives and our relationships with other people: for Bartók, and many other memoirists, this is a necessary and curative task.
Chapter 2

“Picturing It”: Visual Memory In June Jordan’s *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*

1. “Authenticating” June Jordan

June Jordan was not only a poet, an activist, and an author of children’s fiction, but also an essayist, a memoirist, a librettist, an urban planner, and a playwright. She is also perhaps the most published African American in the history of the United States (Gomez 717). The author of nearly thirty books, Jordan was a highly visible and socially engaged poet who, nevertheless, enjoyed only minimal critical treatment while she was still alive. Since her death in 2002 from breast cancer, however, critical interest in her work has grown. Many of the critical essays that treat her work posthumously are written with an eye towards her recent death and how her life as an activist poet can be read as a parable for various reform movements: from educational and linguistic to economic and geopolitical. In this way, June Jordan’s legacy, and her once vibrant role as a “revolutionary poet,” haunts her critical reception, even as her life’s story—the first twelve years of which is told in *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*—is often retrofitted to do the work of a number of social and political tasks. There is a dearth of critical approaches to her work that treat her life and art holistically and reciprocally.

Like Mira Bartók, Jordan is preoccupied with memory and childhood experiences of violence and tragedy and searches the recesses of her memory to provide a narrative that is visually stunning, yet resonant with violence, prejudice, and domination. Jordan plays with the concept of memory and uses her imagination, and her family’s legacy, to recall and record moments that she could not possibly remember, such as the day she was born, or the day that her
parents were married. Jordan’s memoir—poetic, vibrantly imagistic, and deeply affecting—is limited to the first twelve years of her life. Comprised of eleven chapters and a prologue; it begins with her family relocating from Harlem to Brooklyn and then moves non-chronologically from such moments as her birth, to her parents’ immigration and wedding, to her militaristic training sessions with her father. Soldier features her parents’ perennial battle over her education, her behavior, and her identity as well as their own struggles, as West Indian immigrants, to pursue the American dream. A Künstlerroman, the memoir chronicles Jordan’s journey to becoming a “soldier poet.” With the aid of both her mother and father, Jordan learns to love language and to see fearlessly, both of which are necessary to becoming an author. As Soldier demonstrates, however, these qualities come at high physical and emotional costs.

If Bartók’s memoir is like a palace in which each memory is associated with another through spatial arrangement, June Jordan’s memoir is like a mosaic in which each memory is associated imagistically. In Sensorium: embodied experience, technology, and contemporary art, Mark Doty recalls seeing a number of stacked visual images of horses, which makes their bodies both “particular” and “startlingly abstract” (108). Doty’s experience is a handy analogy for Soldier’s formal structure. Like a mosaic, it is comprised of many individual and visually segmented parts that, when placed together become contextualized. Many of the memories that Jordan articulates in her memoir are fragmented and partial and incredibly visual. Some sections within each chapter are no more than a few lines long, and most are no longer than a couple of pages but nearly all are attuned to color, lighting, and the ability or inability to see. Using what Roger Brown and James Kulik, in their 1977 article, identified as define as “flashbulb
memories”—memories that are highly visual, specific, and detailed—my analysis of Jordan’s self construction discovers an autobiographical subject who re-creates her life in snapshots, bringing to light discrete moments of identity formation even as she catalogues and records the stories of her family and the world around her. As Brown and Kulik describe them, “Flashbulb Memories are memories for the circumstances in which one first learned of a very surprising and consequential (or emotionally arousing) event” (73). Often, these visually and spatially-rooted memories form in response to major cultural events, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy; they are an autobiographical marker that locates the subject’s physical and emotional state at the time of the event. Derived from R. B. Livingston’s controversial and invalidated “Now-Print” theory (1967), which argued that our brains latch onto an experience immediately and “freeze-frame” it for future recall—flashbulb memories, originally studied from Kulik and Brown’s Behavioral vantage point, are beginning to garner interest in neuroscience. Through the use of brain imaging and behavioral techniques (such as interviews and questionnaires) Sharot et al. found that when 9/11 survivors recall their experiences of that day, there is a physiological difference in the activation of the amygdala—a part of the limbic system—and the visual cortex (389). Therefore “close personal experience may be critical in engaging the neural mechanisms that underlie the emotional modulation of memory and thus in producing the vivid recollections to which the term flashbulb memory is often applied” (389). Thus traumatic memories, as Jordan demonstrates through her utilization of ekphrasis and vignette structure in her memoir, are pervasive in ways that less emotionally resonant memories are not because of the lasting visual content that they produce.
The emergence of flashbulb memories in *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood* and the importance of visual perception and perceptual clarity to the articulation of Jordan’s autobiographical project, demonstrates the complex and significant relationship between visual culture and contemporary American life narrative. What Jordan sees or fails to see, as we will learn, directly contributes to her sense of self as well as her bodily preservation, so it is not surprising that many of her memories contain flashbulb-like detail—photographic qualities such as clarity, specificity, and narrative articulation—and follow a vignette structure. Many of Jordan’s memories, such as when she recalls her love of orange juice, her mother’s wedding portrait, or sees a photograph of a concentration camp, are not contextualized through their proximity to other related memories in the way that Bartók associates her memories through the use of mnemonics; their flashbulb quality, however, unites them in visual detail and specificity. And as we move from memory to memory, a complex narrative begins to form based on these visual elements/moments. Often, photographs are the impetus for her memories. Although there are no photographs included in the memoir, proper, many of the memories she describes are derived from family photographs currently housed with the June Jordan Papers at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. An imprecise language, the visual offers Jordan a number of different ways into conceiving of the personal, political, and familial stakes of writing life narrative. An alternative to the referential move to authenticate black identity and experience, Jordan’s creative engagement with family photographs, cinematic tropes, and other formal visual structures allows her to simultaneously create and complicate her life story and her family’s legacy. These ways of constructing the self vis-à-vis the visual are carefully cultivated by Jordan.
This chapter analyzes the formal workings of *Soldier* and related autobiographical writing. I am also interested in Jordan’s political activism—which I argue is derived from her autobiographical experience and the articulation of those experiences in her art—as an important key to answering two larger questions that my project raises: What is the role of memoir in the creation and maintenance of contemporary female subjectivity? And how has women’s life narrative been challenged and threatened when it steps out of the authenticating confines that the genre often produces and demands? Jordan’s construction of memory, with the aid of visual documents such as family photographs and a baby album, brings to light issues of agency and gender normativity not only for female children but also for women. In *Soldier* Jordan’s family is deeply concerned with her racial and gendered identity, often violently suppressing or conditioning her behavior. Jordan’s exploration of these familial tensions often gets expressed through the memoir’s articulation or in-articulation of specific memories and through the success or failure of her visual perception. By explicitly connecting her visual perception to her capacity for memory recall, Jordan points out the limitations of both these perceptual structures.

Her engagement of visual aesthetics to express particularly confusing or complicated instances of memory signals Jordan’s challenge to referential certainty and official familial and communal histories. Her deconstruction of various imagistic moments and her use of the visual in her textual account brings to the fore her play with the representational structures that readers and scholars expect in life narrative. With the aid of photographs and family documents, such as her baby book, Jordan breaks linear temporality by narrating events that occurred before she was alive. She imagines and writes about the autobiographies of her parents in some detail. Most
interestingly, her use of ekphrasis—the textual rendering of visual elements, such as photographs—changes the prose-based genre into one that accommodates poetic language and devices, but not the material content of the photographs. Visual elements, such as movies, also help her to articulate her own complicated and, at times, ambivalent relationship to her own identity formation. In short, by incorporating visual techniques and remediated visual material in her memoir she refuses to provide authenticating “evidence” that secures the legitimacy, or veracity, of her memories and personal experiences. Seeing, in Soldier, is not equitable with believing.

Jordan is aware of the limitations of her capacity to represent herself and others. At the beginning of Soldier, she tries to tell Granville Jordan’s origin story, but fails to uncover the circumstances under which he came to the United States: “My father came because his older brother, down in Panama, tried to take his teeth out with an ordinary pair of pliers. Or: He came because he’d finished his stint as a British soldier who served in a cavalry regiment of Her Majesty’s something or other in World War I” (4). Jordan’s biographical account avoids authoritative markers. The irreverence with which Jordan refers to official sites of power, such as “her Majesty’s something or other in World War I” (4), demonstrates her attempt to “fill in the gaps, add fine points, and provide details that were part of no official history” (Wall 96). From the information Jordan offers we can surmise some of the details of Granville’s life, but, as Jordan herself notes: “It was hard to settle my father into a steady frame of reference” (4). Jordan’s refusal to offer an official history of her father’s immigration not only highlights their complicated relationship, but also the distrust that many black feminist authors have for the
official histories that have characteristically excluded or exploited them (18). Jordan’s embrace of uncertainty in her life narrative offers complex and nuanced readings of her genealogy, even as it rejects many of the authenticating and verifying structures that have characterized the genre. Like her father’s immigration story, *Soldier* refuses to settle into one frame of reference.

New theories of memory and visuality are useful in helping to understand the techniques and successes of *Soldier* and in uncovering the rich ways in which we process the world. The neurological and visual language with which I analyze Jordan’s memoir works to redirect conversations about the referential crisis of autobiographical writing. On a large scale, this project offers a new critical methodology that accounts for the work that contemporary memoirs do to upend the genre’s conventions by engaging, in creative and innovative ways, with cognitive faculties that are mysterious and hard to pin down, such as memory and visual perception. For Jordan’s *Soldier*, in particular, this reassessment of life narrative’s critical tools and aims is both necessary and timely as, since her death in 2002, there have been only a few, and problematic, critical examinations of her autobiographical writing.

Valerie Kinloch’s unauthorized biography, *June Jordan: Her Life and Letters* (2006) repeatedly suggests that Jordan is either exaggerating in her memoir or lying outright about the circumstances of her childhood, such as her abuse.38 A narrative that offers a counterview to Jordan’s life story, Kinloch relies upon memories from Valerie Orridge, Jordan’s cousin.39 At times, the language that Kinloch uses to describe *Soldier* bears more resemblance to legal analysis than it does critical analysis: terms such as “supposedly” and “one-sided” find their way
into a text that attempts to right the wrongs of Jordan’s memoir more than it does to engage with the memoir’s content.

Kinloch’s critique of Soldier draws upon older, less subversive, models for African American autobiography, which are steeped in the language of veracity and the culture of reliability. Slave narratives and conversion narratives written predominately in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America had a number of “authenticating” structures in place for the author to demonstrate the veracity of his or her memories and experiences. Implicit forms of control over the ex-slave’s life story, “authenticating” structures such as a photographic frontispiece, or an introduction of character by a prominent white person, allowed white Abolitionists to maintain control over the text for ideological purposes. Robert B. Stepto notes that not only former slaves struggled for control over their autobiographic narratives; a number of modern black authors also “do not control their personal history once it assumes literary form” (17). Jordan is one such author whose memoir, and personal narrative, is a site of critical contention despite her pointed articulation of a highly personal and deeply feminist configuration of her subjectivity.

The critical reception of Jordan’s first and only memoir reveals the troubling conclusions life narrative scholarship comes to when it privileges political and communal ideologies over the construction of personal subjectivity. Jordan’s own fraught history with the genre highlights the problematic configuration of authenticity and identity in life narrative and the push-and-pull that memoirists often feel between writing about the self honestly and openly and protecting family, friends, community, and even a racial group. Jordan’s publicly acclaimed but critically neglected
memoir was published just two years before her death in 2002, but the story of its publication goes back nearly three decades to 1979 when she first pitched her memoir under the title *My Childhood*. In 1996 she once again tried to publish her memoir, but this time under the title *Portrait of the Poet as a Little Black Girl*. The 1979 draft, which is a one and a half page proposal, is narratively linear and less visually explicit; it is more engaged with political discourse than *Soldier*. Her 1996 draft changes its style from draft-to-draft and ultimately becomes the beginnings of *Soldier*; it too is linear, however, beginning with her parents’ biographies, rather than with her birth. One can also observe the progression of her life narrative project simply by tracing the titles—from an homage to Socialist Realist author Maxim Gorky, and his memoir, *My Childhood*, to a riff on James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and finally to *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*—which suggests that, as her memoir took shape she became less concerned with the influence of other authors and departed from conventional autobiographical narrative structures. Beyond the multiple iterations of her memoir’s text and title, and the decades that lay between its initial conception and its eventual publication, there is an anxiety of influence at play in the titles of her earliest drafts, as well as in their linear and non-visual structure.

The false starts she made on writing and publishing her memoir, and the numerous autobiographical poems and essays that she published throughout her career, suggests that Jordan struggled with the personal and theoretical work of life narrative for as long as she was engaged with the intellectual work of being a poet, activist, and essayist. For Jordan, personal experience deeply influenced her political activism, and as her poetic and autobiographic
constructions of her life story suggest, authenticity of experience was a major preoccupation. As we see in *Soldier*, childhood experiences profoundly shaped Jordan’s formation of herself as a “revolutionary poet,” but also contributed to her racial and gender ambivalence. Her activism and coalition politics grew out of her personal experience with language and poetics, and brutality, which was rooted in her childhood experiences and expressed in her memoir. As Richard Flynn says, “Jordan has insisted on a poetics that interrogates private notions of childhood through activist, public positions” (159). Her struggle to publish a memoir about her conflicted childhood demonstrates her complicated relationship to her family and the black community.

Family photos: photographer unknown. June on her first day of school. Image from June Jordan Papers, The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
One way in which life narrative lays claim to veracity and authenticity is through the evocation and adaptation of images. Photographs signal to the reader that the autobiographical pact is in tact. The writer’s identity is verified, and his or her memories bolstered by visual proof of experience. Yet while Jordan’s narrative utilizes the aesthetic structures of photography and film, she does so to complicate, rather than enforce, her narrative’s referential status. The allusion to, or presence of, photographs in memoir and autobiography, which has been common since the invention of portable cameras in the late 1800s, highlights the complicated role that the visual performs in memory recollection and the formation of subjectivity. The arrangement, or deliberate absence, of photographs can speak to representation of the memoirist’s interpersonal relationships and experiences, because photographs carry emotional and ideological weight (Hirsch 189). Images also “close the gap between past and the present . . . creat[ing] a new kind of text that extends both meanings of the [temporal] line” (9). Images, then, are a crucial means by which memoirists establish the credibility of their story, and offer to the reader a comprehensive account of autobiographical experience.

Yet while Soldier refers to many photographs, it only includes one photograph in it; a testament to Jordan’s novel approach to writing memoir. On the book’s cover there is a photograph of Jordan on her first day of school (pictured above). She stands on the steps of Public School 70, one hand on the door, the other holding her dog’s leash (Spot is never mentioned explicitly in the memoir). She wears a white dress, white ribbons in her hair, and brown military-style boots. The image also has textual content: “June + spot The First Day At School P.S. 70 Bkyn Sept. 1943.” The presence of this photograph, however, raises more
questions than it answers about Jordan’s memories and experiences. Is Jordan starting or ending her first day? Who dressed her? Who photographed her? Why is Spot never mentioned in the memoir? Why doesn’t Jordan write about this image, or particular memory, in Soldier? The visual unknowable—that which remains beyond the frame—in concert with Jordan’s ekphrastic autobiographical vignettes, urge us to ask questions about how much a photograph, or a memoir for that matter, can really articulate about personal history (Barthes 27). Rather than verify the genre’s referential certainty—this story happened in the way the author represents it—the presence of visual structures and visual material in this memoir challenge it, as much as a neurological methodology that accounts for memory and visual perception challenges critical examinations of Soldier.

2. The Politics of Seeing

Broken down into sections within chapters, Soldier’s vignettes often span only a paragraph: at most a page or two. Structurally akin to flashbulb memories, these vignettes are highly visual, vibrantly detailed, brief, and often about traumatic or otherwise highly affective experiences. Often, the vignettes refer back to family photographs, or Jordan’s baby book. Reading these vignettes as representations of flashbulb memories encourages close reading of the memoir. So too does it reveal the underlying poetry of this memoir: what literary critics might identify as ekphrasis in this narrative, I suggest is more accurately described as flashbulb memories. That the story is told through photographs—if not with photographs—further reinforces the unique approach to writing life narrative that Jordan takes. Thus my close reading of the memoir, and in particular, how Jordan develops a “politics of seeing” for her characters, is
informed by an engagement with the concept of flashbulb memory, as much as by it is by such poetic devices as ekphrasis: both are processes that render the visual as narratological.

In *Soldier*, what one is able to see and unable to see—that which is able to be “pictured” and that which is unimaginable—have tangible and real-world consequences. In one scene, in the first chapter, Jordan and her father walk across the Harlem River Bridge, “for two reasons: To drill me in techniques of observation and to increase my breathing stamina” (19). By this point, Granville has taken over Jordan’s intellectual training after realizing that she is a precocious toddler with a keen memory for hymns (14). Her memorization of melodies and lyrics prompts him “to test and to observe [her] . . . for signs of intelligence” (14). Much of his training of Jordan’s intellect has a military flavor to it as she notes at the end of a one-page vignette:

I’d be instructed to hold my breath as long as I could while noticing how many tugboats of what color passed below us, or how many people of what kind of age had passed by us. He called this ‘military reconnaissance training’ and he explained to me that one could never get too good at this sort of exercise: It might save your life. (20)

Toddler June is trained in what seems like the arbitrary exercise of breath-holding and visual observation of her surroundings. Her father tells her that situational awareness—paying attention to and remembering what one sees—is crucial to survival. He tests her capacity for visual memory retention by pairing it with the uncomfortable control of holding her breath. Granville encourages her to maintain sensory control, even when faced with physical discomfort. Jordan’s ability to control her body and her mind fosters her capacity for self-preservation;
however, it is this very demonstration of physical and mental strength that repeatedly places her in harm’s way.

Strength, although often a defining marker of black female subjectivity, can be an impediment: “Seldom have we stopped to think, however, that this thing called strength, this thing we applaud so much in black women, could also have detrimental effects or consequences” (Harris 10). While Granville is training Jordan to survive and to become a poet, attuned to sensory information in the environment, her training regimen becomes increasingly violent and dangerous as the scene following the one on the Brooklyn Bridge quickly demonstrates: “As usual, my father had been holding my hand when, unexpectedly, he swung me into the air by my arm, at the same time commanding me to stop that swinging of my body any way I could. But I couldn’t stop it” (20). Granville lets go of her hand and she flies headfirst into a building. Her head begins to bleed, and, as she notes, his act leaves a scar that she still carries around, as an adult (20). In this moment, not only does Granville fail to protect her from injury, Jordan’s senses and her bodily awareness also fail her. Here, Jordan suggests that from a young age she relied on her capacity to see and to react quickly and intelligently to ensure her physical safety because her father refused to—or perhaps could not—assume the role of protector for her. Thus the scar she has through her adulthood is symbolic: a reminder of the debilitating emotional cost, but also the crucial necessity of seeing fearlessly.

Jordan’s strength—her refusal to admit weakness and fear—causes her to experience additional danger, as she notes in the rooftop scene. When Jordan’s family moves from Harlem to Brooklyn, she and her father go up to the roof of their brownstone for another type of training
session, as she says: “my father would take me there [the roof] and teach me how to tread lightly in order not to worsen its shattering-crust surface. Then he’d cajole or dare me to approach the edge of it [the roof]: That way I’d have ‘the best view’ and, also, I’d get over any fears I might have of (dangerous) heights” (41). Granville forces Jordan to confront her fear of heights even as he forces her to confront the nebulous concept of fear brought about by the threat of physical danger. In this instance, as in many others, confronting through looking at the source of fear is supposed to help Jordan to become braver and stronger. Of course, she is a very young child at this moment, perhaps five or six, and the prospect of standing at the edge of a roof is terrifying to her. Interestingly, when faced with a dangerous situation that her father urges her to literally look at, to face, Jordan cannot understand the “shocking perspective” that she is confronted with:

> It was surprising to see things below me and far away. I tried to appreciate that shocking perspective. But the connection between distance and what you could see confounded me. What did it mean to behold everybody’s backyard only when I stood quite beyond and above each one of them, including my own? I had trouble with the challenge of the limits of the roof. I never really enjoyed the game of getting closer and closer to the end of anything under my feet. But I never let on that I was terrified to the pit of my stomach.

(41)

Jordan is unable to comprehend her bodily position above the numerous backyards in her neighborhood—her fear destroys her ability to understand perspective—but, interestingly, it does not translate into a verbal articulation of that fear.
Jordan’s decision to “never let on” that she is terrified by the situations that Granville forces her into, on the pretense of intellectual training, is perhaps—or at least she surmises—the reason why he is often so violent with her: “I think (or I thought) that, partly, that was why my father became so violent and apparently out of control: I never cried. I refused to. And instead I concentrated on things like his position or my position or the proximity of this or that possible escape” (41). Jordan’s “politics of seeing” is disrupted when fear makes her unable to “see,” or imagine a situation clearly. Instead, when she is threatened with bodily harm, she myopically focuses on her opponent, which subsumes her terror even though it leaves her more vulnerable to attack. Strength, in these instances, is a “self-perpetuating expectation” with high psychic and physical costs (19). Granville privileges seeing over not seeing, stoicism over articulation of fear, strength over weakness; these are the “manly virtues” that he teaches Jordan. He also develops his own perceptual code: never taking one’s eyes off of an opponent, never show or admit weakness, and always look for an opening to defend oneself (42). These philosophies of the visual will eventually carry over into Jordan’s particular brand of poetic activism; however, as Soldier demonstrates in a number of instances, how one sees has real-world, physical, consequences.

While seeing fearlessly is often associated with physical danger and bodily violence in Soldier, there are other scenes in the text where her capacity to see and to describe are pleasant experiences, unhampered by fear or danger. When turned towards positive emotional experiences, seeing fearlessly is also a creative asset that is made more poignant by Jordan’s
unwavering emotional strength. In an early vignette in the first chapter of the text, Jordan describes her love for orange juice:

I loved orange juice. It seemed to me that orange juice and daylight fused in my mind as soon as I could focus. It was such a wonderful color! And you could see orange pulp particles moving inside that delicious liquid! A bottle or a glass of orange juice presented me with an aquarium that I could taste. And, oh! The pleasures of that color and that movement of that coloring on my tongue! I could look and look at orange juice. I wanted and I hoped for and I never forgot about orange juice . . . orange juice and the transparencies of glass and suffusing modulations of a day’s light could and would excite me awake, my eyes wide open for more orange juice: More! (7)

In this playful and multi-sensory scene, Jordan explores the visual markings of orange juice—its color, its texture, its compositional makeup—as well as the different forms of light that it transmits well, or evokes with its appearance. There is no larger context to this moment; there is only the visceral sensory memory of baby Jordan’s relationship with and love for this brightly hued beverage. This scene is beautiful because it alludes to a simple need that she has for warmth and nourishment and vibrancy. Of course, this need becomes less simple as she grows into a child and then into an adolescent and experiences her father’s violence and her mother’s remoteness. Still, as a single poetic moment, this scene about orange juice demonstrates Jordan’s love of language, her gift for description and her reliance on visual imagery and flashbulb memories to articulate desires, needs and past traumas that are otherwise disregarded. The singularity of the orange juice memory comes into clearer narrative focus as Jordan recalls and
describes other, less happy, childhood memories in vivid detail: its meaning starts to reveal itself as Jordan recalls more memories.

The visual construction of particular autobiographical memories in *Soldier* speaks to the importance of seeing, and of visual perception, in the formation of a meaningful life narrative. The unconventional structure of Jordan’s memoir—vignettes that capture specific visual memory scenes, most of which are not related through chronology but through similar thematic and visual cues—mirrors the structure of “flashbulb memories” in that they are particularly visual memories that are “surprising, consequential, or emotionally arousing events [that are] registered with mnemonic intensity, which in turn affect[s] the degree of elaboration in the narration of the memory” (322). The events that flashbulb memories are constructed from, such as Jordan’s training sessions with her father, or her first experience drinking orange juice, are especially important and meaningful because of their sensory specificity and their affective quality. These memories are highly specific and contain rich visual “snapshots” that capture sensory information such as physical surroundings and affective states. They are also very detailed but also very brief and non-associative. The definition and behavior of flashbulb memories can be traced upon many of the scenes that Jordan constructs in her memoir—highly visual, brief, super-sensory, meaningful, and non-linear in nature—scenes that capture emotionally exuberant, or conversely, emotionally traumatic moments in her early childhood. So while in many instances Jordan makes palpable the danger and stress of her bizarre military training, she also captures incredibly pleasurable moments, such as the orange juice scene. As a poet-activist her strength and her ability to see fearlessly are her greatest assets.
There are, of course, moments where the textual rendering of a visual object fails to bring memories into context. In fact, if we return to my earlier visual analogy of Soldier as a mosaic, with numerous images coming together and producing meaning through visual accumulation, rather than association, then singular moments in the text fail to fully explain or articulate particular memories. The wedding portrait scene is one such example:

My mother’s wedding picture portrays a young woman standing in white satin and lace. It is as though this is the snapshot of a statue no one can identify. She will not move. She does not breathe. She stands attuned to the timing of an event she can neither comprehend nor compromise. The slant of her beautiful head mystifies the camera, and her lowered
eyes appear to pity the bridal train of languid lace that spills past her feet, on the floor.

This young woman is no one I ever knew. (17)

Although Jordan offers us vivid details of her mother’s expression and of her physical appearance on her wedding day she does not include the actual photograph in the text. In her papers at the Schlesinger Library, there is an image that is likely the one that Jordan refers to in *Soldier*. I include it here to consider why Jordan might have decided not to incorporate the image into her memoir. Perhaps the absence of the image—much like the absence of the winter-garden photo in *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes—demonstrates more about Jordan’s relationship with her mother than if it were otherwise included. For Barthes the absence of the winter-garden photo represents his grief over the loss of his mother, the irrevocable nature of her death, and his own jealous desire to “guard” or “protect” the memory of his mother from the corrosive nature of over-exposure. For Jordan the absence of the wedding photo may signify their strained relationship; her omission is an act that demonstrates that photographic evidence can never fill in for the lack of emotional and psychological understanding between them.

The rendering of the visual via text challenges the referential certainty of both the image and its interpretation. Jordan’s textual articulation of the visual features of her mother’s appearance fails to illuminate much more than the silence and the absence that her mother comes to embody in the text. She is unidentifiable, still, and lifeless: as Jordan notes, she does not breathe. While she tries to understand her mother’s emotional state on her wedding day, she does not get much beyond imagining the confusion that her mother felt, and even when Jordan imagines, she speaks tentatively about her mother—“it is as though,” “her lowered eyes
appear,”—ultimately, neither she, nor the mechanical instrument (the camera) meant to capture her mother’s wedding day can fully understand or express her mother’s affective state. Jordan points out, as Barthes had before her, that there are many things that images cannot explain to us or about us. The photograph is often a type of death: a static representation of people and events that, as time passes, become unrecognizable (14). Despite the scene’s attention to details such as satin and lace, Mildred’s expression remains unreadable, her state unknowable: the absence of the photograph in the text made more conspicuous by Jordan’s hesitant representation. Although, as Hirsch observes of the winter-garden photo, Jordan’s reading of Mildred’s image “becomes a process of self-discovery, a discovery of a self-in-relation,” the lack of connection that Jordan feels to her mother’s photograph is indicative of the relationship that she describes in her childhood memoir: one marked by silence, absence, and ultimately loss (2).44

Neurologically speaking, flashbulb memories arise out of the regions of the brain related to emotion and memory:

Personal experience plays an important role in producing memories with the qualities initially attributed to flashbulb memories, including the engagement of limbic mechanisms . . . The experience of immediate emotional involvement brought about by directly observing, or participating in, highly arousing events gives rise to exceptionally vivid memories. (1-6)

Emotional states play an important role in the consolidation and recall of autobiographical memory so much so, in fact, that the activation of the amygdala can result in deeply visual and otherwise detailed accounts of trauma. Such mechanisms challenge trauma theory’s argument
that traumatic memories are unable to be articulated, or are somehow repressed. In fact, the concept of flashbulb memories suggests that emotionally painful experiences are consolidated into highly detailed and resonant memories. Thus, Jordan’s reliance on flashbulb memory to tell her life story allows her to carefully articulate emotionally traumatic experiences. Yet there are moments in Soldier where Jordan’s mastery over visual imagery fails her. In chapter three, “Deep Sea Fishing and the Beach,” Jordan and her parents plan to take a beach trip together. Interspersed with memories of preparing for the family’s trip to the beach are moments where she and her father plan to go deep sea fishing. Both parents engage in solitary preparations, for the most part. Each event has its own string of visual and other-sensory information—the smells of the different foods that Jordan’s mother cooks for their picnic, the smells of gasoline, tobacco, and alcohol on the fishing boat—and in each of these events there are moments where Jordan is unable to see clearly. Although her parents try to explain where the ocean is in relationship to their home, in Harlem, she is unable to follow: “I wanted to know if the water was nearby. Both my parents told me it was ‘not too far away.’ I couldn’t really picture it” (79). Similar to the “shocking perspective” she confronts on the brownstone rooftop, when fear prevents her from seeing the view, Jordan’s inability to “picture” the ocean is directly related to her emotional state. While in this vignette Jordan does not feel fear, the distance she feels from the physical space indicates the anxiety she feels towards the family trips; this distance motif is mirrored in her parents’ emotional distance (41).

In many ways, Jordan is caught in the middle of their plans. She eventually helps her mother prepare the food, and she helps her father carry all of the supplies for fishing. Still, when
she tries to get more information about the location of the ocean and the proximity of it to her family’s home, her parents are reticent. They only tell her that the ocean is not very far away from them. Jordan’s inability to picture the ocean—to visualize herself at the beach with her family—is a result of the tension between Granville and Mildred and their competition over June’s upbringing. Granville wants her to be a strong “man” who is able to fish and fight, while Mildred wants her to be polite and neatly dressed and a “lady.” Their attempts to sway Jordan’s education and socialization in gender normative ways is a point of tension between them, such as when Granville tries to teach her how to swim by throwing her into the waves during their family picnic: “My father continued pell-mell into the ocean, and when he had waded several feet into it, he suddenly chucked me into the water” (93). Although Jordan expresses fear, initially, over her father’s haphazardly conducted swimming lesson, she begrudges her mother’s interference and only agrees to stay out of the water because Mildred bribes her with, “sandy goodies and paper cups of grape juice” (94). From the onset of the chapter, Jordan’s inability to picture the ocean is representative of the familial tension that pulls at her affections and her behavior. These scenes reveal how emotional states influence the details and sensory data stored within memories: Jordan’s ambivalence is marked by a vague attendance to narrative detail and plot; given her visually stunning and vibrant narrative, then, Soldier contains only a few moments of such aesthetic dissonance.

Other family members have their own issues with seeing. Granville is both a lover of the visual and someone who has problems “picturing” or capturing beauty. Chapter five, “Choosing, And Being Chosen Fighting, And Fighting Back,” begins with Jordan telling a story about
Granville’s refusal to buy a car because it was financially irresponsible: “he could not imagine having money enough for a house and a car. You had to choose between them” (125).

“[B]eautiful things,” however, do not fall into the sacrifice category. She recalls that her father attended auctions each month and often returned home with “odd items such as an antique Chinese vase, a hand-carved coffee table, or a fully restored Victorian hard-back couch” (125). Granville justified the purchase of these items because they were things of beauty. He insisted that, “[t]hey were things of value: ‘because you see them beautiful, don’t you?!’” (125) Here Granville considers the qualities that give objects their value, concluding that seeing them as beautiful is bound up with their projected wealth.

More than theoretically understanding how these objects might be used, or how they might be exchanged, Granville has a personal connection with beautiful and fine objects because of how they affect his sense of aesthetics, as Jordan notes: “[M]ore than anything my father might say, I learned about beautiful things from what he did” (125). He studies seed catalogues, constructs a garden, and teaches Jordan how to surmise the “quality” of various articles of clothing. His love for beautiful things extends to his choice of wife (Jordan observes that Granville often mistook his beautiful wife’s sad countenance for pride) and to how he raises his daughter. The first time that they visit the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Granville makes Jordan memorize a sign: “Let it not be said: All was beauty until you passed by” (126). To appreciate beauty one must see it, which involves careful and studied practice of observing—much like the military training Jordan receives as a child. Learning how to appreciate beauty also involves a certain amount of memorization, as Granville demonstrates when he makes Jordan memorize the
Botanical Garden’s sign about beauty or personally “read[s] up” on various beautifying hobbies such as photography (127). One must memorize first that which teaches us about beauty in order to understand and identify beauty.

Of course, there are complications with training oneself in the art of beauty-appreciation: aesthetics often is an immediately felt experience that is frequently indescribable. One cannot force oneself to become an artist; just as one cannot always “share and preserve beautiful things” (126). Jordan points out the contradiction in her father’s lessons on beauty when she recalls his passion for photography:

He juggled a Rolleicord camera and a Rolleiflex [camera], plus a modest caboodle of lights, light meter, tripod, and cables; these belongings gave him tremendous pleasure and grief. And because he’d taught himself how to read, my father assumed you could master anything by ‘reading up’ on the subject . . . So he continued to ‘read up’ on photography, and never quite got it; he never relaxed into the actual ‘capturing of the moment.’ (127)

In this rather sad moment, we recognize Granville’s tenacity and his dedication to organic intellectualism, yet we also see—through Jordan’s eyes—his struggle with distinguishing between forced and “natural” artistry. Jordan says that her father teaches her that “anything beautiful required a good bit of work”; she also points out, however, that he never quite figures out the difference between art and craft (127). As with many other things in his life—moving into a new development in Harlem, securing the house in Brooklyn, sending Jordan to boarding school—he believes that if he can read enough on the subject he can power through the craft to
the artistry of photography. Of course, in this instance, Jordan shows us that the way Granville trains her to see—fearlessly and vigilantly—might perhaps be a detriment to seeing as an artist. Stranded between amateur and artist—the hobbyist’s Rolleicord camera and the professional’s Rolleiflex camera—Jordan’s father, through his actions as much as his words, teaches her about the importance of relaxing the body and the mind into perceptual moments. Seeing is not only accomplished through memorization and training; seeing is spontaneous and creative as Soldier demonstrates.

In this section, I have discussed the importance of seeing in June Jordan’s memoir, Soldier. In addition to the role of flashbulb memory in the articulation of emotionally arousing experiences, I have also tracked how the visual has failed the characters of Jordan’s memoir. Although seeing fearlessly is crucial to Jordan’s survival, as her father teaches her, anxiety, fear, and danger deter the visualization process. So too, as Granville demonstrates, does the imposition of forced aesthetic values on art. The visual, then, is important to the thematic and formal configuration of this memoir, and guides not only the vignettes and their ekphrastic structure, but also the content of the memories Jordan includes in her story. Jordan is taught by her father that keenly observing one’s surroundings can make the difference between life and death; Granville himself simulates many of these life or death situations in order to “train” Jordan to become a fierce “son.” As a result, she becomes a soldier poet who is both fierce in her activist politics but also fierce in her writing. Her fierceness, however, comes with the hard-won realization that there are a lot of people with little power of their own. In particular, childhood is a political state that is laden with conflict, as Jordan writes in the essay “Old Stories New Lives”: 
When I was a child I never wanted to grow up. Now that I am grown, I look at the children and I think, ‘God help them to survive us, the big people in their lives.’ Mostly, of course, our children will not survive our habits of thinking, our failures of the spirit, our wreck of the universe into which we bring new life, as blithely as we do. Mostly, our children will resemble our own misery and spite and anger, because we give them no choice about it. In the name of motherhood and fatherhood and education and good manners, we threaten and suffocate and bind and ensnare and bribe and trick children into wholesale emulation of our ways. (277)

Although, in this essay, Jordan configures a universal circumstance of childhood there are echoes of specific traumatic and violent memories of her own childhood lurking within the text: namely, the horrible things that parents do to their children and justify as a necessary part of “raising them up.” Here, as in her memoir, Jordan makes the point that even the seemingly innocent and safe state of childhood can be filled with unforeseen and unfair dangers. Seeing, despite its high costs, is part and parcel of this political and activist standpoint (19). When Jordan is able to “picture it” (“it” being a dangerous situation, a geographic location, a photograph, an argument between her parents etc.) in Soldier, she is able to reconcile traumatic events that surround the necessary practice of seeing fearlessly. When she is unable to “see,” however, family conversations become laden with mines; a beating lurks around every hallway corner. Jordan’s belief in giving agency to children, and her desire to protect them, is bound up with memories from her own childhood. Jordan’s activism demands that we open up our eyes to the circumstances that contribute to inequality and suffering: another play on the visual aesthetics of
her work. From a young age she takes her father’s advice to heart, as she demonstrates in *Soldier*; there are very real consequences to seeing or failing to see: it can make the difference between life and death.

3. A “Commander of Men” or a “Practicing Cowboy”? Childhood Violence and Identity

Confusion

Family photos: photographer unknown. June dressed as a cowboy. Image from June Jordan Papers, The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. Courtesy of the June M. Jordan Literary Estate Trust

For Jordan, the process of seeing and visualizing is not only bound up with survival, or the literal process of seeing; cinematic visualization is a crucial component to her construction of gendered identity. Throughout the text there are multiple references to films and to stock filmic tropes such as the Western hero. Jordan relies on these film conventions to tell her life story. As a young child, she recasts herself in the role of the Western hero. These cinematic constructions
help Jordan to respond to her parents’ encroaching influence on her identity and to engage in the process of articulating her own understanding of her rather ambiguous gendered and sexual identity. As Laura Mulvey explains in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, the acts of viewing and participating in film create unequal power dynamics between men and women: “Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (16). In film, women are often highly sexualized and passive beings whose needs and weaknesses hold up the movement of the plot, whereas the active stance of male characters, in films, tends to move the narrative of the plot along. This complicated power dynamic is not only one that affects the narrative construction of films; it also affects filmic constructions in non-fiction narratives, as Jordan’s memoir demonstrates. As a young child, Jordan has a complicated relationship to her female sexuality. Her yearnings to be a Western hero reveal her desire to disengage herself from being a woman. The desires and expectations that her parents place upon her, much like viewers of films place their desires onto actors, account for Jordan’s fraught identity as a woman, and explain her explosive bursts of rage, which, as it turns out, move the narrative forward. In *Soldier*, Jordan adopts a number of more traditionally masculine behavioral traits, such as fighting, in order to protect herself from aggressors like Granville or neighborhood boys, but she also casts herself in the light of a Western hero in order to teach herself self-reliance, a crucial characteristic for a female soldier poet to succeed.

In the prologue Jordan recalls working with her father on home improvement projects: specifically, hanging a clothesline to their brownstone apartment in Brooklyn. Together, Jordan and her father go to the hardware store for supplies and Granville speaks of the project’s details
with clarity and purpose. When they get home Jordan assumes the role of helper and son to assist with this “dangerous mission that only the two of [them] knew how to do” (xv). As she helps her father hang the clothesline, she becomes more and more frantic in her movements because she is afraid that her father will fall out of the window: “I got it in my head that my speed guaranteed his safety. So I was fast, sometimes even mixing up the tool I should retrieve with the one he wanted next” (xvi). Jordan works faster than she really can in order to prevent her father from injury. She gives voice to her fear that if her father fell she would be too weak to save him: “And as my eyes might travel up to his well-muscled forearms and his compact, elegant hands, I’d be worrying, ‘What if he falls?’ I was too small. I was too weak. He’d just fall, maybe the same way that I fell, again and again, in my recurring childhood dream: Falling and falling and falling and falling until I woke up” (xvi).

The anxiety that she feels over being unable to protect her father—of not being strong enough—is connected to not only the physical markers of her body, such as her size and perhaps her age, but also to her personal fears of vulnerability, which are connected to being a girl. Although she is helping her father work on what can be considered a more traditionally masculine project that involves construction and tools, and she calls herself his “son,” in the moment when she unites her own fears about falling with her fears of her father falling she admits to weakness and helplessness: qualities that her father, and by extension she, tries to forestall. Shortly after this moment, also in the prologue, Jordan re-casts herself in the more solitary and masculine figure of a Western hero from one of Zane Grey’s novels: a testament to her own desire for autonomy and authority in the face of unforeseeable danger.
Jordan intersperses her personal fears of falling out of the window with her fear that her father will fall out of the window. In either situation, she worries that she will be unable to prevent the fall. But immediately following the last time she asks, “What if he falls?” she describes her “cowboy holster belt buckled around [her] hips” and the two toy pistols with the chambers that spin “(xvii). It is in this moment that she makes the transformation from weak girl, who is unable to save herself or her father from falling out of a window, to resourceful cowboy, who is capable of handling any dangerous or uncomfortable situation:

I knew I was not a cowboy. But I was practicing, a lot. I already knew how to ride a horse.

And if my long curls and butterfly barrettes didn’t prevent my managing an animal that size, I couldn’t see why there’d be a problem about, finally, escaping from my parents and heading out West to live on the range, ‘by my wits.’ (xvii)

The juxtaposition of long curls and butterfly barrettes with pistols and animal handling demonstrates the pull that Jordan feels between being a girl with little physical strength and agency and being a lone cowboy who relies on no one but himself to survive: in the latter figuration the strength she covets is both a vital defense but also an isolating trait. From a young age, Jordan recognizes the danger of relying on other people for protection. She wants to “escape her parents”—escape her reliance on their often-mercurial care—and engage in the classic male (and white) fantasy of solitary living in a dangerously wild frontier. But as the clashing images of barrettes and cowboys demonstrate, her desire is a fraught one, lined with intricacies and contradicting motivations. In many respects, Jordan is trading in one wild frontier for another.
The act of living by one’s wits is not only adventurous and corporeal; it is also an intellectual act. The notion of not relying on anyone else but the self for survival connotes a certain type of independence borne out of resourcefulness and having “smarts.” So when she confesses her desire to light out for the territories, she reveals an underlying motive connected to her intellectual pursuits:

I was probably seven or eight years old when I began reading the Western tall tales written by Zane Grey. My father bought me two secondhand sets of books around this time: The novels of Sinclair Lewis . . . and the complete works of Zane Grey . . . Lewis took me a while, and some threats and punishment, before I read anything of his all the way to the end. But Zane Grey got me out on the desert or noticing cottonwood trees and building a fire, lonely, and blowing on boiling-hot coffee in a tin cup hard to hold, and galloping mile after mile, hoping to stumble upon water, and later, staring at the stars, alone but tough and devoted to my horse, even though I’d be saddle-weary to the bone.

(xvii)

Physical acts of strength and independence are bound up with the particularly intellectual act of reading. Jordan cannot imagine—one might say picture—the Modernist suburban world of Sinclair Lewis in the way that she can the gritty, yet cinematically romantic West that Zane Grey creates. Therefore, she has problems with following her father’s reading regimen and is punished for her noncompliance. Here, Jordan establishes her love of language and literature’s power to open up new worlds and new information. Not surprisingly, she finds the rather realistic fiction of Lewis less engaging than Grey’s fantastic tall tales. Part of her desire to engage and perform a
classically American mythos, replete with intellectual autonomy even at such a young age, runs counter to her family’s expectations for her to become a leader of her community, as her mother declares when she is born. In chapter one, Jordan’s allusion to her mother’s “premonition” about her “usefulness to colored people” is linked to Mildred and Granville’s attendance of separate churches (13). Pulled between the “Universal Truth Center” and “Father Devine,” Jordan finds her educational and religious training confining.

Still, her desire to acquire the characteristics of a cowboy, such as strength, resilience, and resourcefulness actually indicate that at least part of her fantasy lines up with her parents’ expectations for her future. The same characteristics that allow a cowboy to survive would allow her to assume a position as “a commander of men,” which is her father’s hope for her, or a leader of her community, which is her mother’s goal for her. Her desire for the imagined universe of Grey’s Western novels is motivated by gendered notions of what it means to be successful. The concept of “toughness” that the child Jordan admires in cowboys is one that parents often instill in their male children, and one that Granville certainly instills in his daughter. But the solitude that Jordan craves—in lieu of community—demonstrates her own desires for masculine agency and intellectual autonomy, which is in opposition to her parents’ conflicting plans for her education and upbringing. In short, Jordan would rather be leading her own educational and social development than following her mother or father’s plans.

Despite her desire for autonomy, there are a number of moments in the text where the bizarre advice of her father guides June Jordan towards casting herself in a masculine role. In a scene that mirrors the prologue, Jordan and her father are sitting in the kitchen listening to the
radio. An announcement comes on that asks the audience about vitamin C, and Granville suddenly starts yelling at her to answer the announcer’s questions: “Here my father makes his surprise move. He bangs his fist on the cart . . . ‘Well?’ I lift my head to look at him. My crayon drops from my fingers. I lower my hands toward the back of my chair so that I can push away from the table, fast. And I make sure to answer him, ‘Yes, Sir?’” (65). Granville proceeds to ask her how a person keeps vitamin C in the body. And Jordan, not surprisingly, does not know the answer. Her father goes on a diatribe about the importance of answering—success is intimately bound up with knowledge and education: “You know even an old mon like me must be making himself learn? Even when the white, the young boss him get on the elevator—you tink I closing my ears? You tink they say anyt’ing an’ I don’ make myself listen what it is?” (65) As her father continues to yell at her, she takes a passive—yet watchful—stance with respect to him. She stops coloring, answers him, and continues watching him. Even after he snatches her coloring book, telling her: “If this was the Army, believe me, girl, you won’t be sit there holding a crayon,” she still does not speak (65). Even when he asks her about her drawing of Roy Rogers on horseback and argues for the glory of the frontier—“It took strong men, men of faith! Men of courage. To go out there—into the unknown—an’ fight everything—the climate, the wolves, the Indians—everything! . . . A place to be a mon,”—she is still silent (66). She is unable to “agree or cheer for ‘The Frontier,’” because she does not know how (66).

When faced with her father’s irrational and sudden outbursts of anger, Jordan is unable to react, as in the previous section: her emotional state is directly tied to her representation of memories. Although in the prologue she speaks of her admiration for the qualities that men
living in the West possessed, when her father prompts her for agreement with his own admiration for independent living and bravery she freezes. While she expresses her desire to live alone, “by her wits,” Granville expresses his admiration for the violence and danger of frontier life—similar dangers that Jordan is exposed to living in an urban setting, under her parents’ roof—yet, in this moment they are unable to communicate except through his aggressive and chaotic questioning and her passively mute responses. Part of what Jordan admires about escaping to the West is the fantasy of unburdening herself of the dangerous behavior of people like her father.

The problematic relationship between Jordan and her father manifests again when, in the second half of the vitamin C vignette, Granville casts himself as one of Jordan’s enemies. After yelling at her for being unable to answer the radio announcer’s questions about vitamin C, he commands her to finish reading *The Merchant of Venice*, even though she repeatedly tells him that she does not understand the text. As she is about to go upstairs to read the play yet again, he yells “‘Tention. . . Head up! Shoulders back! Stomach in! And don’ be shuffling, girl. You ain gwine be no run of the mill Negro sneaking around. You gwine be a fine mon you must be walk like a mon . . . Strut your stuff, girl” (68). Again, Jordan argues with her father’s orders, saying that, “Around here, nobody walks like this!” (69). But her protests over Granville’s unfair and eccentric requests fall on deaf ears. In fact, in order to silence Jordan, her father first dismisses her concerns over walking “funny” and then decides to emulate the “ghetto walk” that he wants her to avoid adopting: “You like to see the old man cripple himself up like this? Looking *sharpe*, heh?” (69) But suddenly his joke becomes a fighting exercise when he fakes a series of punches towards her that, once again, highlight the importance of always keeping one’s eyes on the
opponent, as Jordan says: “I am cowering, but he feints a left jab or two. I make a mistake: I look away. Then my father fakes a knockout punch to my face. He catches his fist half an inch away from my forehead. I’m looking up at him now, for sure” (69). After Granville makes his point, through an intimidating lesson, he reminds Jordan that she should “never take [her] eye off the enemy eye,” a reminder that while he might be her father, he is also at times her aggressor (69).

The complicated and tense relationship between Granville and Jordan revolves around the notion of “tough” love, with an emphasis on tough. Granville expects Jordan to grow into a “fine mon” and, as his actions demonstrate, no amount of coddling (or coloring, or other childish, and girl-centric pursuits) will help with the execution of his plan. Strength becomes Granville’s obsession, and as he tries to train June, he also inadvertently teaches her a cruel lesson about gender and race dynamics. The vitamin C scene illuminates the lack of intellectual and bodily freedom that Jordan has as a child. Her desire for cinematically conceived notions of self-reliance, and masculine virtues such as bravery or toughness, are both a capitulation to Granville’s plans for her upbringing and a rejection of them. While embodying the identity of a boy, she is not only able to protect others from harm; she is able to protect herself, albeit at high costs to her relationship with her family.

In another scene where the threat of bodily violence and gender anxiety seem to lurk in every misplaced pronoun, Mildred and Granville discuss their desires for Jordan’s upbringing and education. In a vignette where short verses give way into larger paragraphs of dialogue and fall back again into verse, Jordan’s parents have an argument that is ideologically motivated. Mildred wants to prepare her for life as a black woman whereas Granville appears to want her to
become both more like men and more like white people in order to succeed. He plans on sending her to an exclusive boarding school where, “she *will* rub elbows with the best: The sons of bankers! The sons of Captains of Industry! . . . She will *learn* how to hold his own. She will come out the school a veritable prince. Among men!” (153) But Mildred argues that Jordan’s place is with her family and community in Brooklyn, and challenges Granville’s characterization of June as a boy and as white: “‘But what do you mean: ‘His own’? *Her own* is right here under your nose, mon! Under this very roof! How you can’ see her own is *Black*, Granville, not white! The child is a *Black girl*, Granville; she can not change herself to white!’” (153). Despite her protests, Granville ignores Mildred’s arguments of group progress and racial pride: “‘The child him my son! She have a name, *Jordan*. And him have another name, *June*! What you mean by *Black*? You want that she stay in the pits where they t’row us down here?!’” (153) In this confusing dialogue the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ are often used interchangeably; sometimes in the same sentence both ‘he’ and ‘she’ will appear in reference to June.

The ideological battle between Jordan’s mother and father influences how they construct Jordan’s identity and how she constructs her own subjectivity. At once deeply in love with boys and desirous to become a cowboy, love starved and filled with violent rage that only schoolyard fights seems to alleviate, Jordan’s gender and race, seem to be constantly under the threat and anxiety of others’ influences. As a result, her behavior oscillates between normative extremes that are a response to her parents’ confusing dictates.45 As Jordan presents it in the conversation between her parents, gender is something that both can and cannot be changed; many of the memories of this text recall Jordan’s struggle with her sexuality and identity.
In the midst of the battles between Jordan and her father, the presence and absence of Mildred Jordan haunts the pages of Soldier. There are a number of moments, such as the fight between Jordan’s parents, where Mildred tries to stand up to her husband and take more control over their daughter’s upbringing. But, as we see in the scene where Granville decides that Jordan will attend boarding school, Mildred has very little agency. Towards the end of their fight, Jordan returns to the kitchen and recites a poem well. To reward her, Granville goes out to buy her ice cream. In an echo of the poem “War and Memory,” part of which Jordan inserts in her memoir, and which I discuss in section four, June utters the ambiguous refrain, “’Mommy, why! Mommy!’” and Mildred tells her to “Never mind, now” (156). Instead of explaining the fight, or Granville’s behavior, or even her state of mind at the moment, Mildred chooses to reaffirm her husband’s love for Jordan in order to stop her from asking questions: “Your father him have a lotta tings on him . . . You listen what he say, you understand?” (156) But the child June does not understand, and, when her mother asks her if she loves her father she answers, “’Yes, Mommy, No!’” (156) With further prompting, she explains that she feels stuck between them and is unsure of how she feels about her father because of the fights that he has with Mildred but also because of the violence that he subjects her to: “But between Daddy . . . and I feel . . . and I can’t—Mommy, why? Mommy, why?” (156) Here we see a deliberate insertion of her mother into her construction of her memory of her fights with her father.

Thus, while it seems that most of the text revolves around Jordan’s relationship with her father—and the text is even dedicated to him—there are moments such as the “Mommy why?” vignette where Jordan reaches out for love and comfort from her mother. When she refuses to
side with her father over her mother, and, instead, reveals the ambivalence she feels towards him, Jordan is articulating her need for Mildred. The scene concludes with Jordan and her mother reading Matthew 5.5 as a call and response: “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are the meek” (157). In opposition to Granville’s military tactics, forced Enlightenment, and gender and race “training,” Mildred teaches tolerance, love, and forgiveness. While her life (and her suicide) haunts the pages of the text, maybe as they did Jordan’s life, she is not simply absent or passive, as the “Mommy Why?” vignette and later the “War and Memory” vignette demonstrate. She and June are both victim to, but also tolerant of Granville’s ambitious goals and fantastic dreams. In some ways, Mildred’s silences throughout the text scream louder than any of Granville’s diatribes about Jordan and her upbringing, because they punctuate the absence and longing that Jordan feels for her mother. The refrain, “Mommy, why?” only serves to heighten Jordan’s desire for her mother’s love and protection, and the impossibility of having these things in the face of Granville’s increasing social and educational demands.

The bifurcation of identity that Jordan experiences while still a very young child is highlighted a number of times throughout the text. From her desire to become a cowboy and live alone on the range, to her manic and crazed fighting, to her religious training to be tolerant and meek, Jordan experiences conflicting messages about how to behave, and what gender—or racial behavior—is more desirable to embody. For her father it is important that she grow up to become a “leader of men”—to strive and militarize like the Garveyites—to transcend, somehow, the constraints of her race, gender, and class through solitary physical action. For her mother it is important that she embrace religion and display strength of a moral nature and to contribute to
community building (a DuBoisian model); in short, Mildred wants June to recognize that she is a black woman with all of the dangers and limitations (but also possibilities) that often accompany those identity categories (22). Her sense of identity is further complicated by her father’s mixing of pronouns and his obvious admiration for violent masculine qualities such as those demonstrated by Western frontiersmen. As Mulvey points out, it is difficult to be an active female character where the narrative, in many ways, depends upon masculine action for the development of plot.

In Jordan’s text, there is also an ambivalence regarding femininity as an active position. In the world that she lives in, being a woman is not nearly as advantageous as being a man: her father recognizes this point and to some extent Jordan does as well. This is why she wants to become a cowboy as a young child. The Western genre is an ideal topos within which to cast her fragmented gendered identity, because it: “provides a crucial node in a series of transformations that comment on the function of ‘woman’ (as opposed to ‘man’) as a narrative signifier and sexual difference as personification of ‘active’ or ‘passive’ elements in a story” (33). The Western hero occupies a liminal identity: neither completely in society, nor outside society but straddling both spaces at once (34). This double hero bind describes Jordan’s gender predicament nicely: should she seek a position inside of the black female community, or the more masculine position as renegade outsider? Her father seems to advocate for the latter position; her mother’s protest against Granville’s training of their daughter, however, is a counter-argument that advocates for the respect of the feminine, and a re-establishment of black women’s capacity for agency to bring about social and intellectual change. Jordan’s fearless activism for bisexual
awareness, women’s rights, children’s rights, and the rights of other disenfranchised populations speaks to the fact that her reconciliation of her parents’ wishes for her gendered identity was, to some extent, fulfilled through a synthesis, rather than a destruction of male and female subject positions. She embodies both categories and the space between them. Such complexities of identity are embodied through the cinematically rendered memories of her parents’ fights, and her cowboy fantasies.

4. Poetic and Historical Hauntings

Towards the beginning of *Soldier*, Jordan creates a kind of temporal fold in which the child’s voice and the adult’s voice are conjoined in their autobiographical endeavor. She inserts an excerpt from the poem “War and Memory,” previously published in *Naming our Destiny: new and selected poems*, in 1989. But Jordan actually wrote the poem in 1987 as part of a public reading series in Washington DC on War and Memory in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Creighton 253). As Jane Creighton, the organizer of the public reading, and the curator of its accompanying art exhibit, notes:

“War and Memory,” . . . put into play ideas I had also been working on in my own writing—how the making of family culture moves in constant interaction with broader cultural history. In that poem, as in the broader field of play provided by her autobiography *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*, she [Jordan] constructs a voice that is identifiably her own even as she resists, in the story she tells, any uniform assumptions about herself or her family that might be made according to race, her parents’ immigrant status, or their respective roles as parents and child. (253)
In “War and Memory” Jordan combines the memories of her childhood with those of her adulthood in an attempt to open up a space where the political and often violent nature of childhood is linked to political and global struggles for equality and peace. In the first section of the poem, which is included in *Soldier*, Jordan constructs a scene of violence where Granville yells at his wife for failing to cook him dinner and launder his shirts appropriately. Granville tries to hit Mildred with a frying pan but young Jordan comes to her mother’s aid. Eventually, the fighting becomes so violent that Jordan runs away, “sometimes out of the house and racing/still for blocks” (73).

The first section of the poem examines Jordan and her mother’s daily experiences with violence. This section also examines her father’s abusive, but desperate behavior, which comes out of his own daily experiences with violence and victimization in the white world. In “War and Memory” everyone—those who are violent, those who are passive—is a victim: the social and economic injustices that Granville faces as a black immigrant beget the violence he does to his family and so forth. War, Jordan shows us, is a cycle that begins and ends with people who are wronged and taken advantage of because of their difference: racial, economic, gendered, or otherwise. In her poem war is equated with the experience of belonging to a family unit.

But it is the poem’s second section that is my main preoccupation. In it, Jordan recalls seeing a photograph from the Holocaust and builds her own memories out of that image. Jordan and her parents are sitting in the kitchen. World War Two, as she discovers, is still raging in Europe and the Pacific. Young June stares at a photograph taken at a concentration camp and
featured on the cover of *The Daily News*. She asks her mother what the photo is “of,” and then her mother and father proceed to have an argument over what the photograph actually signifies:

“Momma!” I cried, after staring at the front page photo of the Daily News.

“What’s this a picture of?”

It was Black and White,
But nothing else. No people
and no houses anywhere. My mother
came and took a look over my shoulder.

“It’s about the Jews,” she said.

“The Jews?”

“It’s not! It’s more about those Nazis!” Daddy
interjected.

“No, Granville, no!
It’s about the Jews. In the war going on,”
my mother amplified, “the German soldiers
take away the Jewish families and they make
them march through snow until they die!” (74)

As in Mira Bartók’s memoir, the events of the Holocaust do the rhetorical work of articulating personal experience with trauma and violence. “War and Memory,” written by Jordan when she was an adult, collapses a number of temporal moments—Vietnam, World War Two, The War on
Poverty, The Civil Rights Movement—and private and communal memories. The battle for “rightness” of interpretation that Granville and Mildred engage in is reflective of their struggle for control over their daughter’s education and socialization; it illustrates their desire to guide her understanding of the world; it also highlights their different interpretations of geopolitical situations, which hinges largely on their different subject positions as male and female. For Mildred, the photograph represents the brutality done to racial minorities, primarily women and girls: “That’s the trail of blood left by the Jewish girls/and women out on the snow because the Germans/make them march so long.” (75). For Granville, the image signifies less about the victims—the Jews—than the victimizers, the Nazis. The distinction between victim and victimizer, passive and active bodies, female and male subjectivities represents, to some degree, Granville and Mildred’s personal concerns and desires for Jordan as she grows up. Their ideological struggles create affective and bodily ruptures in Jordan’s life, even as they represent their own unsatisfactory position in American and international political landscapes.

The complicated and at times contradictory information that her parents give to her about the world and how she should be in it contributes to the familial dissonance in the Jordan household; the poem “War and Memory” calls this dissonance to the fore of the memoir. As Mildred and Granville argue over the meaning of the image of the camps, young June goes back and forth between them asking questions that are left unanswered. Like the beach trips where her parents set about executing their individual plans for what they considered to be the ideal trip to the ocean, Jordan’s voice and desires get lost in the enormity of their needs. And, as with the ocean, Jordan simply cannot figure out what she is looking at when she gazes upon the black and
white image. In short, she cannot picture the Jews, or the camps, or the marches that her parents only obliquely reference during their argument. Not surprisingly, as during other familial arguments, Jordan’s voice is silenced: she is told not to upset herself, “/about these things [she] could not understand/” (75). The limitations of her parents’ explanations compel her to search frantically for meaning in opposition to silent images, veiled references, and obscured geographies. In the face of so many forms of subjugation—at the familial level, at the communal level, at the international level—Jordan tries to take an active stance against victimization through the relentless pursuit of knowledge, even in the face of an unclear photographic referent.

Ironically, it is her mother who silences Jordan’s inquiries at the end of the section. She teaches her about the violence that other girls and women suffer, because of their femininity and their racial difference, and then she tells Jordan to stop troubling herself with trying to understand such blatant forms of hatred and brutality. Perhaps the hopelessness that Mildred feels in the face of Granville’s denigration of her ideas prompts her to try to protect her daughter through keeping her ignorant of the everyday injustices that women—black or otherwise—suffer at the hands of men. Still, despite her mother’s commands, Jordan is left with a seed of inquiry about the nature of violence in her mind, which continues to grow even as the section ends: “and I remember/wondering if my family was a war/going on/and if/there would soon be blood/someplace in the house/and where/ the blood of my family would come from” (76). Jordan wonders whether the violence in her family is commonplace or symptomatic of a number of other problems that are both personal and societal. Sacrifice (blood)—which her family has made to buy a house, to send Jordan to sleep-away camp, and to secure her place in an exclusive
boarding school—needs to come from somewhere. Jordan wonders if her immigrant parents’
sacrifices need to be paid for with her blood: with her bodily and cognitive compliance. She
wonders if her mother and father’s different brands of dissatisfaction will always be part of the
cycle of violence that propels their family forward.

As in The Memory Palace, and a number of the other memoirs that this project treats,
images from the Holocaust stand in for articulation of personal and individual forms of brutality
and victimization. Jordan recognizes the tenuous position that young girls, women, and
minorities occupy in society, and the very real possibility of danger that they face in their daily
lives. She has experienced, at the personal level, feeling powerless and brutalized. Additionally,
her father teaches her that she should aspire to be more like a white man—a confirmation of the
“wrongness” of her racial and physical markers—another point of comparison that she draws
between her personal experiences and those of Holocaust survivors. Although, as I note in
chapter one, the experiences of Holocaust survivors cannot be fully traced upon the experiences
of non-survivors in their memoirs—more a part of what Marianne Hirsch calls “post-memory”
than experienced memory—the references to World War Two and the Holocaust in a number of
contemporary American life narratives suggests the importance of this event as a framing
reference for a number of other personal and communal tragedies: it is a “flashbulb memory”
whose traces refuse to fade away (103). In this instance, the image of the camps becomes the
elephant in the room—looming but unexplained—a testament to the failure of the comparison,
despite Jordan’s attempt at connecting her memories of World War Two and the Holocaust with
her own experiences of victimization and random and unsuspecting violence. However the
presence of “War and Memory”—and the galvanizing image of the camps—further shapes Jordan’s narrative of her traumatic and violent upbringing and her early indoctrination in the importance of justice and of continually asking questions that aid in the processes of self-awareness, development, and preservation.

5. Archival and Autobiographic Longings

In this chapter I have discussed the unique formal visual structures, such as flashbulb memory, cinematic tropes, and photographic ekphrasis that June Jordan engages in her memoir. I have written about her experience, at a young age, with violence and the necessity for a child of her race, age, size, and gender to take on a very complex identity in order to survive and thrive in the world. I have also written about the importance of life narrative throughout her career, not simply in the construction of her childhood memoir, but in her essays, poetry, and activist work. Finally, I examined how personal and communal histories affect Jordan’s configuration of her memoir, and how, as we see in the “War and Memory” section, the violence done to the individual by the family is in some ways not so different from the violence done to the individual subject by a government during war. Family, as Jordan reminds us and Hirsch articulates in *Family Frames*, can be full of violence, unexpected tensions, control mechanisms, and surveillance (11). Jordan’s inclusion of an excerpt from a poem she wrote as an adult in her childhood memoir further demonstrates the importance of life narrative, not only in shaping her career, but also configuring her family dynamics. Even from a very young age Jordan thought about the importance of making connections between personal experience and momentous events, which explains the importance of activism to her identity formation.
Briefly, I have also talked about the Schlesinger Library’s collection of Jordan’s papers and how the existence of documents such as her baby book, and her early drafts of her memoir, fundamentally changes critical engagement with her literary corpus. After sifting through drafts, reviews, book tour itineraries, and personal ephemera from her life, I have learned more about June Jordan’s life story—more than is offered in her memoir. I have seen her report cards (not all A’s as she says in Soldier), I have read the correspondence over the revision, publication, and promotion of her memoir (she was a tireless promoter who was willing to pay for her book tour), I have thumbed through greeting cards from family members and friends (they are full of praise and encouragement). All of these items, some of which are quite personal have made me feel a personal connection with her work. This is the power of life narrative and of the archive—these sources hold so many private memories, so many images of a life fully lived—it commands us to feel a personal connection to people we have never met. It is also thrilling to be made privy to the secrets of another person’s life: in both memoirs and the archive the seeker is offered all kinds of information that, under different circumstances would be rude, or downright strange to share. Typical ephemera—report cards, absence notes, repair invoices, letters of congratulations and thanks—are all present in Jordan’s archive, giving us further insight into the girl and the woman she grew up to be in ways that, were these items destroyed, recycled, or simply thrown away, we would not have.
Many of the documents in her collection, however, were never meant for public consumption. Take, for example, an undated Father’s Day card (reproduced above). As I was leafing through the personal artifacts of Jordan’s life, I came across this strange, and somewhat indecipherable, document. In the card, which is double sided and actually a photocopy of an original that is not in the collection, Jordan writes “to dear father on father’s day,” on one side, and, on the other side of the card: “Poor Daddy can’t be a father because he goes to bed to (sic) late and can’t wake up early.” Across from this writing is a drawing of a figure sleeping in a bed, replete with ‘Z’s’ coming out of his mouth. The writing below the figure is largely unreadable, but there is other darker writing in what looks like pen that says “tax goes up” written horizontally parallel from the image of the sleeping man. I am not entirely sure that the June’s slanted and scrawling handwriting says “father,” although this seems to be the only word that would make sense; I am sure, however, that “be a” is positioned above the second line of text on
the left, between the less decipherable “father” and the clearly written “because,” almost as an afterthought to the sentence structure. When I first read this card I struggled to contain my excitement over the realization that, even as a child, Jordan challenged Granville’s role as a father using the clever rhetorical strategy of sarcastically cutting, yet humorous, parody. Of course, I ask myself, even as I write this, if perhaps my own desires compel me to read this card in the way that I do when, in fact, the card says something completely different.

I share my encounter with this strange document, and my response to my initial reaction, because I want to emphasize that as much as memoir is a repository for memories and a formulator of meaning, so too is the archive, as we shall see in the next chapter, which focuses on Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006). But both life narrative and archival spaces have limited purchase on the whole story, as it were. Both offer only fragmentary stories about their content. Jordan’s archive, like so much of her writing, is filled with deeply personal and somewhat strange things. The Father’s Day card is only one of other, countless, ephemera that I looked through for research on this chapter. So much of Jordan’s life is rendered visually in thousands of photographs, and so much of her work is chaotic—multiple undated drafts with ever-changing project titles—organized only partially and with yellow omission forms lurking in every folder.48 It seems fitting that Jordan’s Father’s Day card takes an ambiguous position towards fatherhood and Granville specifically: this is keeping in step with Soldier’s figuration of family as a site of often violent conflict and ambivalent interpersonal relationships.
Artistic passion can give us both “tremendous pleasure and grief,” Jordan remarks while recalling her father’s love for photography in Soldier (126). As I searched through her memoir, and the archival spaces that contain her autobiographical documents, I experienced that sentiment; it was a rewarding and uncertain practice. Finding the photo of June dressed as a cowboy or the photo of Mildred on her wedding day, which is almost certainly the photograph that Jordan describes but never reveals in Soldier, was fortuitous in that it corroborates my chapter’s emphasis on the important role that visual aesthetics plays in the formal construction of Jordan’s memoir; photography and cinema are two media that she draws upon to frame her memories, and to shape her characterization of self and others. Indeed, the presence of flashbulb memories both emphasizes the importance of visuality in the figuration of Jordan’s memories, even as it also alludes to the emotional trauma she experienced as a child.

While I have added more visual contextualization to Jordan’s memoir, however, it makes sense, given her fraught relationship with both of her parents and her rather difficult upbringing, that she did not include any images in Soldier. The absence of the physical photograph denies us a referent in an already referentially-heavy genre and resists comfortable and conventional narratives that explain, or explain away, her disrupted childhood. In Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood, Jordan works against the generic assumptions that we place upon life narrative and the desire that many readers and critics have for “truth” and “authenticity.” In the place of these certainties she offers us a textually stunning rendition of her less-than-ideal childhood experiences. The complexities of belonging to a family unit full of love, but also of disappointment and anger
create numerous tensions in her story. But she also shows us, at least in part, how a
“revolutionary poet” is created and developed over time.
Chapter 3

Recursive Moves:

Memory Bias, Cultural Memory, and Family History in *Fun Home*

1. The Collapse of the Archive: Ontological Crisis in Bechdel’s Comics

In *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008)—a compilation of Alison Bechdel’s twenty-five-year-old serialized comic strip—Alison Bechdel makes reference to her personal archive: a reoccurring trope, in her work, that has been heavily examined by critics. In her “Cartoonist’s Introduction,” she writes: “Good God. I forgot to get a job!” As she frantically thumbs through her planner, she wonders, “How did that happen?” (vii). In an attempt to trace the origins of her professional choice, Bechdel turns to her personal archive, which a number of scholars have asserted is the creative impetus of her comics. Depicted as a warehouse full of file cabinets, the archive initially starts out as an organized and chronological repository for Bechdel’s childhood experiences and memories. But as she pulls out one object after the next, the archive becomes increasingly chaotic and messy and the answer she searches for remains conspicuously absent. From the cabinet system, Bechdel extracts her diary, her kindergarten report card, and a bong. With the help of a forklift, she pulls out sketch books from the early 1980s, which she pinpoints as the pivotal moment when she began drawing women, a moment which in turn led to the creation of the serialized comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (DTWOF). As she relates the history of DTWOF, she moves from cabinet to cabinet pulling out rejection letters, video tapes, and even a carousel slide projector, while reminiscing on the goals that she set, early on, for her lesbian art.
Bechdel’s introduction, however, is not simply a metaphorical tale of remembrance. While Bechdel’s references to the archive and her depiction of memory as a file cabinet appear to have heavily Freudian overtones, my project moves beyond Freudian metaphors for the mind and memory to the cognitive neuroscientific functions underpinning how memory operates, which I argue, are more useful in analyzing the ways in which contemporary memoirists challenge, interrogate, and play with memory in their narratives. Indeed, Bechdel’s figuration of memory as a warehouse harkens back to an even earlier theory that memory operates as a storehouse that one can access at will; however, as Bechdel’s inability to answer why she became a cartoonist demonstrates, memories often produce more questions about the self than they answer. The failure of memory, and its objects, to fully shape one’s life narrative bumps up against the neurotic self-awareness that many artists—especially comic artists—contend with in their work. Bechdel draws upon her personal archive—so prominently featured in interviews, comics, and critical treatments—in fantastical and untenable ways. By imagining her memories tucked nearly away in filing cabinets that are stories high—so copious that they need construction equipment to be accessed—she represents memories as easily assessable and classifiable. Yet at the end of the introduction, despite excavating her past, Bechdel is left feeling as if her decades-long work on DTWOF is just another normalizing, totalizing form of lesbian art that is “conventional” (xviii). She wonders whether or not her comics have been worth creating after all: “Have I churned out episodes of this comic strip every two weeks for decades merely to prove that we’re the same as everyone else?” (xviii). As she ruminates on this newly discovered quandary, Bechdel asks the reader/viewer to make herself at home in her messy, disorganized
archive while she goes back, literally and figuratively, to the “drawing board” (xviii). The last panel of the introduction shows Bechdel’s silhouette as she exits her archive: in the foreground, papers litter the warehouse floor, objects hang limply from file drawers, and the organization that we first observe in the archive has all but vanished. The vantage-point of the panel is that of a person still inside the warehouse and not of Bechdel, who has since exited the scene. The viewer is left behind to make sense of Bechdel’s whirlwind quest to make meaning even as she has gone in search of autobiographical meaning in other places.

The exploding and collapsing archive is, I think, a handy analogy for the project a memoirist undertakes. Faced with the past, the memoirist reaches into his or her life story—autobiographical memories—in order to find some semblance of order and meaning. But often, what memoirists, especially contemporary American memoirists, realize is that the fallibility of memory and the limitation of perception can only take them so far on this quest for meaning. Inevitably, the memoirist must return to the “drawing board” of the mind to make meaning out of his or her memories in consideration of and in relation to the present. As Bechdel moves from cabinet to cabinet in search of the answer to why she became a cartoonist, more questions about her profession, her art, and her life surface. Even with the aid of a comprehensive personal archive, Bechdel is left with questions unanswered and a certain anxiety regarding her profession. Memory and its objects, it seems, are not enough to satisfy her curiosity.

This chapter examines the numerous strategies that Bechdel employs in order to tell her life narrative. Paradoxically, the archive is only one source that she relies on even as it contributes to the narrative’s ontological crisis; the other strategies include memory bias,
confabulation, and cultural memory. In the sections that follow I offer close readings of the text that probe the benefits and setbacks of these different forms of remembering—the material, the neurological, the historical—all of which allow Bechdel to examine the convergences between her own life narrative and her father’s closeted sexual identity, scandalous life, and mysterious death. In section one, I focus on Bechdel’s reliance on the archive in *Fun Home*, and the subversion of that reliance.

While the metaphor of the archive figures in the stylistic and thematic structures of *Fun Home*, as the introduction to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* demonstrates, it is limited in the explanations it can offer about the self and the world; often the archive and its memory contents malfunction. Thus, in *Fun Home*, Bechdel contextualizes and re-works her archive of memories, much like collage work, in order to solve the mystery of her father’s death. But the conclusions that she arrives at characterize Bruce Bechdel’s death as a suicide even though there is evidence that it was simply an accident. The alternate possibilities for her father’s death lead Alison Bechdel on a journey through both his memories and her own. As such, there are a number of instances where Bechdel knowingly engages bias and confabulation while narrating memories about her father’s life, his arrest, and his death. Bechdel is a self-conscious “rememberer” who exposes her own thoughtfulness about the manipulation of memory and the use of memory to speculate on the unknowable in her memoir.

Her conscious use of memory bias to manipulate and speculate upon her father’s life and death illustrates how contemporary memoirists engage cognitive neuroscience theories of memory to trouble the genre’s earlier focus on establishing ontological certainty. That Bechdel,
along with the other authors I treat in this project, acknowledges the importance of memory confabulation to her story suggests the genre’s turn away from the authenticating constraints it engaged with for centuries. Bechdel’s inclusion of drawn photographs (and her reliance on the comics medium more generally) further challenges the referential certainty of the photo-object, as well as the memories assigned to it: further evidence of the genre-busting that *Fun Home* engages.\(^5\) The explanations that Bechdel retroactively creates to understand Bruce Bechdel’s death demonstrate that she works hard to place herself within the larger story of her father’s life and death, sometimes to the point of obsession, while also calling attention to the importance of consciously narrativizing memory in order to derive meaning from it, however tenuous or fantastic that meaning might be (68). Thus if, as Schacter argues, “Egocentric biases in memory reflect the important role that ‘the self’ plays in organizing and regulating mental life,” then *Fun Home* not only shows the importance of the self in how the brain constructs and recalls memory, but also the important role that memory—personal and cultural—plays in shaping the self (150); it is a dialogic process that demands a certain amount of “navel gazing” as Bechdel argues (*The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, 32).

Bechdel’s autobiographic anxiety is expressed early in her career, and is even more pervasive in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006). Even though *Fun Home* has an “aesthetic [that] is evidentiary,” there are too many instances of referential anxiety—which are made manifest by her struggle and ultimate failure to impose order and certainty on her memories—to be ignored (342). The presence of the archive—threatening, as it does in the introduction of *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, to literally collapse on the subject—is one that is more
troubling than reassuring. For even in a space where objects and documents can be traced back to their originals and linked to the personal past of the subject, so much is left unanswered and unclear in *Fun Home*. These uncertainties derive from memory’s flawed function, which, in turn, troubles life narrative’s central focus on memory to give rise to and shape meaning and self-concept. In her story, Bechdel’s search for meaning is problematic because her memories of her father’s closeted sexual life, arrest for indecency with a minor, and tragic death are subjective, incomplete, and biased. Bound up with the mysterious life and death of Bruce Bechdel are Alison Bechdel’s own struggles with sexual and gender identity. Everywhere we turn, authenticity—familial, sexual, visual—is presented to us even as it is subverted. As Alison Bechdel shows in the first chapter, “Old Father, Old Artificer,” Bruce Bechdel was both there and not there well before his death: “But his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him . . . I ached as if he were already gone” (23).

What Rohy calls the “small marks of authenticity” in the archival “evidence”—maps, photos, police reports, letters etc.—that Bechdel proffers function as proof of the epistemological crisis of personal narrative in *Fun Home*. Like the archival space in *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, *Fun Home* is fraught with uncertainty and mystery because of the elusiveness of memory and remembrance. No amount of documentary verification can ever reveal the mystery at the center of the narrative, which revolves around Bruce Bechdel. 51 Alison Bechdel, however, attempts to make meaning out of the documents, objects, and memories that she possesses in a way less akin to archival work than to collage work; that is, through the re-contextualization of her personal archive, the reproduction and re-creation of her childhood memories, and the
engagement of the comics medium. Like Bartók and Jordan, and the other authors of life narrative that I treat in this project, Bechdel “question[s] authentic character development as a requirement of the genre, asking what is the most important point of . . . memoir, autobiography, or even biography. Does it matter if certain truths are left out, altered, or fabricated?” (Reed 17)

There are many instances in *Fun Home* where Bechdel subverts her own documentary process through the re-contextualization of archival materials. Thus collage is a necessary extension to the archival metaphor that numerous critics, and Bechdel herself, uses to describe her comics. For collage, as we shall come to see, mirrors the cognitive processes of memory bias and reconsolidation that Bechdel utilizes in her memoir. As Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver explain in *Adhocism*, the twentieth century signaled the rise of “intentional adhocism” (154). Collages, invented and utilized by the Cubists, demonstrated that:

> Everything can always be something else . . . They [artists] take the ready-made clichés of industrial society or bountiful nature and disconnect them from their habitual context. In this way the stereotypes of an advanced industrial state can be used to advantage; used in their ordinary contexts they stifle individual initiative and the development of personality. Used in a dislocated way they become refreshed through juxtaposition. (27)

Jencks and Silver argue that this process of refreshing the meaning or significance of objects by placing them into new context “satisfies the mind and is the precondition for anything of greater significance” (27). Adhocism and collage, by definitional extension, are necessary for developing new needs, purposes, and meanings for objects, which, in turn, forges new relationships in art. Collage is an apt metaphor for Bechdel’s project of making meaning out of
memory in that it shores up the physiological processes underpinning how the brain reconsolidates autobiographical memory, which is via attachment to new experiences and sense memory. Collage also captures the visual quality of her comics in that it accurately describes her partial reproduction of letters, maps, newspapers, police reports, novels, and other documents and their deliberate insertion into scenes from her memory.

The Modernist art of collage was not only featured in the artwork of Cubists, but also in the art of the picture book, such as that by George Morrow and Edward Verrall Lucas called *What a Life!* (1911). Like comics, the children’s book *What a Life!* is an illustrated story with overlaid text and familiar objects; however, “it [is] the visual analogue to the pun, the rebus, brought for once to formal respectability” (154). Here Jencks and Silver unknowingly identify yet another form of artwork that exudes the general adhocist spirit: comics. Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, nearly one hundred years later, relies on the tenets of adhocism and the art of collage to re-purpose newspapers, maps, photographs, personal records, letters and other ephemera in order to derive “refreshed” autobiographical meaning from them through new contextualizations and juxtapositions. Objects from Bechdel’s archive “carry an affective weight” as Robyn Warhol notes, once they have been excavated, re-purposed, re-drawn, and placed within new and present contexts (6). Meaning making in *Fun Home* relies upon temporal shifts that allow Bechdel to form new associations and connections with materials and memories from the past. Like memory consolidation and reconsolidation, the archival hodgepodge—which threatens to collapse under its own weight into inscrutability—must be sorted, contextualized, and realigned with new material to sustain itself. Memory, then, is both recursive and dialogic in *Fun Home*. 
*Fun Home*’s figuration of memory, however, is neither straightforward nor apparent. The doubling of the self that Julia Waston argues is present in autobiography is doubled yet again in the graphic memoir: “That splitting of self into observer and observed is redoubled in autographics, where the dual media of words and drawing, and their segmentation into boxes, panels, and pages, offer multiple possibilities for interpreting experience, reworking memory, and staging self-reflection” (28). Through the sheer visuality of the text, Bechdel is able to create multiple frames of self-reference, overlaid onto multiple temporalities: she is child, teenager, young adult, and middle aged, she is actor, narrator, critic, judge, and negotiator. Because of the various subjectivities that her self simultaneously embodies, there are a number of recurring visual tropes that lend themselves to the articulation of the recursive nature of her memories. As with the snake scene in chapter four, or the milkman scene in chapter two, visual elements become the impetus for remembrance, but with a difference. The story Bechdel creates relies not only on a refreshed re-contextualization of her archival materials, but also on memory’s mutable structure. As Hillary Chute observes, “*Fun Home* is not a book about ‘what happened’ to Bechdel’s father. Rather, it is a book about ideas about what happened to Bruce Bechdel . . . arriving at a collection of ideas through an intense engagement with archival materials” (180). Bechdel relies upon the cognitive structures of memory to accomplish this “intense engagement with archival materials,” which, in turn, allows her to create a complex and “autographic,” to use Gillian Whitlock’s term, narrative (971).
2. Confabulations and Biases: The Necessity of “Memory Sins”

Although archives’ “bundles may be mountainous,” as Carolyn Steedman observes, they contain little inherent meaning (68). Archives hold fragmentary and decontextualized information that without an interpreter remains inert: “as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised” (68). Bechdel narrativizes her archive by engaging memory bias and memory confabulation. By embracing “memory’s malfunctions” she tells a more dynamic and inclusive story (4). For example, Bechdel relates an inherited memory of her father as a child and then admits that she consciously changed the memory because she enjoys remembering it her way instead of the way her grandmother does. Similarly, she searches for clues to prove her father’s suicide, presenting books and letters as evidence, even as she recognizes her own motivations for piecing together memories that “prove” her father’s death as such. Memories, in this way, become personally meaningful and relevant in spite of their accuracy not because of it, in this text. Bechdel’s embodiment of the visual and textual spaces in her memoir “lets the reader recognize how the archive is by definition in Fun Home refracted through Bechdel’s experience and her body” and, I would add, calls attention to the cognitive processes underpinning memory (Chute 186).

Confabulation in autobiographical memory is often identified in neurological patients with diseases such as Alzheimer’s Disease, Korsakoff’s Syndrome, or schizophrenia; it also occurs, however, in people with healthy brains (Hirstein 217). People who confabulate “sincerely claim to remember events that did not actually happen” (217). These “false knowledge claims [might be] . . . an attempt to maintain a coherent identity over time by linking our current self to
previous actions or events, to present our self to others as a unified being, aware of and responsible for our past actions” (218). Confabulation, or suggestibility as Schacter terms it, is often accompanied by convincing “visual imagery” (125). Thus, if a person has a vivid recollection of a childhood memory, replete with rich visual detail, then that person is more likely to recall this memory as true whether it is or not. According to Schacter, “[t]hese results make sense in light of other evidence that true recollections of actual events are often characterized by rich and detailed visual imagery” (125).

The related concept of memory bias “refers to distorting influences of our present knowledge, beliefs, and feelings on new experiences or our later memories of them” (138). In other words, memory bias affects how we view past experiences, beliefs, or emotions to be more consistent with our present views, or vice versa; “memory can serve as a pawn for the ruling masters of our cognitive systems” (138). Our memories are often retrofitted to avoid cognitive dissonance, which is a disjuncture between how we view the world and ourselves at multiple given points in our development. Schacter identifies five different types of memory bias, but I will only focus on the three types of bias—hindsight bias, consistency bias, and egocentric bias—that are present in Fun Home. Hindsight bias, as the name suggests, prompts people to re-configure their assessment of a situation, event, or personal belief based upon additional knowledge: “recollections of past events are filtered by current knowledge” (139). As Schacter observes, “people seem almost driven to reconstruct the past to fit what they know in the present” (147). Other types of memory bias include consistency bias, where people do not often have “clear memories of exactly what they believed or felt in the past, and instead infer past
beliefs, attitudes, and feelings from their current states” (140). Egocentric bias, which I refer to in this chapter’s introduction, occurs when a person relies on his or her own memories of an event as more valid than those of other people (150). Bias, in its myriad forms, pervades our autobiographical memory system; yet, however troublesome it might prove to the development of life narrative, it occurs for adaptive reasons, which is a point that I return to later in this section (156).

Hirstein and Schacter identify these malfunctions of memory in humans as predominately unconscious processes—borrowing from cognitive neuroscience’s definition of this term, which includes mental phenomena that are mediated by conscious awareness, such as learning, implicit memory, or preference bias—however, I would like to consider how confabulation and memory bias occur in Fun Home in conscious and generative ways.56 In a multi-layered and complicated moment of remembering—the milkman scene—Alison engages with memory confabulation as she remembers a story that her grandmother told her when she was a child about Bruce Bechdel getting stuck in muddy fields when he was a toddler. The memory Bechdel works with is twice removed—her grandmother learns of her son’s brush with death from his rescuer—and Alison re-imagines her memory of hearing her grandmother’s story by inserting her personal interpretation of Bruce’s experience into the memory, thus engaging in a form of memory bias quite consciously. Alison’s grandmother recalls a mailman coming to Bruce’s rescue in the muddy field. Alison, however, admits to remembering the story “wrong”; in her version, a milkman saved her father: “I know Mort was a mailman but I always pictured him as a milkman, all in white—a reverse grim reaper” (41). Her play with memory, and her reliance on
confabulation to interrogate her father’s earliest brush with physical danger, reveals an exciting and creative extension of autobiographical memory that refuses to collapse under the weight of verifiability or questions of ownership. Alison draws herself into this family memory.

*Fun Home’s* milkman scene is just one example of “memory sins” making their way into the narrative. These “sins,” as Schacter terms memory’s flaws, occur in multiple instances in the text, especially when Alison tries to unravel the mystery of her father’s death. Returning to memories—as well as archival evidence—of the books her father was reading at the time of his death, and her decision to come out a few months before he died, she engages egocentric bias to retroactively construct a narrative of his death that locates the importance of her subjectivity in his story. We can read the wild explanations for her father’s death—such as that it was a “deranged tribute” to F. Scott Fitzgerald—as “after-the-fact explanations that specify a deterministic cause of the outcome” (146). Paradoxically, her egocentric bias both drives and hinders these wild explanations, as her rejection of the Fitzgerald hypothesis suggests: “that would only confirm that his death was not my fault . . . it has nothing to do with me at all” (86). That Bechdel is ultimately “reluctant to let go of that last, tenuous bond” to her father, demonstrates the primary purpose of her narrative is not to finally solve the mystery of her father’s suicide (86). Her narrative’s purpose is to make sense out of her memories, in spite of their flaws. Egocentric bias, in this instance, allows Bechdel to hypothesize about her father’s death, even as it forces her to acknowledge her own fraught role in that envisioning process.

In the second chapter of the memoir, titled “A Happy Death,” which is inspired by the Camus novel of the same title, Alison Bechdel engages hindsight bias to trace the events leading
up to and following her father’s sudden death. Hindsight, as Mark Freeman notes is “the process of looking back over the terrain of the past from the standpoint of the present and either seeing things anew or drawing ‘connections,’ . . . that could not possibly be drawn during the course of ongoing moments but only in retrospect” (4). Hindsight allows us to narrativize memory: to turn past experience into “episodes in an evolving story” (4). For Bechdel, hindsight enables her to recall and connect a number of memories that substantiate her argument that her father’s death was a suicide, although in reality his death remains a mystery, as she admits: “there’s no proof, actually, that my father killed himself” (27). Nevertheless, she uses her memories and hindsight to produce enough “evidence” to indicate that Bruce Bechdel killed himself.

Alison refers to the book her father was reading two weeks before his death—Camus’ *A Happy Death*—his pending divorce from Alison’s mother, and his closeted sexual identity as evidence to corroborate her assessment of his death. But in the middle of the investigation her narrative jumps into the past to show us her parents’ courtship, their sojourn in Europe, and life in rural Pennsylvania. Her narration of her parents’ biographies is steeped with the tension of their marital relationship: his queerness. In chapter three, when she describes their life in Germany, Alison reveals that from the beginning of her parents’ marriage Bruce was hiding his sexuality: “My parents made a trip to Paris soon after their wedding to visit an army friend of my father’s. They had a terrible fight in the car. Later, my mother would learn that dad and his friend had been lovers” (71). The underlined passage in Bruce Bechdel’s copy of *A Happy Death* is only one of the numerous pieces of archival evidence that Alison collects and reproduces to substantiate her claim that Bruce’s death was a suicide. With an eye towards her parents’ marital
For each piece of evidence proving that her father’s death was suicide, however, she provides counter-evidence that his death was an accident. In the second panel on page 28 Bechdel writes “But dad was always reading something. Should we have been suspicious when he started plowing through Proust the year before?” (28) And in the next panel she re-creates, in close-up detail, a bird book with Bruce’s observation notation, dated only days before his death, along with the question “Do people contemplating suicide get excited about spotting Rufous-sided Towhees?” (28) Even her parents’ pending divorce—one of the main pieces of evidence of
her father’s desperation and suicidal tendencies—becomes counter-evidence when Bechdel wonders whether or not he was hit by a truck accidentally because he was not paying attention to the road: “Maybe he didn’t notice the truck coming because he was preoccupied with the divorce. People often have accidents when they’re distressed” (28). Despite the flaws she finds in the evidence at hand she continues to pursue the most personally meaningful interpretation of her father’s death. By the end of the page she admits that the inconsistencies she finds in the evidence, which challenge her theories about her father’s death, are beside the point: “But these are just quibbles. I don’t believe it was an accident’” (28). She then turns her narrative to recalling a number of different memories that point towards explaining Bruce Bechdel’s death as a suicide: his rural and isolated life, his closeted sexuality, his unhappy marriage, his professional sacrifice, and his proximity to death on a daily basis. All of which engage hindsight bias to construct a narrative consistent with her memories of her father’s life.

Of all the memories that substantiate Bruce Bechdel’s death was a suicide, none is more complexly rendered than that of the milkman scene, which occurs about mid-way through chapter two. The scene begins with Alison recalling sleeping over at her grandmother’s house, the fun home, or funeral home where Bruce Bechdel worked. Late at night, after she and her siblings helped her grandmother to find and kill bugs with a flashlight, they listened to her tell “the story of when dad got stuck in the mud” (40). Over time, this story becomes part of the larger familial mythos: Alison and her brothers refuse to listen to any of their grandmother’s other stories: “there was one tale that held us in such thrall that the rest of my grandmother’s repertoire—her stillborn twins, the time my aunt had worms—paled before it” (40). The story
follows. When he was a toddler Bruce Bechdel wandered out into fields during springtime. Eventually the fields got so muddy that he was unable to lift his feet out of the mud: “But just then, along comes Mort Dehaas with the mail, and he sees Bruce a way out there, just a tiny speck” (41). Alison and her brother’s interrupt their grandmother with speculative questions such as “What if the mailman didn’t see him?” and “Would he have died?” (41) But their grandmother refuses to engage in this speculative fiction: “Well, I don’t know, dears. But Mort commenced to walk out across the muddy field to where Bruce was. He gave him a yank, and he was that stuck, his overshoes come off!” (41) In the panel where Bechdel portrays her father’s rescue she draws a milkman in place of a mailman. Dressed all in white, the milkman pulls Bruce out of the muddy field. In the background are the rolling foothills of the Allegheny Mountains and a pickup truck (41). Below the milkman, in parenthesis, she writes: “I know Mort was a mailman but I always pictured him as a milkman, all in white—a reverse grim reaper” (41).

Confabulation in the milkman panels allows Alison to re-work a childhood memory of a story about her father as a child into a story about his death. She knowingly misattributes his
rescue to a milkman instead of a mailman, because she recognizes the broader significance of someone dressed in white saving him once, but failing to save him again—the truck driver who hit Bruce wore white and drove a white bread truck. Beyond misattributing, or confabulating, this memory, she also engages egocentric bias by placing herself into both stories about him. Her parenthetical addition to the image of the milkman who pulls Bruce out of the mud not only explains the dissonance between her grandmother’s memory and her depiction of that memory; it also shows Alison’s visual and linguistic intervention into the memory. She writes herself as an “I” into the milkman panel—adding onto her grandmother’s narrative by admitting her desire to remember her father’s rescue in a certain way—even as, visually, she inserts her artistic “eye” into the memory by drawing a milkman instead of a mailman.

By re-writing the narrative of her father’s childhood brush with death and stamping it with her own visual interpretation of family history, she establishes her need for making sense of
her father’s life and death through the creation of life narrative. She also demonstrates memory’s fluidity, and our tendency towards subjective figuration, which becomes even more readily apparent in the closing panels of chapter two, on page 54. Here, she engages a similar visual-textual insertion of self into the story of her father’s death. These panels show Alison standing in the cemetery where her father is buried. She is mourning his death. But by this point in her investigation she cannot really say whether his death was an accident or not: “Intentional, accidental, it was une mort imbécile any way you looked at it. My father really was down there, I told myself” (54). Visually, the bottom panel on page 54 echoes the layout of the panel with the milkman on page 41: fields border both panels, while the Allegheny foothills occupy the background of both panels. She also connects these two memories textually through the evocation of “mud” when she says that he is “stuck in the mud for good this time,” unable to be rescued by Mort or by anyone else (54). Her desire to mis-remember, or re-remember, the story of Bruce’s rescue—and the reiterative nature of her panels’ visual and textual structure—reveal her narrative’s attempt to find sense in Bruce’s absurd death through the aesthetic mobilization of various forms of memory bias.

Absurdity is a theme that makes numerous appearances in chapter two. Beyond the multiple references to A Happy Death, there are a number of other connections that Alison makes between Bruce Bechdel and Albert Camus, which serves to highlight her theory that Bruce committed suicide. Alison recalls, for example, that her father was reading Camus before he died: “In college, I needed The Myth of Sisyphus for a class. Dad offered to send me his old
copy, but I resisted his interference” (47). In the panels that follow, she wishes that she accepted his copy of the book, because that archival object might contain a clue about his death:

I wish I could say I’d accepted his book, that I still had it, that he’d underlined one particular passage. It’s not that I think he killed himself out of Existentialist conviction. For one thing, if he’d read carefully, he would have gotten to Camus’ conclusion that suicide is illogical (47).

Along with narrative, Bechdel includes a panel that reproduces the “particular passage” she imagines him to have underlined in the book he never lent to her, which follows: “The subject of this essay is precisely this relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd” (47). Although she admits that her father did not kill himself because of a philosophy book, she still entertains the possibility of Bruce misreading Camus’ essay on suicide: “But I suspect my father of being a haphazard scholar” (47). This scene is perhaps the clearest example of how Bechdel’s need to find an explanation for her father’s death takes control of the narrative; although illogic—absurdity really—pokes holes in her theories, she continues to try out different hypotheses. She moves from imagining Bruce Bechdel underlining a passage on suicide in The Myth of Sisyphus—and his subsequently poor interpretation of Camus’ treatise on suicide—to drawing visual parallels between her father and Camus. Recreating an image of her father in a car, she is reminded: “of Cartier-Bresson’s photos of Camus” (47). She pushes the association further by noting that her parents were living in Europe when Camus died in a car accident. But here the comparisons end. The archive fails to
produce meaning, as the fabricated copy of Bruce’s book demonstrates, and the presence of consistency and hindsight bias in the narrative confirm.

Bechdel’s desire to (literally) draw parallels between her family’s life and the lives of authors, and even fictional characters, is indicative of the forms of bias—egocentric, hindsight, and consistency—that she engages when recalling her life narrative. She also relies on an archive of authors who often fail to fully translate onto her autobiographic story.

I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are more real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison. (67)
Because of her self-admitted emotional distance from her father’s death, she finds avenues that allow her to intellectualize its circumstances. Thus she connects her father’s death to Camus’ untimely death, as well as to his philosophical writings. She also draws parallels between Bruce, Daedalus, and Icarus. Like the milkman memory she and her brothers ask their grandmother to re-tell over and over again, Alison refashions Bruce Bechdel’s life, death, and relationships within these fictional and recursive structures: “In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky” (4). Alison interprets her father’s life within a literary framework because it provides a fitting analogy to cast Bruce as a master of artifice and of creation like Daedalus; this figuration also allows her to develop her own identity both in alignment and in opposition to his. Yet, as we observe with Camus, the comparisons can only be taken so far. The four panels on page 15 (reproduced above) are visually punctuated by images of Alison juxtaposed with Bruce, engaging in opposing activities. Bechdel is able to construct her aesthetic, philosophical, and behavioral difference: “I was Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his Aesthete” (15). Armed with literary, philosophical, and cultural training, Bechdel is able to engage bias to retroactively formulate her identity as it bumped up against, reacted to, and engaged with Bruce Bechdel’s identity. Utilizing hindsight bias, and the related consistency bias, aids in the intellectualization of her dynamic with her father—she is neither son nor father, neither Icarus nor Daedalus, Bruce occupies both roles—and allows her to create a polished and developed sense of self, even as it pays homage to him and his influence.
In this section I have discussed the role of confabulation or misattribution as well as hindsight bias, egocentric bias, and consistency bias in key scenes in the first half of *Fun Home*. While Bechdel admits that, in spite of the archival evidence she gathers, the circumstances surrounding her father’s death are perhaps unknowable, she constructs her own tentative interpretation of the events leading up to and following her father’s death. Armed with memories that only seem to make sense in hindsight, she shapes a narrative of a man obsessed with fiction more than with life; a man living in secrecy and perhaps shame; a man who was hero and anti-hero, victor and failure, simultaneously. By inserting herself, with egocentric bias, into his narrative, she is able to shape her own life narrative as it stands in proximity to but also apart from her father’s. To admit as she does that her own memories of her father’s life and death simply do not align with the official documents of his history demonstrates the shift in generic figurations underway in contemporary life narrative: authors and artists are preoccupied with memory’s biases and flaws rather than the demonstrable “realness” of experience. Bechdel does not express anxiety over getting the facts right in some official or authenticated way; in fact, in admitting to her desire to recall specific memories in certain ways, she reveals that her biases drive the construction of her life narrative. Bechdel’s memoir, which is about theorizing memory as much as it is about remembering memory, gestures towards what neuroscientists have discovered about memory, which is “that memorizing something is not at all like recording it and that recalling something is not at all like replaying a recording” (223). Because “memory is a selective and reconstructive process that can go wrong in several ways” one can argue that we are always remembering “wrongly” (223). Out of necessity, the brain must limit and select the
information it stores. Thus the narratives that we form out of autobiographic memories are constructed. Bechdel calls to the fore this constructed quality in *Fun Home* when she knowingly collages bits of her archive to represent her personal biases, wishes, and memories.

And although neuroscientists often allude to bias in conjunction with pathology, I do not mean to implicate Bechdel in this way. I do not want to judge or criticize her project as somehow “untrue.” For as I argue in the introduction and in earlier chapters, embracing memory with its flaws and malfunctions is necessary for approaching the genre in open and more generative ways, because as numerous neuroscientists point out, “our normal correct memories are rational reconstructions, in that the reconstruction process is guided by what seems rational to us” (223).

No memory is totally correct. So when Bechdel admits to remembering something differently than it was presented to her, such as the milkman story, a neuroscientific approach to the narrative construction of that memory asks the why and the how of her process, which opens up a multiplicity of meanings about the role of the rememberer’s subjectivity in constructing a life story that would otherwise be foreclosed.

Beyond the shift in critical attention from approaching the genre of life narrative as a tension between fact and fiction towards a more cognitively holistic approach, there is also a biological reason why we ought to approach memories as one part of a larger meaning-making process. Schacter argues that when memory malfunctions (or “sins” against us to use his term) there are reasonable biological explanations that have to do with the physiology of the brain, and paradoxically the functionality of our memory systems:
Even though they often seem like our enemies, the seven sins are an integral part of the mind’s heritage because they are so closely connected to features of memory which make it work well . . . they also illuminate how memory draws on the past to inform the present, preserves elements of present experience for future reference, and allows us to revisit the past as well. Memory’s vices are also its virtues, elements of a bridge across time which allows us to link the mind with the world. (206)

To this I would add that memory is guided by the process of shaping the self—identity—and by the desire to make sense out of the noise of experience that we encounter in the world. Thus confabulation and the various types of memory bias are all part and parcel of our desire to express our lives and our identities within structures that are consistent and logical. Fun Home’s unique play with the structures of memory can in part be attributed to the ways in which Bechdel confronts the inaccessibility of the past; from it, she constructs a narrative that reconciles her own experiences in the world with those of her family’s: it is a dialogic process.

3. Steadying Frames of Reference

In Fun Home drawings masquerade as photographs when in reality they are re-created as Ariela Freedman suggests: “the displacement and artifice involved in drawing the photographs rather than simply reproducing them also signals the way that she, as the artist, is manipulating and forming the narrative. Her father is the ‘artificer,’ but she is an artificer, too” (131). Spiegelman, as we will see in chapter four, creates a similar character dynamic in Maus. Bechdel uses these “drawn photographs” to challenge official histories (Watson 37). Memory, however, is also troubled by the presence of these reconstructed photographs because although “one could
argue that such artifacts operate to prompt remembrance, they are often perceived actually to contain memory within them or indeed to be synonymous with memory” (Sturken 19). The photograph is perhaps the object that we most frequently associate with memory: “Memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze” (19). The notion, however, that a photographic image contains memory, or is a verifiable source of memories, is an illusion. In fact, like confabulation or memory bias, a photograph can disrupt one’s memory. For example, during the beach scene in chapter four, which occurs midway through the narrative, Bechdel offers two versions of her family vacation: one interpreted through the frames of “officially reproduced” family photographs and the other interpreted through a newly uncovered erotic photograph. As Reed summarizes:

The text describes an illicit activity, while the drawings of pictures taken on a beach holiday portray happy children and adults innocently playing in the sand. Bechdel relies on text and image to show the layers of her story and to point out to the reader that her childhood memories of that trip match the photographs, not the story she learns about the trip as an adult. (20)

The beach scene is one of the foundational markers of the text and is accompanied by a double-page spread that recreates a photograph of Bechdel’s babysitter Roy semi-nude and posing for the camera. Bechdel finds this image shortly after her father’s death. The centerfold (the two-page spread) features a blown-up version of the image held in Bechdel’s hand, she proceeds to deconstruct it and her memories of that particular family vacation:
It’s low contrast and out of focus. But the subject is clearly our yardwork assistant babysitter, Roy. It appears to have been taken on a vacation when I was eight, a trip on which Roy accompanied my father, my brothers, and me to the Jersey Shore while my mother visited her old roommate in New York City. I remember the hotel room. My brothers and I slept in one adjoining it. (100)

By pointing out that she remembers the location where this image was taken, Bechdel calls attention to the layered quality of memory’s dynamics and the complexity of any given historical moment: what she remembers from her childhood is re-contextualized through the viewing of the illicit photograph, and its accompanying negative, of Roy in her adulthood. Though viewing this photograph produces a conflicted response in Bechdel—why is she not “properly outraged,” she asks in a text bubble—she is made privy to and identifies with her “father’s illicit awe[,] a trace of [which] seems caught in the photo, just as a trace of Roy has been caught on the light-sensitive paper” (101). This image is a crucial one to the development of the narrative because, “At this evanescent point the family legacy of desire materializes across generations and genders” (Watson 39). Through the viewing of this complex image, Alison is able to emotionally merge with her deceased father—as she does in the milkman scene when she overlays her memories onto his life story—to understand his queer desire through her own desire to embody masculinity. As Bechdel says, “Between us lay a slender demilitarized zone—our shared reverence for masculine beauty” (99).

Despite the photograph being a drawn reproduction of the original it retains many of the markers of an actual photograph, such as date and month stamps, and a white border that frames
the image. These markers of authenticity are punctuated by her father’s odd attempts at blacking out the date and month, which, as Bechdel observes is a “curiously ineffectual attempt at censorship” (101). Bruce Bechdel’s attempt to hide the image in plain sight, as it were, only complicates Alison’s emotional response to it, which, of course, stands in as a metaphor for other instances of her father’s behavioral lapses and failures. His inclusion of this image in an envelope labeled “family” further complicates Alison’s childhood memories of her father: “In an act of prestidigitation typical of the way my father juggled his public appearance and private reality, the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed” (101). Alison Bechdel is the one left to figure out the significance of her father’s strange inclusion of this incriminating photograph with mundane family snapshots. She locates understanding in the “demilitarized zone” of queer sexuality and ambiguous gender identity, which in many ways they shared. Family, in this regard, becomes “queered” through Bechdel’s reading of her father’s photograph (Mitchell 1).

That the photograph occupies a prominent place in the narrative arc of Fun Home—located in the center of the story—and that its structure is evocative of a pin-up or centerfold found in pornography further emphasizes the interconnection between family and personal desire. On the page following the centerfold of Roy, page 102, Bechdel re-creates a strip of photographic negatives, which corroborates the duality of the events surrounding the beach vacation. The photographic object in this instance refuses to reveal the whole story of that childhood memory, as it were.

The newly discovered image of Roy upends Bechdel’s memories of the beach vacation; as she shows us in the drawing of the negative strip, however, the previously viewed images
from the trip corroborate her childhood memories. In the first three frames on the negative strip, Alison and her brothers play at the beach. These family photos are rendered suspect by the inclusion of the final frame in the strip, which features Roy posing on the hotel bed. Bechdel’s childhood memory is bifurcated by the newfound knowledge of Roy and her father’s erotic, and problematic, behavior. Even the lighting, as she notes, lends itself to the illicit nature of this re-formed memory: “A perusal of the negatives reveals three bright shots of my brothers and me on the beach followed by the dark, murky one of Roy on the bed” (102). Watson calls Bechdel a detective who “hunt[s] the evidence of her father’s secret life that was hidden in their everyday interactions, and reread[s] family photographs for evidence of his covert homosexuality” (41). Interestingly, once she finds proof of her father’s transgressions the lighting fades to noir and the reconstructed images only further complicate her relationship to her father’s closeted identity. If she is a detective, she is one who cannot solve the case put before her, as there are no absolute answers to whether her father’s death was an accident or suicide, or how his queerness figured into his death.

While the photo-object can, as Sturken argues, be the source of illusion, such as the family snapshots from the beach vacation, photographs can also prompt the viewer to form new meaningful connections at the site of memory construction, as the ineffectually hidden image of Roy demonstrates. Photographs (and their negatives) can make visually present an event or an action that would otherwise remain unproven. While not always providing the memories that we hope to find in them, photographs can help us to fill out the gaps in personal history and shape long-term memory. For Bechdel, photographs help her to form bonds with her father even after
his death. For example, at the end of chapter four, Bechdel reveals that she found yet another suspect photograph of her father cross-dressing: “the pose he strikes is not mincing or silly at all [because] [h]e’s lissome, elegant” (120). Although Bechdel reveals this image at the end of the chapter, it is also the chapter’s frontispiece. Reminiscent of the Proustian gardens evoked at the beginning of the chapter, Bruce stands in front of flowering trees and looks, as Alison suggests, quite feminine. His beauty in this pose is something that might otherwise have been lost in translation, which Alison argues is indicative of the “complexity of loss itself” (120). The photo-object reveals the illicit awe that Alison observed in the mise-en-scène of the photograph of Roy, but this time that awe is reflected upon Bruce, not expressed by him. Alison (and by extension the viewer) is implicated in the photograph’s gaze. By juxtaposing the image of Roy with the image of Bruce, Bechdel crosses temporalities. In doing so, she remarks on the similar circumstances of Roy and Bruce; both men were of a similar age when they posed in their photographs, both men express their queer identity via photographic performance (120).
The similarities between all three characters—Bruce, Roy and Alison—is demonstrated when Bechdel offers us a literal side-by-side comparison of a photograph of herself and one of her father on page 120. Both photos are held in her drawn hands. While the foreground of the panel contains two photographs—one of Bruce Bechdel on the left and the other of Alison Bechdel on the right—there is a third photograph of Bruce Bechdel in a woman’s bathing suit in the background. The bathing suit photograph is obscured by text bubbles and is much smaller than the other two images, because of the perspective of the panel; the similarities, however, between the figures in all of the photographs are striking. In fact, Bechdel draws a number of parallels between herself and her father through not only visual juxtaposition, but also through textual juxtaposition. In the text bubble above the image of her father, Bechdel writes: “In another picture, he’s sunbathing on the tarpaper roof of his frat house just after he turned twenty-two. Was the boy who took it his lover?” (120) Here Alison opens the image of her father as a young adult to “subjective reinterpretation” (37). She imagines the similarities between her father’s life at the moment when the photograph was taken and her own life at around the same age, much as she does when she compares Roy and Bruce in the centerfold and cross-dressing image, respectively. The text above the image on the right is a direct continuation of the text above her father’s image on the left. Connected by the coordinating conjunction “as”—a connecter word that typically joins two clauses, rather than starts a whole new sentence—her reading of her father’s photograph merges with her memory of when her own photograph was taken: “As the girl who took this Polaroid of me on a fire escape on my twenty-first birthday was mine?” (120) In this panel, Bechdel lovingly reproduces the nuances of these photographs, and
offers speech that connects yet spans two bubbles, in order to heighten the material relationship between herself and her father. The reproduction of these images enables a performance of translation from father to daughter.

Translation is an important conceit in *Fun Home*. Bechdel uses translation both literally and figuratively to unpack her memories of her childhood and of the circumstances surrounding her father’s death. She translates literature and the lives of literary figures into her father’s life, postulating that one particular circumstance or another in a novel, or an author’s life, is the reason why he committed suicide. However, she also translates images of other people into those of her father, and vice versa. But the most complex translation process is the one in which she, literally and symbolically, re-casts herself as her father. In the juxtaposed images of father and daughter, side-by-side, she calls attention to this process, as she calls attention to the similarities in the visual schematics of the photographs: “The exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces—it’s about as close as a translation can get” (120). Bechdel imagines the circumstances under which her father had his photo taken as similar to her own, thus revealing an intense desire to connect to him bodily, visually, and through a shared queer identity. Her desire to force him “out” from under his artifice manifests in the various moments in the narrative where she reveals a document or an image that speaks to the double life he lived. Like Mira Bartók who reproduces excerpts from her mother’s journal entries, Bechdel re-writes herself onto memories in Bruce Bechdel’s life that would otherwise remain silent and unknowable. She also gives voice to the part of his life that he concealed. So when she suggests that “[w]hat’s lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself,” she refers
both to the loss of her father, but also to the loss of his history. Her narrativization of artifacts from her archive attempts to reclaim that history’s loss.

Bechdel’s use of photography to construct her graphic narrative is pervasive and reminiscent of her father’s tendency towards artifice. To draw the nearly one thousand panels in *Fun Home* Bechdel took hundreds of photographs of herself in the poses of her family members (Burkeman 1). In an interview with Anna Gross, Bechdel admits: “It’s a lot of work, but it would be a lot of work too if I didn’t do that. It’s mostly a drawing aid—a kind of shortcut . . . I’m always creating these schemes. If I have to draw someone sitting in a chair, I have to go find a chair, sit in it, and take a picture of myself sitting in it” (1). Here Bechdel reveals that photographing herself as the subjects in her graphic narrative helps her to re-create more life-like postures in her drawings. These reproductions, however, go beyond simply capturing the dynamics of figure drawing accurately; as Warhol notes: “To tell the story, and to show/draw it, she must literally embody each of the characters on the page . . . this stunning participation in her narrative’s construction also lends weight to the pervasiveness of the body (and more specifically Bechdel’s body) in this text” (7). The performative nature of Bechdel’s art is perhaps no more present than in the photograph of Bechdel dressed as her father, in suit jacket and tie, staring downward into the camera. This image is recreated in a panel on page 197 of the graphic narrative, along with the text, “In my earliest memories, dad is a lowering, malevolent presence.” In a move that is similar to the photographic translation on page 120, Bechdel attempts to forge a bond with her deceased father via photographic reproduction. Alison must literally embody his body and re-create the terror he produced in her as a child to capture his “malevolent presence.”
She translates his fashion style, his facial expressions, his posture, and his behavior onto her own body and in the process places yet another mark of her selfhood onto his life while attesting to his influence in her life. Over her father’s biography, she traces her personal narrative and biases, entwining and merging them as she sees fit.  

4. Writing the Self into Cultural Legacies

In chapter four, titled “In the Shadow on Young Girls in Flower,” a reference to Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, Bechdel draws connections between Proust and her father. In a textual-visual juxtaposition beginning on page 92 she narrates a synopsis of Remembrance focusing specifically on passages where Proust describes gardens and flowers, as she depicts Bruce Bechdel’s passion for gardening. She draws images of her father painting delicate roses on goose eggs for Easter and replanting stolen dogwood trees. While the narrator focuses on the story of Swann’s garden, the graphics and dialogue focus on Bruce’s “disturbing,” to quote Alison, hobby (90). At the end of page 92, however and moving into page 93 the juxtaposition
between *Remembrance* and Alison’s memory of her father’s horticultural passion collapses when she admits that her father had been reading Proust a year before he died (92). Here the literary and the horticultural become linked not only at the site of Bruce Bechdel’s domestic hobbies; they also become linked through a causal relationship that Alison Bechdel identifies between her father’s reading habits and his untimely death. In this complicated translation Alison attempts to trace the events that led to her father’s death through his literary preferences as much as his home improvement skills.

Later in the chapter, a scene from *Remembrance* explores how circumstance and contingency affect both personal identity and history. In the scene Alison says: “In one of Proust’s sweeping metaphors, the two directions in which the narrator’s family can opt for a walk—Swann’s Way and the Guermanties [sic] way—are initially presented as diametrically
opposed . . . But at the end of the novel the two ways are revealed to converge—to have always converged—through a vast ‘network of transversals’ (102). While the network doubles as a metaphor for the tension in the Bechdel household, which Alison attributes to her own nascent sexuality and her father’s hidden sexuality, the “vast network of transversals” is also a queer navigation of what shapes personal and cultural history. Proust’s “vast network,” Bechdel implies here, will ultimately converge back on queer identity regardless of external pressures; however, each path offers its own possibilities in terms of experience. Identity, in this respect, cannot be altered to suit the needs of the family, or of cultural history. Still cultural history, not just individual history, is created from innumerable possibilities: random and at times fortuitous, at other times not so much. Bechdel’s connection of her life narrative, and her father’s story, to the Gay Rights Movement further explores the relationship between personal and cultural history and the role the family plays in shaping each. As Bechdel superimposes herself onto her father’s life story, she also draws herself into major historical moments of the middle twentieth century that were pivotal in shaping the queer community. Historical circumstance, Bechdel shows us, affects how we shape the markers of our identity: especially sexuality.
Bechdel interrogates the relationship between personal and public memory on page 104 when she recalls driving to New York City only a few weeks after the Stonewall Riots:

I have a hallucinogenic memory of a throbbing welter of people in a large circle. It must have been Washington Square Park. Maybe I was experiencing a contact high from the LSD trips no doubt swirling around us. Or perhaps it was a contact high of a different sort. It had only been a few weeks since the Stonewall Riots, I realize now. (104)

In the panels that follow a wide-angle-shot of people dancing in Washington Square Park, and a close-up of young Alison observing sexually androgynous people, Roy and her siblings walk past the Stonewall Inn. The first panel does not have any indicator that the building they are walking past is Stonewall, but the last panel on the page not only shows its sign, but also a message that was posted there immediately following the riots. As in the milkman scene earlier in the graphic narrative, Alison draws herself into this momentous cultural event. Merging personal history with cultural memory, she re-casts a formative childhood memory as the beginning of her awareness of queer identity. And while she “acknowledge[s] the absurdity of claiming a connection to that mythologized flashpoint” she also challenges the notion that to be part of history one must experience it when she says: “might not a lingering vibration, a quantum particle of rebellion, sill have hung in the humectant air?” (104) Communal history, she argues, is relevant to the development of personal history.

There are a number of other instances where Alison frames certain memories within the context of larger historical events. While Stonewall allows Bechdel to locate herself in the emerging sense of queer identity in America and the Gay Rights Movement; it also acts as a
“watershed” between her parents’ “young adulthood in the city a decade earlier, and [her] own a
decade later” (105). Drawing herself into the legacy of the Stonewall Riots allows Bechdel to
identify with her parents—who, at one time lived in the gay epicenter of New York City—even
as it allows her to shape her own sense of queer identity.

Bechdel’s association with the galvanizing moment of the Gay Rights Movement is only
one instance where she traces her own role in the history of queerness in the twentieth century. In
the final chapter another major historical moment—the Bicentennial—acts as a framing device
for the development of her queer identity. In this instance, however, the raucous celebrations that
occur in New York City during this event eventually lead to another, less celebratory historical
event: that of the AIDS epidemic. But before Alison speculates on whether or not her father
would have survived the epidemic had he not died, she draws our attention to her growing
awareness of queer sexuality: “In 1976, dad took my bothers and me to New York City for the Bicentennial . . . at age fifteen, I saw the neighborhood in a new light” (189). In the panels on page 190 (reproduced above) we watch Alison watching the “cosmeticized masculinity” she encounters on Christopher Street: “It was quite a gay weekend all around” (190). She recalls seeing Baryshnikov and *A Chorus Line* and visiting two men who lived together. While she, “did not draw a conscious parallel to [her] own sexuality, much less to [her] father’s . . . the immersion . . . left [her] supple and open to possibility” (191). Here, Alison re-casts a family vacation to New York City as one of the defining moments of her sexuality; much like the beach vacation was a significant moment that articulated her father’s queer sexuality. Pulling together the threads of memories of her encounter with queer culture and queer society, she weaves a tapestry that locates her identity within these spaces. Like her proximity to Stonewall, the Bicentennial is a formative experience in shaping her queer identity.

Bechdel’s proximity to significant historical events, however, is not always a positive experience. There are instances during these events that are so dangerous they have all but been forgotten. The morning after her family sees *A Chorus Line*, Alison’s little brother John leaves the apartment on his own. At the time Bechdel admits: “I didn’t understand the level of my father’s alarm” until their host, Elly, mentions chickenhawks, or “Guys who prey on young boys” (192). In the panels that follow, Alison imagines her “absurdly beatific” eleven-year-old brother, who is wearing a sailor shirt—perhaps a reference to the epidemic that was to come, perhaps a reflection of the tall ships docked in New York harbor for the Bicentennial—wandering around the “notorious cruising grounds” of the Village (192). She re-creates the scene,
drawing John and a chickenhawk walking together and talking about boats. When John returns to
the apartment, he tells Alison that a man followed him until he ran away (193). This latter part,
about the man who followed John, is something that Bechdel admits she had all but forgotten: “I
didn’t know about the man until years later, or maybe I did know and blocked it out, or simply
forgot because there was so much else going on” (193). At play in this scene are the largely
unstated, but visually present, dangers of [queer] sexuality: especially when there are large age
disparities between people, such as a young boy and an older man. It is no surprise that this scene
mirrors Bruce Bechdel’s own sex scandal with a minor and that he promptly forgives his young
son for wandering out alone (193). The parallels between the chickenhawk and Bruce Bechdel
are only hinted at and Alison’s memory fails to fully illuminate her brother’s experience. Still,
the scene points to the various dangers associated with queer sexuality during the Bicentennial
and the vagaries of Bruce Bechdel’s behavior.

There are other dangers that threaten queer identity. In a scene following the end of the
Bicentennial revelry, Bechdel wonders what her father’s life would have been like, post-1980.
Immediately, she links the AIDS epidemic to imagining her father’s life: “When I try to project
what dad’s life might have been like if he hadn’t died in 1980, I don’t get very far. If he’d lived
into those early years of AIDS, I tell myself, I might very well have lost him anyway, and in a
more painful, protracted fashion” (195). Bechdel not only imagines losing her father, but also her
mother: evidence of the threat of AIDS to the preservation of the family unit. She counters her
fears of losing both parents through challenging her own sense of plausibility (a common move
she makes, such as when she creates a circumflex to represent her ontological crisis in diary-
keeping): “Perhaps I’m being histrionic, trying to displace my actual grief with this imaginary trauma” (195). Still, as another object from queer culture—And the Band Played On—suggests, she is not histrionic. The book opens at the Bicentennial, and, as Bechdel shows us in a close-up drawing of its first page, postulates that this is where the epidemic first occurred, because sailors came from all over the world to celebrate. The Bicentennial is a bittersweet historical event for Bechdel: one of the first places where she came into contact with unapologetic queerness, but also where, as she later comes to find out, a disease that decimates the queer community was first located. It is also the site where her family is threatened in numerous ways.

Trying to make sense out of a narrative that is dangerous and confounding, John’s brush with a sexual predator and her father’s own run-in with the legal system under similar circumstances leave Alison reeling. Like the archive, and memory bias and confabulation, she uses historical moments—and cultural memories—such as the Bicentennial to trace her coming-of-age narrative upon the narrative of her father’s final years. However, as she admits, this is a problematic project that says more, perhaps, about her own memory bias and desire for meaning than it does about her actual father’s life and death:

Maybe I’m trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A Narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. It’s tempting to say that, in fact, this is my father’s story. There’s a certain emotional experience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia, but that’s a problematic line of thought. (196)
Bechdel’s desire to make meaning out of her father’s life and death causes her to run up against the more theoretical and political reasons for her father’s death, which are problematic explanations. The story she wants to tell about her father is directly linked to her desire to absolve him of blame, as she observes. However, there are moments in the narrative—often connected to his secretive relationships with underage boys—where Bruce Bechdel admits to Alison that he is not a hero: that he is bad (153, 230). These opposing lines of inquiry into her father’s death clash and collide with one another. Still, she is able to draw parallels between herself and her father—their desire for attention, their sexuality, their intellectualism—while holding two simultaneous images of her father as hero and anti-hero. Creating these similarities allows her to draw closer to her father, even posthumously. While a definitive explanation for why he died may not be forthcoming, the process of uncovering and contextualizing memories through locating them in cultural events allows Bechdel to narrativize her personal history, which is a worthwhile project.

Steedman argues that we construct our identity through the process of identification, through others or through broader cultural and historical events. In *Fun Home* Bechdel casts out lines to a number of different people, communities, and cultural moments in order to make meaning out of her life. She searches for connection with her mother, her father, lovers, the gay and lesbian community, comics, and a number of cultural events that are related to and inform these previous influences. But her desire to locate herself in history underpins the larger concern of this section; it also punctuates the narrative’s movement—from linking Watergate to the summer she got her period, Stonewall to her first visit to New York City, the Bicentennial to her
blooming sexuality, and the AIDS epidemic to her father’s death—as we see, especially, in chapter seven. Steedman argues convincingly that historical identification allows us to shape our identity: “the past is searched for something (someone, some group, some series of events) that confirms the searcher in his or her sense of self, confirms them as they want to be, and feel in some measure that they already are. The search is for all the ideas, and times, and images that will give us, right now, solidity and meaning in time” (77). Historical identification also gives us communal markers to locate our memories in and throughout time. Cultural events carry affective weight and help us to locate our subjectivity in a given temporal moment. For Bechdel, her own coming out and sexual awareness is tied to the national emergence of a gay and lesbian community and, in many respects, she re-figures her father’s story within this larger national emergence of queer identity, although ultimately her re-figuration of his queer story fails because it is imagined. He dies before the height of the Gay Rights Movement. The Nixon era—which Bechdel makes multiple references to in *Fun Home*—with its secrecy and political artifice, provides a more apt analogy for her family’s various concealments. History and memory, as Sturken suggests and Bechdel demonstrates in her graphic narrative, are not in opposition but entangled (5).

5. Structural Complexity in Graphic and Autobiographic Narratives

Since the 1970s, with the mainstream success of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Joe Matt, and Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*, and the later success of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, graphic narratives have emerged as a singularly dynamic and popular medium. At once confessional and constructed, they offer the
reader a particular version of autobiographical events mediated by the visuality of their narrative. 
But long before Alison Bechdel’s breakout hit *Fun Home*, critics struggled to identify what in particular changes the genre of life narrative when the medium of comics is introduced.

In the first special issue devoted entirely to comics, in *Modern Fiction Studies* (2006), guest editors Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue that graphic narratives not only display autobiographic tendencies through their thematic construction, but also through their material construction:

Because of this foregrounding of the work of the hand, graphic narrative is an autographic form in which the mark of handwriting is an important part of the rich extra-semantic information a reader receives. And graphic narrative offers an intricately layered narrative language—the language of comics—that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page. (767)

Graphic narratives, Chute, DeKoven, and others argue, add to the layers of complexity in narrative construction. Often scholars privilege comics over more traditional, text-based autobiographical writing, as Warhol does here: “*Fun Home* shows how the addition of the visual images to the verbal narration that occurs in autography can produce a depth-effect to characterization that goes beyond what prose autobiography typically can achieve” (4). Similarly, Watson argues “Bechdel’s linkage of autographic modes and graphic disclosures creates a richly embodied subjectivity different, in its sustained semiotic cross-referencing, from the narrative consecutiveness of verbal autobiography” (36). These attempts at elevating graphic memoirs over text-based memoirs, however, create a binary that fails to account for a number of visual-
verbal hybrid projects that fall somewhere in between these distinguishing markers. For example, Mira Bartók’s *The Memory Palace* engages both text and image to explore her memories. In fact, visuality plays a crucial role in shaping her life story largely because of her traumatic brain injury, which prevented her from incorporating more traditional, linear and text-based forms of memory recollection. Similarly, June Jordan’s use of ekphrasis speaks to the importance of visuality in constructing her life narrative; although photographs are never reproduced in *Soldier*, like the posed photographs Bechdel used as models to draw figures in *Fun Home*, they are the basis from which Jordan constructs her highly descriptive and visual scenes. Life narrative, one can argue, is at its core a visual medium because the process of re-creating memories and translating them into scenes is a visual one: autobiographic memory, as Kulik and Brown demonstrate, is entwined with our visual processes (73).

Understanding how comics affect and influence the autobiographic process necessarily means considering how the medium so frequently emulates memory in its structure. As Chute argues, “Comics locates the reader in space and for this reason is able to spatialize memory. The cartoonist Chris Ware suggests that comics itself is ‘a possible metaphor for memory and recollection’” (108). Chapter one focuses on the intimate connection between memory and space in the method of loci; I will return to this connection in chapter four. As mnemonics demonstrates, our memory is keyed into location and time; parts of our limbic system use these demarcations to aid in memory storage and retrieval. A medium grounded in spatial and temporal awareness, such as comics, moves beyond standing in as a metaphor for memory; comics reflect how our cognitive structures, such as memory, operate. That we often remember
through locating information in time and space—the very elements that the comics medium
utilizes to create narrative—places comics in the unique role of making visible, on the page, the
often nebulous processes of long-term autobiographical memory. Thus, when Bechdel recalls
and represents her memories of her father, she not only engages in the process of recollection,
but also makes visible the process of dialogic revision, or memory reconsolidation. She speaks
back to her memories, challenging and reconstructing them, in order to make explicit how she
thinks about memory, but also for the more personal motivation of interlocking her life narrative
with that of her father’s.

The physical nature of comics—that they are drawn, that bodies are reproduced again and
again, that they so often have to do with perception and cognition—gestures towards the
engagement of the medium with many of the biological frameworks underpinning human
subjectivity. Bechdel’s ability to visually and physically embody all members of her family lends
insight into her memories of these events while also allowing her to re-figure her memories
through performing their otherness. She literally gets to be all players in her story, which
changes the stakes of representation and troubles the notion of authenticity. So while, as Chute
argues: “[c]omics is, above all, a haptic form . . . [that] demands tactility, [and] a physical
intimacy with the reader in the acts of cognition and visual scrutiny” (112); it is also a form that
encourages deep and meaningful engagement with one’s own cognitive processes. In Bechdel’s
most recent memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), this engagement is reflected
in Alison’s meta-thinking, or thinking about how others think about her. Bechdel’s engagement
with theory of mind, both in her latest memoir as well as in *Fun Home* allows her to navigate
“complex social situations” as Zunshine suggests while also signaling to the reader that her work has “sociocognitive complexity” (115). In other words, the comics medium, and its attendant aesthetic structures, help authors to navigate their internal—and quite complex—mental processes while also offering to readers insight into their external worlds. Like text-based memoir, graphic memoirs encourage memoirists to scrutinize their own memories and engage in a dialogue with their past experiences that is both recursive and generative. The visuality of the medium adds immediacy and complexity to the narrative structure, and the way in which the memory process unfolds, even as text-based life narrative also engages visuality and cognitive complexity in its narratological process.
Chapter 4

Where Time and Memory Collide:

Maus and the Neuroscience of Comics

1. Time and Comics

Comics make visible—on the page—the passage of time, because the medium engages the ethical dilemmas of the past by “approach[ing] history through its spatiality” (Chute 202). In other words, the medium’s ability to render time spatially places comics in a unique position to make visible, and call attention to, its interrogation of the past and, thus, of memory. Visual complexity, lack of closure, and narrative ruptures are only a few of the signature markings of Maus: A Survivor’s Tale’s treatment of World War II and the Holocaust. While comics enable artists such as Art Spiegelman to “narrativize history,” the medium is also well situated to narrativize memory: to interrogate how we remember and what we remember, and how our memories affect our actions and our belief systems (202). Maus recounts, graphically, Vladek and Anja Spiegelman’s attempt to hide from the Nazis in occupied Poland and their subsequent capture and imprisonment at Auschwitz, and later Dachau and Ravensbrück, respectively. The telling of Vladek and Anja’s story, however, is mediated by a number of different circumstances and, significantly, by their son Art, who creates Maus in the form of a graphic narrative and overlays his own story and current temporal moment onto his parents’ story and the past. Additionally, Spiegelman tells his parents’ story through Vladek’s testimony as Anja—and all of her notebooks about her experiences in the camps—are gone. Thus memory, this chapter will argue, is complexly rendered in Spiegelman’s Maus, specifically because of its relationship to
time and narrative structure, which the comics medium makes visible panel by painstakingly drawn panel.

The relationship between time and space is one that a number of comics artists and comics scholars have referred to as a signature marking of the medium’s departure from more traditional narrative structures. The visual complexity, and, in specific, the situating of the panels on the page—separated by gutters that indicate the passage of time—enables the artist to convey a complex and multi-temporal story. As Scott McCloud argues, in comics “[b]oth past and future are real and visible and all around us!” (104) In *Maus* temporalities overlap and intertwine. Speaking from then present-day late 1970s New York and World War II Poland, Vladek Spiegelman recalls his imprisonment in a prisoner-of-war camp and two concentration camps, and his liberation by the Allies even as he brings these experiences to bear on the present day and his anticipation of the future. His son, called Artie in the narrative, refers to childhood memories of his parents, his struggling relationship with his father as an adult, and the years following Vladek’s death, which coincide with the publication of the Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* and with the birth of his own children, Nadja and Dashiell.

Like layers of sediment amassing over time, *Maus* embodies the dialogical and recursive nature of life narrative. Throughout his career, Spiegelman returns again and again to the family heritage of the Holocaust’s trauma and the non-linear nature of memory recall. In *Maus* temporalities and memories overlap one atop the other, mixing and fusing together. The publication history of *Maus* lends further insight into the narrative’s multifaceted temporal structure. First appearing serially between 1980 and 1991 in *Raw* magazine, *Maus* was published
by Pantheon in two volumes that came out in 1986 and 1991. The first volume begins in 1958, in the Queens neighborhood of Rego Park New York, but fast-forwards quickly to the late 1970s when Vladek is still alive, while the second volume begins in 1987, five years after Vladek’s death. *Maus* I also includes its precursor, “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” a comic strip that Spiegelman first published in *Short Order Comix* #1 in 1972 about his mother’s suicide in 1968 and his father’s ongoing grief and neurosis. Complicated not only in visual and narratological structure, but also richly conceived, as its intertextual and multi-stage production demonstrates, *Maus* quite literally illustrates the importance of documenting history, but also the slippage of memory and time in that documentation process. While Artie attempts to impose order onto the story, asking that his father remain in one temporal moment as he recalls a memory, Vladek engages memory—and history—in all its chaos. Memory, Vladek reminds us, is temporally shifty and associative: transporting the past into the present, it refuses to remain chronologically stable.

And true to memory’s evasive and slippery nature, Artie and Vladek fight for control over the narrative, and over Vladek’s life story, from the very beginning of *Maus*. While Artie struggles to keep Vladek on target—to keep his story linear—Vladek engages with the associative way in which we remember. He connects his joyous family reunion upon returning from the Polish front to his unhappy second marriage, the burning pits of Jewish bodies during the end-days of Auschwitz to the pool at the Pines Resort in the Catskills, and the value of cigarettes on the black market in Auschwitz to Artie’s chain-smoking habit. Vladek’s associative approach to telling his life story demonstrates memory’s non-linear and web-like qualities and
the impossibility of isolating, in time, a single memory, especially through the medium of comics. Through engaging the aesthetics of comics—gutters, open and closed frames, overlapping or stand-alone panels—Maus demonstrates that the past is alive in the present. Yet because of its serial structure, panels that seem to move in predictable patterns from left to right across the page, comics impress upon the reader a false sense of seamlessness. Time, it appears, moves along a discernable and predictable path, ever marching forward towards action and closure. The dual narrative structure of comics, however, problematizes a linear understanding of time and memory and challenges whether the telling of life narrative can ever have closure. As Vladek remembers the past, he is, in many ways, transported back there—traveling with the reader on his back—so much so that the past bleeds into the present at many points throughout the text. Like the open, or broken, panels that Spiegelman draws to indicate present-moment narration of past memories, Vladek shows us that past and present memories are interconnected and in constant dialogue through the way in which he tells his story. The open or broken frames around the panels lend complexity to the narrative by engaging with multiple temporalities, narrative arcs, and memories, simultaneously. Not so much timeless as hyper-time-aware, leaving the panels’ frames open or broken visually renders Vladek’s process of recalling past memories in the present. Such aesthetic choices as the “borderless” panel demonstrate a preoccupation with representing the cognitive structures underpinning memory’s relationship to time and trauma. The cognitive functions of memory, as they are unpacked in Maus, reveal that constructing life narrative is an ongoing process of self discovery that is informed by memory’s time-traveling capacities and its ability to carry forward the past into current and future experiences (102).
Yet the dual narrative structure and the preoccupation with the relationship between time and memory are further complicated by the realization that Art Spiegelman is the one who is calling the aesthetic and thematic shots in *Maus*. Writing life narrative involves elimination and selection. Engaging a process akin to alternate world theory, life writing makes a narrative from an infinite number of possibilities, all of which seem at least possible prior to the occurrence of events. The connections that Vladek makes between the Pines and the burning pits of bodies, or Artie’s chain smoking habits and the smoke stacks of Auschwitz’s ovens, are included in the narrative because Spiegelman—the artist—decided to include them. So while Vladek demonstrates through associative story-telling that the past always informs the present and that temporalities are interconnected, Spiegelman demonstrates through *Maus*’s structure that telling life narrative is a process of selection that involves contingency and accident. Like the Holocaust, which functioned around an illogic—virtue had nothing to do with survival—life narrative reminds us of the memories, the lives one can argue, that fail to survive. For all of the connections that Vladek, via Spiegelman’s authorial control, makes between the present and the past, there are a host of memories that both men do not agree upon. Artie’s preoccupation with historical truth, Spiegelman shows us, is constantly challenged and contradicted by Vladek in the story. This highly mediated and selective tale reveals the ways in which memory operates at the cognitive level and that its temporal shiftiness and bias prevents accurate reportage, which Artie, nevertheless, longs to deliver.

This chapter will examine how Vladek and Artie struggle in different ways for control over the telling of Vladek’s story, in the narrative. Here, I use the term “in the narrative” because
ultimately Art Spiegelman is the one telling both stories; he is the one selecting how Vladek’s memories, and their inter-generational conflict, are represented. Thus the paradox of recalling and telling life narrative in spite of the mediated nature of the genre, and the absences that memory’s limitations make present, is left exposed for us to witness. Yet still we fall in love with Vladek and feel sympathy for the way in which his son represents him. What Spiegelman accomplishes through the comics medium is the creation of what appears to be a seamless narratological and temporal framework, which, upon closer examination, reveals itself to be fraught with representational conflict. In Maus, Vladek’s story is represented as digressive by Artie, yet the inclusion of these digressions is deliberate because they bring to the fore the multifaceted nature of remembering as it is done by different people. Thus the different strategies they use to represent memory serve to highlight the intergenerational conflict between father and son. Maus illustrates the “flaws” with memory’s cognitive structures, demonstrating that the timeline of memories of trauma are often different—either compressed or elongated—than those of non-traumatic memories. The book’s dual narrative structure calls attention to the myriad and often conflicting motivations underpinning the process of constructing life narrative. As much as Maus is about Vladek’s experiences during the Holocaust; it is also about Spiegelman’s inheritance of these memories and the sense he tries to make of this horrific bequest.

I begin with a close examination of a number of instances where Spiegelman “breaks the panel’s frames,” which demonstrates that comics work within a cognitive framework to formulate aesthetic representations of temporality and memory recall. What these instances share is an open-framed style that highlights Vladek and Artie’s position as interlopers in the past. As
Vladek recalls the early days of the War, or his brief stint fighting on the Polish front, we see that the panel he occupies is not fully enclosed: the lines that border the panel are often missing. This lack of panel enclosure renders visual the process of memory recall; the open frames connect the person who is remembering to the past experience, thus demonstrating that memory allows for symbolic “time travel”—projecting our present selves into the past—and shifting cognitively between different temporalities. The instances where Spiegelman breaks the panel’s frames makes visual the process of memory recall and brings to light that as a subject remembers he or she re-experiences the past.

From here I turn to a discussion of the multiple associations that Vladek makes between his experiences during the Holocaust and his life afterward. Through associating key moments in his story, he creates a narrative that bridges temporalities, which Spiegelman then mimics visually in his panel construction. Both men show us that the past looms large in the minds of survivors and non-survivors alike. Fighting for control over the way in which a story is told is, by extension, fighting for control over time and memory. In the text, Artie tries to order Vladek’s memories chronologically, while Vladek struggles to tell a fuller, if also more elliptical, story that at one point he suggests no one can fully tell because: “About Auschwitz, nobody can understand” (224). The ongoing struggle between Vladek and Artie for narrative control stands in for the less articulated struggle that Artie confronts as the child of survivors: burdened by his father’s memories, yet not fully sure what to do with them once he records Vladek’s life narrative.
The major tension between telling and not telling life narrative—between telling *in spite of* rather than because of memory’s fallibility—is a central tension of the life narratives I have examined in this project. Each author deals differently with the limitations of memory and visual perception in their narratives thus pushing the boundaries of memoir’s generic structures outward. Bartók re-works her perceptual structures in order to access memories otherwise damaged in her car accident; Jordan relies on flashbulb memories to unpack her emotionally fraught childhood; Bechdel relies on memory’s fallibility and its biases in order to imagine a more complete narrative of her father’s death. *Maus*’s engagement with memory adds further nuance to the genre of life narrative; its dual protagonist structure calls to the fore the internal tension between Artie and Vladek’s approaches to telling a story, and, by extension, to remembering. Artie and Vladek’s narrative negotiations make visible and visual the often internal dilemmas with recollection and recounting that the life writer confronts.

While the majority of this chapter will focus on the formal ways in which Vladek and Artie remember and tell life narrative differently in *Maus*, at times even contradicting one another, this chapter will ultimately conclude with an exploration of how the language of neuroscience finds its way into Art Spiegelman’s autobiographical comics—including *Meta Maus*, the newly published critical compendium to *Maus*—and how cognitive theories of memory and time perception can inform our reading of comics, which tackle, quite complicatedly, issues of personal recollection and historical remembrance. Both *Maus* and Spiegelman’s more recent autobiography, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@squiggle*! (2008), call to the fore the interrelatedness between time and memory,
tapping into the former to represent and interrogate the latter. Yet, as the neuroscientist David Eagleman notes, like memory, time is a fallible measure of personal experience; it compresses, elongates, and twists. The similar neurological flaws in how memory and time are perceived by a subject make their treatment in comics difficult, but also nicely illustrate the tensions that reside in the process of telling life narrative. While comics challenge how we see time—by embodying the past, present, and future simultaneously on a page, in panels, gutters, and frames—the medium also challenges the expectations we have for how a subject remembers by making the processes of recollection visible on the page. Time, comics shows us, is not linear, yet neither is the process of remembering. Thus to the genre of life narrative, *Maus* contributes a novel and nuanced interrogation of how a subject perceives and relates memory, which, the text establishes, is intimately bound with how a subject understands time’s movement. “Brain time,” as Eagleman notes, is deeply subjective and context dependant (1). Autobiographic memory works in much the same way.

2. Breaking the Panel’s Frames: Where Time and Memory Collapse
There are a number of instances in which Spiegelman indicates via borderless panels that Vladek is in the process of recalling a memory about the past. The first instance of where he breaks the panel’s frames occurs in the first chapter of Volume I, on page 15. Vladek—while pedaling on his Exercycle—recalls dating a young woman named Lucia Greenberg during his youth, “People always told me I looked just like Rudolph Valentino” (15). In the background there is a movie poster advertising *The Sheik* (1921) that features Valentino (as a mouse) holding onto Agnes Ayres (also depicted as a mouse). The poster is enlarged to about three times the size of Vladek and his Exercycle. This first break in the narrative flow—from present day in Rego Park to pre-World War II—is a bridge point; a moment where Vladek can step back from the past into the present while still maintaining the narrative thread of his story about the first time he met Lucia Greenberg. The poster is an additional visual marker of his memory’s chronology that locates the story in the inter-war period, but after 1921: the year when the film was made. The lines of the poster, which simulate panel enclosure, refuse to entirely encompass Vladek and his Exercycle. Straddling past and present temporalities, the panel frames and the gutter (the space between each panel) overlap with the panels of Lucia and Vladek dancing. Memory, Spiegelman indicates, allows us to keep one foot in the present as we recall the past. The breaking of the frames around the panel simulates the transportive quality of memory recall. Memory recall, in this moment, is rendered visually dynamic, its structure fluid.
In two other panels with broken frames on page 38 (Volume I) Artie and Vladek sit across the table from one another: Vladek has just recalled the first time that his factory in Bielsko was robbed. Artie interrupts him to ask if his factory was “looted as part of some kind of anti-Semitic activity” and Vladek replies: “I don't think this was it. Just a robbery. . . ” (38). In the next panel, Vladek connects his first experience with robbery with a more recent memory of a robbery that took place at his house in Rego Park: “. . . Like when they robbed us in Rego Park here, last year . . . In Bielsko father-in-law helped us again to establish ourselves. . . ” (38). The visual structure of these two panels is quite similar to the ones on page 15. On the bottom of the panel on page 38 is lining that closes the table off from the white space of the page. The frames, however, cover only one third of the right and left sides of the panels; they remain incomplete and open at the top and the sides of the panels. Father and son sit on opposite sides of memory and time: Artie asks Vladek to recall the circumstances the led to being robbed at the start of World War II while Vladek remains stubbornly in the near-present, unable to definitively say whether or not the Bielsko robbery was a religiously charged act. On the next page, 39, Vladek is featured in close-up, narrating the events preceding the robbery as if in a flashback. His position
with respect to the past, however, is still that of one in the present looking backward. He does not dissolve into the past, as in film flashbacks. His body remains at the top left of the page as he recalls the past in the next several panels.

Narratively speaking, the open, or broken frames around these panels allows Spiegelman to signal to the reader that Vladek is about to recall a memory from the past. Unlike the wavy dissolves that indicate flashback scenes in films, however, Vladek remains stubbornly in the present throughout the process of telling his story. Acting as a bridge between then and now, Vladek is in the unique position of occupying both past and present temporalities. While he struggles to maintain a linear or chronological story-telling mode, his occupation of these temporalities demonstrates that memory does not follow a linear chronology. And although Spiegelman, as the architect of the narrative, focuses on Artie’s struggle to maintain control over Vladek’s narrative—interrupting him for more detail, attempting to keep his story on track—he also lovingly embodies his father’s associative story telling style vis-à-vis the broken frames structure.

The mixed generic structure of *Maus*—it is both a memoir and a biography—calls to the fore many of the struggles of classification and taxonomy that authors confront as they write life narrative. That the book is about the Holocaust further problematizes *Maus*’s generic structure because of its relationship to documentary and historical testimony. While in the text Artie struggles to make sense of his father’s experiences in Auschwitz and later Dachau, outside the text he struggles to render graphically Vladek’s story. Coupled with the frustration of getting at the “authentic” survivor experience is Artie’s own guilt resulting from not experiencing World
War II or the Holocaust first-hand. What emerges from the multi-tiered feelings of guilt is a narrative that seems to be at odds with itself both visually and textually. While Vladek constantly seeks connections between his memories of the Holocaust and the present day, Artie constantly tries to steer Vladek back to the past: back to chronology, back to the linear story. Yet as the broken frames around key narration panels demonstrates, Spiegelman is not only willing but desperately trying to insert his father’s voice into the story. That he retains ultimate aesthetic control over the structure of Maus, yet still feels compelled to depict narration as a struggle, reveals the ongoing inter-generational conflict that drives a wedge between father and son. The Holocaust—and memories connected to it—is that wedge.

In another recurring visual device that is quite similar in execution and purpose to the open or broken frames, Spiegelman demonstrates his priority of featuring both himself and his father in Maus’s narrative. In certain “bridge scenes” Artie and Vladek are united visually in their quest for unpacking the act of telling life narrative. Like the Bielsko robbery scene, on page 38, these bridge scenes impress upon the reader the importance of their collaboration on this project and the insights that emerge from sharing, interrogating, and re-contextualizing memory
as it occurs in given temporalities and vantage points. On page 137 (Volume I) father and son speak across the gap of time. Artie, on the left, asks his father: “What happened in 1944, after you left Srodula?” In between the images of father and son, there is a fully enclosed panel that shows young Vladek and Anja sneaking towards Sosnowiec—their former hometown. On the right side of the center panel, Vladek responds, “It was still dark outside . . . We didn’t know where to hide ourselves. . .” (137). Artie and Vladek are not enclosed by a frame. Their bodies, Vladek’s especially, overlap with the center panel indicating Vladek’s participation in the journey and his memory of it. Artie, however, is also touching the frame of the panel—his leg dissolves into, perhaps behind, it—indicating his “afterward” position in relationship to the center memory. Father and son are connected in the panels through time, the process of remembering, and Anja, to now.

In another bridge scene on page 149 of Volume I, Vladek and Anja occupy a panel on the left while Vladek and Artie sit close together in a panel with broken frames on the right; in
between them are a rat and a barrel. These objects are doubly symbolic; they represent Vladek and Anja’s circumstances hiding in a storage locker, as well as the breakdown of Spiegelman’s representation of Jews as anthropomorized mice. The murkiness of the symbolism is something that Spiegelman has struggled with from the beginning of working on *Maus*. In *Meta Maus* he even features himself holding a dead rat in his hands, either about to dissect it, or eat it—a statement about guilt over “cannibalizing” his father’s traumatic story—as a way to think through the complications of using comics to write about lives and historical experience (8).

Murky symbolism aside, the visual nature of the medium allows the author to put into conversation and imagine connections between characters that otherwise do not exist. In the bridge panels on page 149 the two sets of bodies on the bottom of the page mirror each other: Anja’s right arm holds Vladek’s shoulder as Vladek’s left arm moves to encircle her waist, while in the panel on the right Vladek’s left arm is raised towards Artie (like Anja’s arm) while Artie’s arms remain at waist-height (like Vladek’s). Both sets of people remain seated. This inversion of familial roles—Vladek protecting Anja in the past as she appeals to him for help, while in the present Vladek raises his arm and appeals to Artie in a position that is similar to Anja’s—is Spiegelman’s interrogation of the various roles that family members occupy over a lifetime; it is also a visual move to bring Anja into the story even as he connects his parents’ story with his own. Bridging not only temporalities but also familial legacies in this way allows for Spiegelman to examine the effects of sharing life narrative on the individual; it also connects his subjectivity to the Holocaust, in spite of not being directly involved.
Like Alison Bechdel, Spiegelman inserts himself into his father’s narrative by bringing to the fore his role in making material his father’s life narrative—his father’s testimony—and by bridging his own experiences, growing up in the household of two survivors, with those of his mother and father’s. Marianne Hirsch, among others, has characterized Spiegelman’s particular brand of material remembrance as “postmemory,” suggesting that “postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (22). Like the other authors I examine in this project, Spiegelman engages with memories that are not directly his own. Like Jordan imagining her parents’ wedding day and the day that she was born, or Bechdel imagining the circumstances leading to and surrounding her father’s death, or Bartók imagining the origins of her mother’s schizophrenia, Spiegelman uses “imaginative investment and creation” to tell Vladek’s (and to some extent Anja’s) story (22). The mitigating factor that, I think, prompts scholars to label Spiegelman’s form of “memory” different from those of other contemporary American memoirists, however, is the presence of historical legacy, and in particular the Holocaust, in his narrative. While Spiegelman spends an incredible amount of time interviewing his father and other survivors, researching the architectural layout of Auschwitz, and learning about the historical legacy of Hitler’s bellicose and maniacal actions, the fact remains that he is unable to share in these experiences with his parents. Arguing, as scholars do, that Spiegelman’s *Maus* contains a form of postmemory ignores the ways in which neurological memory engages imagination. The theory of postmemory ignores the cognitive qualities of memory, many of which are tied to the default network—a group of regions implicated in day
dreaming, goal setting, planning, and prognostication—and fails to account for the way in which people’s memories shape the experiences (and therefore the memories) of the people around them. It also conceives of memory as a reliable, linear, and somehow authentic structure, all of which Vladek and Artie’s stories—and the aesthetic structure of graphic narratives, as well as more traditional life narratives—contradict.

Spiegelman demonstrates in his visual rendering of the open or broken frames around Vladek’s narration panels, or in the bridge scenes where he and Vladek are placed in purposeful juxtaposition—occupying different temporalities simultaneously—that memory is an associative process that looks for patterns cut from the cloth of experience. Throughout the narrative, Vladek makes connections between past experiences and memories in the present. Swimming pools become pits where bodies are burned, cigarettes become currency, and even the simple act of walking evokes memories of Auschwitz selektions. In a similar way, Artie demonstrates memory’s associative quality when he admits that as a child he fanaticized about “zyklon B coming out of our shower instead of water,” and whether he would save Anja or Vladek, were he forced to choose (174, 176). These gruesome thought experiments suggest that while the Holocaust was a large part of his childhood imaginary, it was supplanted by the more present familial and domestic issues that beset the Spiegelman household.

Anja and Vladek’s memories of the camps are brought to bear on Artie’s rearing and haunt him perhaps because they are at some base level unknowable. An exemplar of what Lori Lefkovitz calls “reciprocal ventriloquism,” Artie attempts to control his father’s narrative even as his father attempts to control his son’s life and behavior (226). In the narrative, both men
struggle to imprint each other with their respective traumas. For Spiegelman this trauma centers on Anja’s suicide and his troubled relationship with his parents, for Vladek this trauma also centers on Anja’s death as well as his memories of the Holocaust. Because Artie cannot fully understand Vladek’s various neuroses—his hoarding, his petty thievery, his absurd cheapness—or the explanation for his mother’s suicide, both of which seem to reside at least in part in their experiences in hiding and the camps, he wishes that he had gone through World War II with his parents “so [he] could really know what they lived through!” (176) The paradox in his wish, however, is that he probably would not have survived if he had access to the experiences that shaped his parents’ troubled lives. *Maus* is a safe way of enacting his wish—and a creative way of coming to terms with his childhood memories—without negating his patrimony.

As with Jordan, Bechdel, Bartók, and, I would argue, most contemporary American memoirists, writing life narrative is always a process of informed imagining, simply by virtue of the limitations of memory and other perceptual systems; however, *Maus* is rendered more complex by the historical legacy underpinning that imaginary, which might signal critics’ desire to label Spiegelman’s particular brand of remembering something “other” than memoirs that have less provocative content. While Vladek’s narrative is the chaotic, messy, and at times circular, center of *Maus*; it is Artie’s memories and experiences that give shape to and frame the narrative. Vladek’s story gives nuance and verve to Artie’s story. Their memory dialectic complicates the traditional survivor story: troubling the role of eye witness testimony and representation of atrocity. In *Maus*, Spiegelman calls attention to the gaps, inconsistencies, and absences in Vladek’s story thus “the reader is repeatedly made aware of both the shortcomings
and the strengths of each [eyewitness accounts and documented historiography], particularly in the context of historical traumas” (Elmwood 692). The different ways in which Vladek and Artie conceive of and engage with the cognitive structures of memory in the narrative challenges, in a positive way, generic constraints for non-fiction.

3. “Bleeding Memories”: Associative Memory and Temporal Overlay

This next section will focus on a few scenes in *Maus* where Vladek uses an associative storytelling approach to merge memories from the remote past with memories in the recent past. In this section I would like to call specific attention to how memories from the past seep into and inform our present-day lives. In particular, recent research into memory trauma has discovered that the amygdala, when aroused, releases chemicals that make more prominent unsettling (but also highly pleasurable) memories. As in June Jordan’s *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*, where incredibly visual, flashbulb, memories allow her to explore her early childhood experiences with rich—if also at times violent—sensory memory, Vladek’s traumatic experiences in the Holocaust color how he views the world around him. As I suggested in this chapter’s introduction, as well as in section two, Vladek connects particular aspects of his experiences of war and the camps with events happening in the present. Although Artie tries to reign in these associations, constantly asking Vladek to stick to the stories of the past, of Auschwitz, or of Anja, he cannot help but move into the present: to the Pines Resort, to Artie’s chain-smoking, and to his unhappy second marriage. Vladek runs circles around Artie with his complicated, inter-temporal, and multi-layered memories, demonstrating, in this process, just how complex the process of recalling and telling life narrative can be.
We often return to the same memory over and over again during the processes of memory re-contextualization and reconsolidation, as chapter one on Bartók’s *The Memory Palace* demonstrates. Memory is associative; it builds off itself, expanding out from past experiences and connecting itself to the mutable present. In *Maus* the expansive associations of memory reconsolidation center on the act of cigarette smoking and the significance of cigarettes as a symbolic object. On page 54 (Volume I), Vladek recalls becoming a prisoner-of-war after Germany invades Poland. During his initial confinement, he was commanded to clean out a stable in less than an hour. As Vladek recalls rushing to clean an impossibly filthy stable in a short time period, he is interrupted by Artie’s cigarette ashes falling onto the carpet. In this panel, which is also one with open or broken frames, Vladek calls attention to Artie’s carelessness; however, the broken frames around the panel suggest that he is still inside of the memory of cleaning up the stable in the POW camp. The next panel confirms the liminal position that Vladek occupies between the past and the present—merging memories and associations as he narrates—when he compares the current cigarette ashes on the carpet to the stable that he
cleaned as a POW: “You’re dropping on the carpet cigarette ashes. You want it should be like a stable here?” (54) For Vladek, the past is inseparable from the present: textually he makes the comparison between these two messy situations. Spiegelman, however, makes this temporal bridge visually apparent through leaving the frames of the previous panel open. If Artie’s father “bleeds history,” as Volume I of *Maus* affirms in its subtitle, then he also bleeds memories: allowing them to rise out of the past and trickle into present circumstances.

There are a number of other instances where Vladek refers to Artie’s cigarette smoking in context of his survival story. For example, on page 56 (Volume I) Vladek points out that a cigarette was not only a luxury item in war-torn Europe, but also a valuable bartering tool. Right before he returns from the Polish front, as a POW, he is given a package containing cigarettes, which he saves. Later, he receives a letter from his family via the Red Cross: “I had a sign my family was safe, and—because I never smoked—I had cigarettes to trade for food.” As Vladek
speaks of his resourcefulness and his ability to deny himself little luxuries, he points towards Artie’s hand which contains a lit cigarette, thus implicating him in his story, which is a parable about “decadence” during a time where even food was sparse. So, on page 54 he compares the ashes from Artie’s cigarette on the carpet to the stable he cleaned as a POW, and on page 56 he compares—through implication—his crafty resolve to trade cigarettes for food to the weakness of Artie’s chain-smoking habit. In fact, Vladek does more than imply that he finds Artie’s smoking unpleasant on page 86 (Volume I) when he says, “Please, Artie, stop with the smoking. It makes me short with breath.” Later still, he will finally give a breakdown of the value of cigarettes in Auschwitz’s black market: one day’s bread is equal to three cigarettes, 200 cigarettes is equal to a bottle of vodka and for “100 cigarettes and a bottle vodka,” which Vladek calls a “fortune,” he arranges for Anja to be moved to Auschwitz I, much closer to him than Auschwitz II, Birkenau (224). So for 300 cigarettes: 100 plus the bottle of vodka, Vladek saves Anja’s life. Commonplace for Artie, cigarettes were a luxury during World War II that helped to buy a life in the concentration camps.
The cigarette also travels through time, as the panels at the bottom of 229 (Volume II) demonstrate. In them, Vladek recalls dismantling the crematorium: “You heard about the gas, but I’m telling not rumors but only what really I saw. For this I was an eyewitness.” The last panel on the page contains a smoke stack reminiscent of those found attached to crematoria. The smoke wafts up from the chimney into the panel above it in which Artie and Vladek discuss why it was necessary for the tin-workers to dismantle the death centers towards the end of the war. Artie’s cigarette smoke rises out of the smoke stack—the smoke stack bleeds out of its panel and into his—splitting him from his father as they talk. In *MetaMaus* Spiegelman admits that the juxtaposition of past and present, as enacted in the crematoria chimney/cigarette smoke, is a visual punctuation of the relatedness of Vladek and Spiegelman’s lives and stories: “I didn’t mean to hammer that home but on the other hand I do believe that the self-destructiveness of my smoking is not totally unrelated to the secondhand memories of secondhand smoke, so I entered it into the visuals there for what it’s worth . . . it had another implication” (215). Here Spiegelman is not only trying to represent Vladek’s eyewitness account of the crematoria, but also the implications of his actions in the present as they affect the memories of his father. In other words, the second implication of the secondhand smoke is that it represents the perennial struggle between Artie and Vladek for narrative, and other forms of, control. Throughout this section we have seen multiple instances where Vladek criticizes Artie’s habits, pointing out that cigarettes—during his early adulthood—made the difference between life and death in ways that do not apply in our modern world; Vladek’s concern for his son’s welfare is a touching, if not also mortifying, connection that Spiegelman (literally) draws between himself and his father.
There are other moments in *Maus* where Vladek draws analogies between memories from the past and his present circumstances. Towards the end of Volume II, Artie and Francoise spend a few days visiting Vladek after his second wife, Mala, empties their joint bank account and runs away to Florida. They stay at Vladek’s summer rental in the Catskills. As they talk about Vladek’s final days in Auschwitz—towards the end of the war—Vladek recalls how the camp was liquidated: “It started in May and went on all summer. They brought Jews from Hungary—too many for their ovens, so they dug those big cremation pits. The holes were big, so like the swimming pool of the Pines Hotel here. And train after train of Hungarians came” (232). He explains that many of the Hungarians were burned alive in these mass graves: “And the fat from the burning bodies they scooped and poured again so everyone could burn better” (232). Vladek makes the disturbing connection between the Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz who were bathed in gasoline and human fat, and the Jews at the Pines Hotel who are bathed in chlorinated pool water. Afterward, while Artie sits stunned—able only to utter “Jesus”—Vladek, seemingly unaffected, notes how “time is flying” and sets about completing household tasks (233).

Vladek’s gruesome comparison between the mass graves and the pool at the Pines Hotel demonstrates a counterintuitive aspect of how memory functions that Dan Schacter, in a recent seminar at the Cognitive Theory and the Arts Seminar, described. In the seminar, Schacter explained how the brain anticipates future events based upon memories of experiences from the past. The default network of consciousness guides our episodic simulations. However, because of memory’s various flaws—such as transience and confabulation, for example—we tend to be more successful in our predictions of events in the near future, rather than the remote future. Like
episodic memories from our recent past, which are more detailed and accurate than memories from our remote past, the further out we anticipate life events, the more likely we are to be incorrect. Memory’s prognosticating capacity appears to be at work in many of the scenes in which Vladek traces the trauma of the past onto events in the immediate or near future. Like the secondhand smoke that seems to cling to him wherever he goes, Vladek is unable to divorce the past from the present, locating patterns and similarities between them. Artie, on the other hand, is frequently stunned into troubled silence by his father’s comparative tales. In the instance of the mass graves story, he dwells angrily on why the Jews were unable to protect themselves, “Why didn’t the Jews at least try to resist?” (233) He voices a frustration that Vladek seems unhampered by; for in a world where survival means working with the hand one was dealt, resistance seems not only futile but too dangerous to entertain.

The question of resistance comes up shortly after Vladek’s recollection of the mass graves at Auschwitz. And while this moment is yet another one where temporalities overlap and fold in upon themselves, this time Spiegelman is the instigator drawing different moments in time together. On page 239, Artie, Vladek and Francoise drive to the supermarket where Vladek attempts to return half-eaten groceries. Prior to their drive, Artie yells at Vladek for his inability to throw anything away. Like many Jewish relatives, Vladek tries to ply Artie and Francoise with food—fruit cake and cereal—in spite of Artie’s refusal. Artie asks Vladek to forget about packing food for him, but Vladek is unable to forget: “I cannot forget it... Ever since Hitler I don’t like to throw out even a crumb” (238). Angrily, Artie replies, “Then just save the damn special K in case Hitler ever comes back!” (238) This angry exchange eventually leads the entire
family to the supermarket where Vladek exchanges the cereal and other food for new groceries. Vladek’s hyper-memory—his obsession with food and with survival (to never forget)—even years after the end of the War, reveal the constant presence of the Holocaust in his life. So it comes as no surprise that as the family drives to the store, out of the depths of history, the legs of four female camp inmates emerge, hanging from trees in the Catskills.

As with the orchestra on page 214, Spiegelman researches certain historical moments in Auschwitz and then compares these accounts with Vladek’s memories of his own experience in the camp. While Vladek stubbornly insists that there was no orchestra at Auschwitz—in spite of the numerous eyewitness accounts that say otherwise—he does corroborate Spiegelman’s research into resistance at Auschwitz, and the role that the girls who were hanged played in that movement. In MetaMaus Spiegelman discusses how the visual dimension of comics allows for corroboration between personal and historical memory (30). He renders Vladek’s first-person account in dialogue and a refutation of that account in the graphics, so while Vladek says that there was never an orchestra in Auschwitz, visually we see the orchestra as it becomes obscured by prisoners (31). Thus comics allow for the reconciliation of historical and personal memory,
the latter which might be ignored or elided in a less media-rich format. Yet in another moment where the edges of historical and personal memory touch, Artie and Vladek discuss the girls who were hanged for their role in a plot to blow up the gas chambers. While driving, Artie asks his father about the rebellion: “Some prisoners working in the gas chambers revolted, they killed 3 S.S. men and blew up a crematorium” (239). Vladek instantly recalls the story: “And the four young girls what sneaked over the ammunitions for this, they hanged them near to my workshop. They were good friends of Anja, from Sosnowiec. They hanged a long, long time. Sigh” (239).

Earlier, when Artie asks Vladek why the Hungarians who died in the mass graves were unable to rebel, he says that “Everyone was so starving and frightened, and tired they couldn’t believe even what’s in front of their eyes” (233). When Artie presses his father for instances of rebellion, however, the story of the four girls from Sosnowiec emerges.

In the panel that features the four girls from Sosnowiec hanging in the trees, their faces are not visible: only their wooden shoes and their ragged pin-striped gowns, out of which their stick-thin legs jut out, are present. The forest that Artie, Vladek and Francoise drive through can be that of current-day Catskills, or it can be the woods of Poland during the War. Temporality, in this panel, remains resolutely ambiguous, occupying the past in which the girls hang in the trees and the present in which the Spiegelman family drive to the supermarket. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the past and the present overlap, interact, and collapse upon one another in *Maus*. What my project adds to this well trodden point, however, is the way in which brain science—and memory’s time distorting capacities, in particular—can inform formal readings of Spiegelman’s densely packed comics. *Maus’s* temporal confusion is only further
highlighted by the multiple moments in time that this text exists within. Both its publication history and its narrative structure are such that there are not only two discrete temporalities at play, but multiple temporalities, all of which signal the interconnection between time and memory in graphic narrative. This temporal disruption signals the “fugitive,” to borrow from Spiegelman, nature of neurological memory: inserting itself into past and present experiences, imposing the past onto the present, re-framing the past based on present circumstances, and anticipating the future based on past experiences. *Maus* shows us the deep relationship between time and memory and how memory seems to move effortlessly between different temporal spaces (30). As the neuroscientist Eagleman suggests, “time and memory are so tightly intertwined that they may be impossible to tease apart” (Bilger 7). What the comics medium brings to the genre of life writing is not necessarily just a complexly rendered mixture of image and text, or a collapsing of temporalities through the mixture of images and text: the comics medium shifts our understanding of how time moves and gets expressed in narrative form, which in turn more accurately represents autobiographical memory’s non-linear progression in narrative and its little known role as prognosticator.

4. “Time Flies”
The title of the second chapter in Volume II of *Maus*, titled “Auschwitz (Time Flies),” can be understood as an aphorism that delineates the passage of time—often very quickly—from one positive moment to the next ("Time flies when you’re having fun"). The inclusion of flies, however, both on the chapter’s cover page as well as the first few pages of panels, removes the metaphorical quality from the chapter’s parenthetical title. Time not only flies—in the sense that it moves quickly—time is also personified by flies: insects that feed off of decaying fruit and other rotting organic matter, such as dead bodies. The analogy is complicated, but it works as we see on page 201. As Artie narrates the events that followed the completion of *Maus* Volume I—Vladek’s death, the birth of his first child, the critical success of *Maus*—flies buzz around his masked face. As the view of the panel pans outward—towards the bottom of the page—we see that below the drawing board where Artie sits, there are hundreds of emaciated and rotting
corpses of mice reminiscent of the bodies that the Allies found when they liberated camps such as Dachau. The flies buzz around the bodies, attracted to the decay.

Flies, in this instance, feed off of and therefore contain biological memory (DNA) of the dead, who can no longer speak. The proximity between the time flies’ parasitic behavior and Artie’s cartoonist drawing board, however, is not coincidental. Spiegelman has kept these memory corpses around for too long; they have overrun his workspace and his life, so much so that if one looks outside of the window of Artie’s apartment, one will see what looks like a guard tower on page 201, and barbed wire on page 203. In addition to the literal flies, the metaphorical notion of “time flying” and the corpses that embody the decay of historical memory, there are interviewers, photographers, and wheelers and dealers of all kinds swarming around Artie much like the flies swarm around the corpses piled at the base of the drawing board. Success, Spiegelman tells us, results from and in all types of parasitic behavior: both internal as well as external. His own guilt over making material his father’s story—becoming famous for it, in fact—is coupled with his frustration with the way that critics and producers leech off of artists and their creative work. Telling life narrative is made more ethically complex given the historical circumstances around which that life narrative developed: that is the Holocaust.

There are a number of places where Spiegelman alludes to not being able to escape from the juggernaut that *Maus* has become. In the introduction to the expanded 2008 edition of *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@squiggle*!, a re-issue of early experimental and autobiographical comics made between 1972 and 1977, Spiegelman includes the new strip “Pop Art,” in which he describes how he has tried to cope with the overwhelming, and at times
vampiric, success of *Maus*. Running away from a monument of his father, depicted as a bust of a mouse’s head that casts an infinite shadow, he says, “I still wrestle with the memory of my own father” (12). Included on the same page is the single panel comic “Looking up to Dad,” which recounts the lack of “warm memories” that Artie has of his father. The panel shows Vladek whipping young Artie with a belt. The violence and fear—Vladek is a looming presence viewed from the vantage point of someone below him at a considerable distance, looking up—drawn into this panel further contextualizes “Pop Art’s” ambivalent treatment of *Maus’s* success. Less loving than *Maus*, these comics identify Spiegelman’s struggle with the “time flies”—the memories of the past that he has latched onto for artistic content, and the critical “flies” that buzz and flutter around him in the hopes of further capitalizing on his success, and by extension his father’s tragic story. Like the infinite shadow of the mouse head, the infestation of flies in the first pages of “Auschwitz (Time Flies)” reveals Spiegelman’s complicated relationship to his artwork and the haunting quality of his father’s memories. Time and memory, in this instance, are inescapably linked and Spiegelman cannot get out from under the legacy of either the Holocaust or his father’s story.

But the connection between time and memory goes beyond the analogical here. In the first page of “Auschwitz (Time Flies)” Artie offers a number of different memories that are located in time and also space:

Vladek died of congestive heart failure on August 18, 1982. . . Francoise and I stayed with him in the Catskills back in August 1979. Vladek started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944. I started working on this page at the very end of
February 1987. In May 1987 Francoise and I are expecting a baby... Between May 1, 1944 and May 24 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz... In September 1986, after 8 years of work, the first part of MAUS was published. It was a critical and commercial success. (201)

In these four panels, Spiegelman makes a number of comparisons between his life and particular instances of Nazi atrocity; however, he also connects his own life narrative to that of the now-deceased Vladek’s. He moves between a number of different temporal moments as well as memory structures: signaling milestones in his personal and professional life even as he records gruesome historical moments. Personal and historical memory is entwined here, as are autobiographical and semantic memory, but, even more importantly, time and memory are entwined. One cannot divorce memory from time; it is resolutely connected perhaps because of the trauma of the memories. Thus the familial legacy that Spiegelman inherits from his father stands to become his children’s legacy, as his coupling in these panels—and the narrative arc of “Pop Art”—suggest.

In this project, I have discussed a number of ways in which our sensory mechanisms—such as sight—deceive us. I have identified how the brain fills in the blind spots in our visual system, and how the hippocampus attaches memories of current experiences to memories of past experiences (reconsolidation). I’ve explained the importance of bias in autobiographic memory. Time works in similar—illusory—ways. The various regions in the brain responsible for sensory input operate at different speeds—we hear before we see, for example—thus, as Eagleman says, “The days of thinking of time as a river—evenly flowing, always advancing—are over. Time
perception, just like vision, is a construction of the brain and is shockingly easy to manipulate experimentally” (1). Like memory, and the other perceptual structures we use to explore and engage with the world, time is not linear and not always reliable; it compresses, elongates, and throws action out of order. Eagleman studies these aspects of time’s illusory nature. In particular, he questions whether our experience of time affects other sensory mechanisms, asking whether or not a person in a car accident perceives sound and visual data as slowing down to match the slow-motion aspect of the event. What Eagleman concludes is that “Like vision, time perception is underpinned by a collaboration of separate neural mechanisms that usually work in concert but can be teased apart under the right circumstances” (1). So that if a test subject is dropped from a crane over a hundred feet high, which Eagleman has done as part of an experiment on time perception, and asked to pay attention to a watch with numbers flashing just above the threshold of human perception, the numbers will not slow down. The fall, however, will seem about a third longer than it is in actuality (1). Eagleman argues that this is because of the relationship between time and memory;

In a critical situation, a walnut-size area of the brain called the amygdala kicks into high gear, commandeering the resources of the rest of the brain and forcing everything to attend to the situation at hand. When the amygdala gets involved, memories are laid down by a secondary memory system, providing the later flashbulb memories of post-traumatic stress disorder. So in a dire situation, your brain may lay down memories in a way that makes them “stick” better. Upon replay, the higher density of data would make the event appear to last longer. (1)
Eagleman’s finding that highly stressful or traumatic experiences affect the amount of detail that we remember, which in turn causes a traumatic memory to seem longer than it was in actuality, suggests that memoirs about traumatic experience operate in an altered time scale. So when Vladek speaks with such confidence about the different jobs—and their accompanying amounts of time—that he performed in Auschwitz, only to be corrected by the frustrated Artie, we can see in operation the clashing of two different temporal maps, which guide and shape the construction of these memories.
In the second chapter of *Maus* Volume II, Vladek and Artie walk in the woods, in the Catskills. On their walk, Vladek recalls that he was in the camp for ten months, part of the time in quarantine teaching a guard English, part of the time at a tin shop working under Yidl, part of the time in a shoe shop, and part of the time performing the nebulous “black work” (228). As Artie tries to record Vladek’s ten months in the camp he asks his father for more details: “So, black work lasted 3 months” and Vladek replies, “Yah. . . No! I remind myself. . . After black work I came again as a tinman with Yidl for 2 months. They-” But Artie cuts him off before he can finish speaking, annoyed at the lack of accuracy: “But WAIT! That would be 12 months you *SAID* you were there a total of 10!” (228) Vladek responds to Artie’s exasperation with a seemingly off-the-cuff response: “So? Take less time to the black work. In Auschwitz we didn’t wear watches” (228). In a March 2012 lecture at Northeastern University, Spiegelman noted that the debate was never resolved because Francoise conveniently interrupts their conversation, and in doing so, the panel’s structure. Her text bubble is superimposed onto where December 1944 should be, thus leaving open the question of whether Vladek was in Auschwitz for longer than he thought, or he did black work for less time than he remembered.

The frustration that Artie feels with Vladek’s mutable and changing narrative is one that does not take into account that brain time is “intrinsically subjective” (1). Moreover, the possibility that the amygdala ramped up the amount of chemical and neuronal power assigned to capturing the details of Vladek’s traumatic experiences in Auschwitz would suggest that the variable timeline he offered to Artie was in fact the way he actually perceived his time in the camp. The amygdala—unaccustomed to the unfamiliar experience of being in a concentration
camp—fleshed out the details of his trauma, thus making the memory appear longer than it was. The distinction between Artie and Vladek’s perception of time, in this instance, begs the question of whether or not the events at Auschwitz, which Vladek felt to be as long as twelve months, were in fact that amount of time or a shorter amount of time? To put it another way, if a memory appears longer than it is in actuality, does the felt-experience of that memory as longer override that it was experienced over a shorter amount of time, in actuality? When the fear response in a person is heightened—as it would be when someone free falls off of a crane, or a person is imprisoned in a concentration camp—the perception of the length of the experience fundamentally alters the memory of that experience. Thus Vladek’s cheeky response to Artie’s frustrated attempts for evidentiary certainty accurately illustrate the ways in which generic structures and cognitive structure bump up against each other in life narrative. In calling out this tension between what we expect from memoir and what we get from it, Spiegelman argues for a cognitive reading of the genre, as much as he articulates a cognitive aesthetic for the genre. Telling life narrative, as the timeline scene demonstrates, is a messy and subjective process that is made more dynamic, but also more chaotic, by defects in our perceptual apparatuses.

However, it is those “defects,” or flaws that underpin the registering and telling of all life narrative—not just those who have experienced deep trauma. And these flaws, I argue, are more telling of the experiences of the mind and the body than a life story presented as a unified and linear whole. Vladek’s trauma is written onto his brain; it is located at the neurological level, in his limbic system, in his neurons. That trauma can be articulated and represented through an exploration of the functions of the brain—and their aesthetic articulation—is novel evidence of
how our memories fundamentally shape and guide us. Artie’s desire for closure imposes itself on
Vladek’s story, yet Vladek evades closure, often making manifest the trouble of telling life
narrative. Yet Vladek also demonstrates how a mind—an individual mind—with unique
experiences, comes to formulate and tell a life story. Long-term memory’s biological structure, it
should come as no surprise, is an important component to the process. But so too is brain time,
which shapes how a person registers and stores autobiographical memories, and memory’s
function as a (not necessarily accurate) prognosticator of events to come. Time, then, like
memory, is condensed or elongated (developed or undeveloped) based upon the circumstances in
which experiences occur. The brain runs point on parsing these details into viable—if somewhat
unstable—chunks of information, as we can observe through Spiegelman’s representations of
time lines, for example, in his comics.
5. “Memory Holes” in Autobiographical Comics

The achievement of narrative closure in life writing is perhaps impossible because its
creative act is continuously being connected to the fact that the construction of identity is an
ongoing process. So while literary closure is an important part of the construction of certain
types of literature (such as poetry) because it “allows the reader to be satisfied,” closure seems to
be evaded in nonfiction writing (Smith 34). Herrnstein Smith attempts to locate nonfiction’s
inability to produce closure to the difference of “fictive from nonfictive speech” (15). Because
nonfiction speech’s “primary function . . . is practical,” and the circumstances under which it is
produced are “immediate,” the act of hearing non-fictive speech is deeply connected to the
original utterance, whereas poetic speech is left “unmoored” from its original creation and thus
open to more interpretively satisfying conclusions (14-16). Life narrative, while not necessarily practical, I would argue rarely achieves closure because the immediacy in which it is produced is always already in the past. Like time, the moment it occurs it is immediately in the past, and experience, the moment it is experienced it becomes a memory, life narrative is always a previous act of self-fashioning that is made more complicated and perhaps even negated by the development of the self in the present. That authors such as June Jordan, Alison Bechdel, and Art Spiegelman—not to mention a number of earlier autobiographers such as Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman—make multiple returns to autobiographical writing over the span of their lifetimes further suggests that telling life narrative is a fundamental part of our engagement with the self and the world made complex by the self’s interaction with previous and potential future selves. If the self is always in a state of construction, then life narrative is in some ways analogous to the epic Boston-area “Big Dig”: conclusion or closure is nearly impossible.

Spiegelman is a serial artist by virtue of the comics medium in which he works. His autobiographical comics “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” (1972) and In the Shadow of No Towers (2004) were first published in newspapers and underground comix venues before they were compiled into discrete texts, suggesting that he has returned to the ongoing task of autobiographic self-fashioning a number of times throughout his career. Contemporary authors who return multiple times to the project of creating life narrative demonstrate a willingness to explore and challenge the multi-faceted temporal position that the genre occupies as well as the various roadblocks to subjectivity formation, such as memory construction, that arise.
narrative, as it is presented narratologically in memoir is in the past, yet exists in the present as a
material object, while simultaneously serving a prognosticating function that imagines a future
self and future ways of being. Thus the genre:

Is a space in which the writer temporarily attends to the reader’s generic expectations, as
each book ends, but in which the writer ultimately declines closure as the memoirist
refuses a stable or unified subject position. In so doing, serial memoir rejects the concept
of last words inherent to closure. (McDaniel 200)

Spiegelman rejects both his readers’ and his own expectations for closure in Maus by pulling us in numerous affective directions at the end of the story. Offering a “fairy tale” synopsis of his story, Vladek tells Artie that he and Anja: “were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after,” yet as the final two panels, and Spiegelman’s recreation of his parent’s shared headstone in between the two panels, signify Vladek and Anja’s story does not end “happy, happy ever after” (296). In fact, as Vladek’s evocation of Artie’s dead brother Richieu, and the time lapse of nearly fourteen years between Anja’s and Vladek’s deaths suggest, even after the Holocaust ends Art’s parents could not find their happy ending. At the end of Maus, Spiegelman offers competing visual and textual information that calls attention to our desire for a happy ending even as it undercuts this possibility. Offering the hint of a stable and complete ending while denying his own role (he becomes his dead brother at the end of the story) in that ending attests to Spiegelman’s—and I would argue many contemporary memoirists’—rejection of the commonly held assumption that creating memoir enables the subject’s redemption. Through the pairing of the visual and the textual, which draws attention to the cognitive limitations on
perceptual apparatuses, he turns a lens towards what we expect and want from the experience of reading memoir, thus challenging the purpose of the genre and the thematic and aesthetic structures it so often upholds.

There are other instances where Spiegelman calls attention to the difficult relationship that the author of life narrative has to his subjectivity and memories. In *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@squiggle*! (2008), in the comic strip titled “Memory Hole,” Spiegelman “exposes the struggles he encounters to represent himself” and his memories (200). Set in New York’s Soho in 2005, the strip has a noir style. A man in a tan overcoat and tan fedora hat tails Artie as he floats through back alleyways that lead to various childhood memories. As the detective says, “I tailed the little squirt as he got lost in the squalid labyrinths of his past” (10). The detective narrates Artie’s circuitous search for memories that “shaped and misshaped him,” which ultimately lead him back to infancy (10). The detective and infant Artie both sit in a pram, wheeled by Anja. In the side-profile panel, baby Artie reads a book titled *Kafka,* while the detective looks on with disgust: “The fetid smell of [Art’s] self-absorption made me gag” (10). In the panel that follows, the detective likens Spiegelman’s autobiographical comics to “dig[ging] for belly button lint,” an uncannily similar description to that in Bechdel’s introduction to *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* (1998) where she describes autobiographical comics artists as “not content to simply to navel-gaze, but [they] must also collect the lint they find there” (32). Both Spiegelman and Bechdel identify the exhaustive and rewarding, yet solipsistic work that comic artists engage in when they create autobiographical art. Artie’s alter-ego detective has little pity (or tolerance) for Artie’s smelly self-absorption, “snarl[ing] stop whining
ya crybaby!” at him (10). The detective concludes the comic strip with kicking baby Artie in the navel—the metaphorical site of his autobiographic musings—and then receding “into the shadows” of memory’s labyrinthine alleyways (11). Spiegelman’s detective alter-ego fails to uncover his autobiographic mystery: his earliest memories fail to reveal the origins of his subjectivity.

The title “Memory Hole” might seem to suggest that memory is always already inaccessible, inaccurate, and obtuse: quite literally a hole absent of any signifiers. In place of locating the memories that shaped and misshaped him, this interpretation suggests that Spiegelman will only find memory’s absence: its inability to answer his autobiographical questions. A second interpretation, however, reveals that “Memory Hole” might refer to a space in which the author becomes trapped: memory’s dark alleyways threaten to subsume the hopelessly lost autobiographic traveler or entice him further along on his journey. In this second scenario autobiographical comic artists recede further into the hole of memory in search of origins, explanations, and certainties. What emerges from the hole, perhaps amusingly for some but certainly frustrating for many, is belly button lint: threads of material that are otherwise useless. “Yer running out of time. The whole sorry planet is running of out time, while you just dig for belly button lint,” the alter-ego detective tells baby Artie (11). Time here, as in most of Spiegelman’s work, is inexorably bound with the comics medium. As the detective says, “Comics are time, time turned into space!” (11) Yet if time and comics are bound together, they are also bound to the larger metaphysics of life and death—time, the detective warns Spiegelman, is running out and so perhaps is the opportunity for creating further autobiographical comics,
further self-fashioning. The detective challenges Spiegelman’s work, suggesting that the belly button lint that comes from his digging is simply not going to plug up the memory hole: no matter how many alleyways he travels, or memories he unearths (literally going back to his babyhood in the comic strip), Spiegelman will never fully “locate the moments that shaped and misshaped him” (10).

In place of certainty is a type of elusive figuration of memory’s power over the subjectivity of comics’ artists. Both loved and hated by the artist, as the work of Alison Bechdel also points out, autobiographical comics blur the line between self-absorption and revelation: the two halves of the debate are embodied in the two protagonists in Memory Hole, which, in turn, can really be read as different parts of Art Spiegelman’s subjectivity. Both longing to return, or go back to the point of origins, and realizing that one can never really go back, keeps the tension in the strip—and in Spiegelman’s other autobiographical comics—alive. The detective hates Artie’s journey back to his childhood, yet he stills accompanies him. This, I think, is the main dynamic that contemporary memoirists confront in their work: the longing and the impossibility of returning to autobiographic memory. While Bartók directly engages neuroscience, and her mother’s diaries, and Jordan utilizes family photographs and flashbulb memory, and Bechdel relies upon re-contextualizing her personal archive, Spiegelman uses comics’ aesthetically cheeky play with temporality and space to curb this existential angst. He splits himself in “Memory Holes” into detective and baby, much as he splits the narrative in Maus into Artie and Vladek’s stories; these visual ruptures in narrative and subjective positions adds nuance and layers to the ways in which a life narrative is remembered and recalled. The spatialization of
time and memory in comics challenges assumptions that these perceptual structures are linear or monistic, and makes visual the dialogic and associative qualities inherent in autobiographical remembering; “comics resurrects and materializes” both time and memory (Chute 112).

Yet this engagement with cognitive structures, such as time perception and memory recall, are only the tip of the neuroscientific iceberg. In *MetaMaus* as well as during his lecture at Northeastern University, Spiegelman made multiple references to the connection between our brains and the comics medium. He argues that comics work in much the same way our thought processes do in that “they burn themselves into our brain” (“What the %@&*! Happened to Comics?”). At another point during his lecture he said that “we are wired to understand comics” (“What the %@&*! Happened to Comics?”). The implications of these statements are tantalizing, if also speculative. While we know that the open architecture of the brain gave rise, some thousands of years ago, to our capacity to read, there is not, to my knowledge, research on the neuroscience of comics, although there is an interesting book that examines the neuronal and biological composition of a Marvel superhero.70

Spiegelman has a number of interesting theories on how memory and the brain play a role in the creation of autobiographic comics. In *MetaMaus* he rightly suggests that, as Plato feared, writing can replace memory to the point of absurdity. After publishing *Maus*, Spiegelman forgets the details of when his father died: “I’d have to go home and find out because I’d written it down in *Maus*, on the gravestone, but I didn’t carry it in my head anymore” (76). Memory, he demonstrates, is both an external and internal process, guided by capriciousness as much as biology. In another instance in *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman points out the danger of rehearsing
memories—especially traumatic ones—so much that they become a type of script. Here Spiegelman recalls becoming frustrated with Vladek for “reciting” certain stories a number of times while becoming stymied when prompted for information he previously had not recalled: “When I was asking him stuff that he hasn’t ever talked about, he’d have a difficult time locating it and telling me about it . . . Memory it a very fugitive thing . . . It wasn’t like there was a text and he’d only be willing to read certain parts of it to me at certain moments” (29). Spiegelman’s frustration with his father is a frustration that the memoirist often feels while recording his life narrative. Memory isn’t, as Augustine argued, a storehouse that a person can enter at will, or fully preserved like an impression upon a wax tablet as Plato suggested. Memory is messy and unreliable: woolgatherings as much as revelations.

Spiegelman also calls attention to how theory of mind—people thinking about other people’s thoughts—plays out in the creation and reading of comics. On page 201 of MetaMaus he says:

An artist’s limitations—whether those be on the narrative side of comics, or the graphic representation side—are actually an asset: you enter into a person’s brain and world, and every brain has its deformations and its limitations. That’s part of what it is to see through somebody else’s eyes.

Subjectivity—and deformity—give rise to the dynamics of life narrative; comics allow readers to inhabit the artist’s world in a multi-sensory, encompassing way. However, in creating Maus Spiegelman had to, in some ways, embody Vladek. He enacted his memories, his corporality. Like Bechdel, who posed as the characters in Fun Home, Spiegelman notes that he had to
“inhabit and identify with each character . . . act out their poses . . . think them through” (35).

Engaging with theory of mind allowed for Spiegelman to assume a more ethical stance towards his father’s trauma as much as, on a personal level, it allowed him to role play his father’s subjectivity, at least temporarily: “The very process of giving voice and visual gesture to Vladek was a way of inhabiting his point of view so he could be more than I might have otherwise reduced him to” (73). What gives narrative “tensile strength,” according to Spiegelman, is this envisioning process, which occurs when an artist puts himself into the position of his subject; in turn, the artist’s theory of mind for his subject creates a theory of mind for readers (73). The visceral quality of graphics and the immediacy of the comics form seem especially suited for interrogating theory of mind, or thinking about other’s thoughts, as it plays out in the creation and reception of the medium.

Neuroscientific memory, and the articulation of its various aesthetic and thematic functions in life narrative, is important. Writing life narrative is an act of remembering that engages a number of neurological memory’s processes. Until recently, however, both artists and scholars of life narrative paid little attention to the structures of neurological memory that underpin the creation of the genre. Right now, this is changing, as Spiegelman’s assessment in his recently published MetaMaus demonstrates, “The subject of Maus is the retrieval of memory and ultimately, the creation of memory . . . It’s about choices being made, of finding what one can tell, and what one can reveal, and what one can reveal beyond what one knows one is revealing” (73). Spiegelman’s Maus tries to get beyond memory to meaning making and understanding. While perhaps never fully achieving closure, life narrative allows him to form
new associations and interrogate memories within new contexts. Visually, *Maus* uses panel bridging and panels with open frames to demonstrate how temporalities overlap during the retrieval process; these devices make the process of remembering—its retrospective as well as prognosticative functions—visible. Vladek and Artie demonstrate the difficulty of articulating memory. Their dual presence in the narrative and their bickering makes manifest the internal problems that the author of life writing struggles with, including maintaining veracity, linearity, and connectivity. Vladek’s associative memory and his multi-temporal story-telling style is graphically rendered by Spiegelman in a way that a more traditional autobiographic narrative would be hard pressed to accomplish, yet, life narrative, graphic or otherwise, enables this type of dynamic and often visual interrogation of memory as the previous three chapters, and chapter five will, demonstrate. To life narrative, comics adds the additional lens of temporal visualization, which allows both the reader as well as the subject to remember in real time; that is, to imagine traveling between different temporalities, locating memories as they imprint, develop, and reconsolidate. Comics help to make the neuroscientific processes underpinning memory and its attendant connection to temporality visible on the page. Yet, as Spiegelman notes, *Maus* is not only a graphic narrative about memory but about how memories are created, which suggests that remembering is always a “work-in progress” that deserves scrutiny in its own right. This project attempts to bring the aesthetic and thematic concerns that Spiegelman articulates in *Maus* and *MetaMaus* to bear on the criticism of contemporary life writing. In chapter five, I extend my discussion of memory’s role in future-oriented thinking and imaginative processes as I discuss
Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*: a memoir about the importance of lying in developing self-concept.
Chapter 5

“Out of Dreams and Memories”:

Self-Fashioning in Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*

1. Breaking the Confessional Frame

   In childhood multiple forces come to bear on one’s sense of self; family is perhaps the most dominant of these forces. Memoirs often draw attention to how complicated family dynamics overflow onto the budding subjectivities of children, negatively affecting them. *Unable to Remember* seems to confirm the destructive power of the family for its individual members, especially children, as its chapters feature a parade of children who have been abused, neglected, manipulated, used or otherwise hurt by the adults in their lives. Memoirs create a space where these authors reconcile themselves to their experiences and reassert their separate selves: a space in which they can imagine and enact autonomy. Often, as in Bartók’s *The Memory Palace*, Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, or Spiegelman’s *Maus*, the protagonist’s parents are too consumed by their own psychological issues (Norma’s schizophrenic paranoia, Bruce’s double life, Vladek’s neuroticism) to consider how their actions might harm their children.

   For memoirists such as June Jordan and Tobias Wolff, however, physical abuse is part of everyday life. To cope with the violence that is done to them, these authors fashion multiple subjectivities and counteract their circumstance through acts of violence and rebellion. To explain the aggressive actions of their children, their parents are quick to pathologize them, as Jordan suggests. To counter these labels, the young June and Jack imagine different identities and lives for themselves. Thriving on language, they write and dream themselves differently than
the external world sees them; they rebel by creating new lives, in narrative form. The imaginative processes that writing life narrative engages are, in many ways, the flip side of memory processes. Although the common schematic for memory is that of retrospection, of thinking back to some moment that occurred in the past, memory, as the previous chapter on *Maus* demonstrates, also engages in prognostication. Thus, the regions of the brain that are implicated in remembering are also engaged in goal setting, daydreaming, and other future-oriented processes, among which is imagination.

Tobias Wolff is the author of short stories, fiction, and two memoirs: *This Boy’s Life* (1989) and *In Pharaoh’s Army* (1994). He is the winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction (1985) among other literary prizes. *This Boy’s Life* (1989) is Wolff’s first memoir. In his coming-of-age story, he recounts his experiences moving across the country with his mother, Rosemary. The story begins when Jack *née* Tobias Wolff is ten years old; he and his mother are driving from Florida to Utah. Unable to settle in one place, and on the run from Roy, Rosemary’s abusive boyfriend, they travel from city to city looking for a stable life. After failing to find and mine uranium in Utah, they move first to a Seattle boarding house and then to a dilapidated house in the city center. Early in the narrative, Rosemary meets Dwight, a mechanic who lives in rural Northern Washington in the Cascade Mountains. After committing a series of delinquent acts, Jack moves to Chinook to live with Dwight and his three children, Skipper, Norma, and Pearl. Although his relationship with Dwight is abusive, Jack is afraid to tell his mother. Eventually Rosemary marries Dwight and moves to Chinook. Jack spends the better part of his adolescence—and the rest of the story—suffering from Dwight’s sadistic wrath.
In “The Future of Memory: Remembering, Imagining, and the Brain,” Daniel Schacter notes that there are regions of the brain that “support goal directed simulations” (686). These regions are called the default network, which was originally used as a baseline for fMRI studies. When subjects were not performing directed tasks, researchers assumed that their brains were at rest. Neuroscientist Randy Buckner, however, made the argument that the default network could not be used as a baseline for a lack of neuronal activity. Rather, the default network is comprised of brain regions that are implicated in a number of neuronal processes, such as daydreaming, goal setting, and imagination. So, when a subject rests in between directed tasks in an fMRI machine he or she is not actually resting. The mind is hard at work, thinking about the past, anticipating and imagining the future.

The default network tells us a lot about memory and the role it plays in anticipatory activity. Common assumptions about how memory works (it is available for us, waiting, holding the past) are not true. We know that as we remember in the present we also revise and update our memories about the past. However, new research in neuroscience is interested in approaching memory studies from a future-oriented vantage point because shifting the focus to futurity can tell us more about the relationship between memory and imagination. Schacter mentions current research that has found that the default network helps people to “make decisions about self-relevant future scenarios that involved specific goals” (686). In the study, when people were prompted to think about how they might achieve a goal (to be freed of debt) and map out a plan to avoid obstacles in obtaining their goal, researchers found that the default network as well as the frontoparietal control network (which has been linked to executive control processes) were
both engaged. Such findings suggest that one important part of networks implicated in memory is applying past experiences and memories to future goals and tasks. For Jack Wolff—a name Tobias Wolff adopted during his journey west with his mother—such autobiographical planning has real-world consequences. Wolff is a habitual liar who is constantly participating in creative self-fashioning. By compulsively lying, Jack Wolff obsessively engages in a “departure from established modes of being” that becomes to him more real than his actual life (277). Lying and imagining, and the narratives that are born out of these processes, allow him to re-make himself endlessly, in his attempt to escape his abusive life. Such engagement of autobiographical planning anticipates future scenarios and utilizes imagination to set goals. In short, Wolff’s compulsive lying and habitual self-fashioning exemplifies how memory can be harnessed for goal setting and imaginative processes. As he lies and self-fashions, Wolff tests out simulations in which he imagines his life to be radically different and better. The reader, however, holds on to the distinction between reality and invention.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate the significance of future-oriented goal setting in Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*. Unlike the autobiographies considered in earlier chapters of this project, *This Boy’s Life* does not contain the visual, temporal, or narrative experimentation usually associated with postmodern narratives. Although *This Boy’s Life* is not a generically adventurous text—it’s narrative is linear, its subject matter is traditionally autobiographical, its protagonist is painfully “honest” about his infractions—Wolff challenges reading life narrative as a work of authentic selfhood that contains stable memories from the past by focusing on the future-oriented potentiality of autobiographical planning. His preoccupation with imagination and lying are also
a nod to the instability of identity and memory. Wolff’s story upends what Philippe Lejeune terms the autobiographical pact—a tacit agreement of narrative reliability and truth between the reader and writer of life narrative—by focusing his story on how, as a child, he made his way in the world by lying (214). Although Jack is a deceiving child, the reader becomes more invested in his narrative—not less—after each act of self-fashioning because the reader believes that she is made privy to his internal world and the goals he sets for himself.

Wolff demonstrates that lying is a crucial if not also dangerously alluring and alienating method with which to shape identity. The various selves that Jack adopts, and the lies that accompany his various personae, become more real to him than the truth of his life, yet ultimately Jack is unable to achieve autonomous and coherent self-creation, as protagonists in classical autobiography claim to do. While managing to retain the structure of a traditional autobiographic confessional throughout his story, Wolff directly contradicts the claims of authenticity and accuracy that earlier life narratives make. Thus, he complicates the generic expectations of life narrative by working within (not outside) these earlier constraints, unlike the four other texts that I discussed, which deliberately resist autobiographical orthodoxy.

Throughout his story, Jack struggles to reconcile the strange power that self-fashioning has over his identity. Identity, like memory, remains neither stable nor true to the original experience; it is an associative and constructive process that is made real by articulation, enactment, and personal belief. Identity is shaped in many ways by memory’s future-oriented processes such as autobiographical planning and goal setting. In writing life narrative, then, Wolff engages in the process of autobiographical self-fashioning, which because of its focus on
future-oriented thinking and planning, manages to complicate and challenge earlier held notions of what constitutes an autobiographical subject and narrative; his book is not about a subject in the present reflecting on his life in the past. Instead, Jack Wolff is a boy who is always looking towards the future. At times, Wolff breaks the temporal framework to intercede in the present textual moment to offer seemingly omnipotent meta-commentary about his younger self. Such structures of continuity that produce the semblance of authenticity—temporally linear and flat narrative structure, earnest depictions of self-development—are invalidated by the presence of future-oriented self-invention, which Jack makes explicit in This Boy’s Life. By drawing attention to how life narrative helps to shape and construction his identity, Wolff gestures towards one of life narrative’s great complexities, even contradictions: the story shapes the self, not the other way around.

Although life narrative is subjectively rendered and heavily context dependent, it remains so “rule governed” that stories found to be falsified are met with critical denouncement and public outcry, such as James Frey’s A Million Little Pieces (Eakin 33). Such contractual obligations are all but negated in This Boy’s Life, which at its core is a book about the importance of lying and the imagination in the shaping of the self: both in narrative and in the real world. Like the fragments of meaning that Jack pieces together in his story, the brain sorts and synthesizes information in order to build a functioning self-concept. Life narrative is the manifestation of these processes that so often go unacknowledged in our day-to-day experiences. Life narrative, Wolff shows us, is a creative act influenced by cognitive mechanisms that guide decision making, daydreaming, and goal setting; constructed and combinatorial in structure, life
narrative makes possible, through the creative engagement it encourages, the enactment of a life that might be otherwise unobtainable.

While *This Boy’s Life* appears to be the most generically conventional memoir that I examine in this project, I argue that the text is as engaged with the aesthetic and conceptual makeup of the memoir form as the narratives discussed in previous chapters. Filled with adventure, violence, freedom and transgressions, *This Boy’s Life* adopts a confessional style in which the main character outlines the various infractions of his youth and his attempts to reconcile his misbehavior with his lofty social aspirations. Wolff departs from canonical autobiography in his memoir, however, by having his protagonist, Jack, embrace the future-oriented aspects of memory and engage with the possibilities that imagination and autobiographical planning make available. Wolff’s pathological self-awareness and his performance of multiple subjectivities draw attention to life narrative’s central ambiguity by challenging the notion that there is an authentic and linear self. In the story, Wolff identifies himself as a compulsive liar who is taken to fits of vandalism and violence, yet he frequently worries that the various people in his life see through his disguises. Eventually, his confessional mode breaks down as he fails to find absolution for his destructive behavior. His memoir refuses to ballast his fragmented and multiple subjectivities and his goals often remain unrealized. At the end of the narrative, Jack—who lied to gain admission to an elite boarding school—is unable to uphold his ruse. He is expelled and joins the army. Rosemary, who has escaped from Dwight, comes face-to-face with him once again in Washington DC. Dwight nearly murders her and Jack is unable to stop him. In the end, the memoir’s use of the confessional mode calls attention to
fissures in Jack’s story, yet fails to offer him the absolution or redemption that readers have come to expect from the life narrative genre.

Throughout his early life, Wolff assumes and discards many identities in an attempt to mentally simulate alternative lives. He takes on the role of aggressor, bully, neo-Nazi, and street-hardened youth, as well as more wholesome identities such as Boy Scout, newspaper boy, athlete-scholar, soldier, and Western Hero, yet these attempts fail because they lack the ability to be fully enacted because of external forces. Memoir, Wolff shows us, is a space of experimentation—a laboratory in narrative form—where the self can move through multiple iterations at breakneck speed. Unlike autobiography, which represents a subject’s entire life in retrospect and dismisses character flaws in favor of a more unified and model subjectivity, *This Boy’s Life* uses the memoir form to work through the messiness of identity construction and the myriad flaws inherent in Wolff’s character, during his childhood. Lying and imagination are integral parts of the self-fashioning process, both in this text and the genre of life narrative, yet they remain suspect in spite of their obvious presence in textual productions concerned with self-concept and memory; Wolff’s memoir attempts to reclaim lying and imagination for the genre even as he undercuts himself, as the sly irony of the title—the use of a demonstrative pronoun (this)—demonstrates.

Wolff’s admission that lying is an important component of his story and of his identity is not a feature that is unique to his text. Examining, however, how the futurity of memory affects the creation and articulation of self-concept in memoir offers an unselfconscious critical apparatus with which to read life narrative’s engagement with creative self-fashioning; it also
makes apparent the process of future-oriented goal setting, and the importance of imagination in that process. As I noted in the introduction to *Unable to Remember*, other authors—Mary McCarthy perhaps most famously—have addressed the problem of veracity in memoir because of memory’s unreliable and fluid nature. Yet her book *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* separates creative and artistic renderings of self-concept from reportage of life events. The result is a text that splits—chapter-by-chapter—the creative process of writing life narrative from the external circumstances that govern the artistic process. Such distinctions, this project suggests, are artificial in their delineations between empirical evidence—experiences checked against family members and official documents, for example—and introspective “records” of memory and experience. Memoir is primarily concerned with the messy cognitive processes that underpin the articulation of self-concept and attempts to schematize these processes; in addition to creative and structural schematizing, such as we observe in McCarthy’s *Memories*, authors of life narrative also draw upon neurological processes and their aesthetic correlates to schematize their stories. For some authors such schematizing helps to organize the narratological structure of a memoir; Mira Bartok’s *The Memory Palace*, for example, mimics the structure of neurological networks for memory consolidation and reconsolidation in its structure and organization. *This Boy’s Life*, on the other hand, is preoccupied with memory’s future-oriented and imaginative structures and reveals this preoccupation through its characterization of Jack Wolff.

In the text there is of course the ever-present question of whether memory can give rise to the existence of an authentic selfhood. Although in the preface Wolff admits that “this is a book of memory and memory has its own story to tell” he also attempts to establish the veracity of his
story: “But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story” (preface). Such ambivalent and puzzling treatments of “truth” and “dishonesty” are common in this memoir, thus demonstrating Wolff’s thought-provoking engagement with the expectations, desires, and actualities that we bring to the genre. Memory, Wolff admits, tends to have a mind of its own when recollecting the past or imagining the future; therefore, like so many elements that he tries to control in his memoir, he fails to force memory into telling a “truthful story.” That Wolff is already struggling—despite his claim to reconciliation—in the preface with the tension between a truthful narrative and a memory narrative again places this text resoundingly within an emergent genre that has a complex and often problematic relationship to autobiographic memory and perception.

Wolff is adept at maintaining a frustrating distance from his callous, violent, and difficult self, yet the confabulation that he engages, and the violence that he fantasizes about, come as little surprise when one considers the manipulative behavior of the adults in his life. A child who craves love and respect from the adults around him, he goes to great lengths to please the most destructive people in his life. Uprooted, all but abandoned by his itinerant mother, and subjected to multiple and creative forms of cruelty by his stepfather, Dwight, Jack’s story is a study in survival through manipulation. Thus while the lies that he tells often send him into paroxysms of guilt and self-loathing, they are also necessary mechanisms that enable him to imagine and to some degree construct a better world and a better self. As Peter Bailey suggests “This Boy’s Life is an extended meditation upon the disparity between ideal and actual selves” necessitated by Wolff’s depraved childhood and lack of positive role models (220). My point is that these ideal
and actual selves are also cognitively and neurologically based: they are part of schemas of goal setting and autobiographical planning that we engage in our daily lives. As I will demonstrate, the lies that Wolff tells about himself—often in the forms of oral and written narrative as well as in his performances in the world—are necessary points that ground his otherwise chaotic and violent life. In many respects, these lies allow him to become the scholar-athlete he aspires to be and to survive the life he hates living.

2. Adaptive Functions of Episodic Simulation in Life Narrative

Recent neurological research on memory is preoccupied with the future-oriented potentiality of its processes in addition to its implication in past events and experiences. A recent paper on future-orientation in memory processes observes that the hippocampus—a region crucial to processes of memory consolidation—activates more strongly when engaging in creative imagining than memory recall:

One of the more compelling and even unexpected findings from research on the neural underpinnings of episodic simulations is that the hippocampus, a region traditionally thought of as a “memory region,” can be engaged to a greater degree when imagining than remembering (e.g., Addis, Wong, & Schacter, 2007; for reviews, see Buckner, 2010; Schacter & Addis, 2009) (Addis & Schacter 3).

Addis and Schacter theorize that because future-oriented imagining requires the recruitment of past memories as well as the recombination of those memories into an imagined scenario, this process requires more engagement from the hippocampus than memory reactivation. If “remembering and imagining engage the same common core network [then memory] . . . provide[s] the details comprising both remembered and imagined event representations” (3).
Memory, then, is crucial because it offers the raw data that people draw upon to imagine future scenarios. Such future-oriented imaginative thinking serves an adaptive function, yet also might explain why long-term memory, given its constructive and combinatorial nature, is notoriously biased and otherwise faulty.

Creating positive simulations about the future serves a number of adaptive functions that: “improve emotion regulation, [which] result[s] in decreased amounts of worry related to upcoming future events” (11). Imagining positive future outcomes allows “one [to] cope with the prospect of an upcoming event” (11). Furthermore, “simulations are used when attempting to solve open-ended or ill-defined problems, where different possible solution paths need to be mentally evaluated” (11). Finally, “episodic simulation has a significant impact on temporal discounting of future rewards: when people imagine experiencing a reward in the future, they show an increased tendency to favor rewards that produce greater long-term payoffs, thereby countering the normal tendency to devalue delayed rewards” (12). When considered within the context of life narrative, the future-oriented qualities of memory and the adaptive functions that imaginative simulations of the future serve, demonstrate the temporally robust and varied quality of autobiographical writing. Exhibiting a multi-layered and multi-temporal utilization of memory, life narrative simultaneously engages with the past and future-oriented aspects of the memory process; it also demonstrates how the protagonists of life narrative utilize imagination to create episodic simulations of varying adaptive and creative merit.

In particular, Jack succeeds in demonstrating many of the adaptive purposes of constructive episodic simulation in his narrative. In addition to utilizing the future-oriented
processes of memory to imagine his life as better and more secure, he also attempts to solve the open-ended problems of everyday life, such as how to live with his abusive step-father, or how to cope with the intellectual stagnation that accompanies living in the rural town of Chinook, Washington. Jack’s capacity for creating future-oriented simulations also backfires in that it frequently leads to reckless behavior because of his inability to delay gratification, long-term. In short, through fantasy he constructs a multiplicity of selves and imagines a wealth of life experiences that would be otherwise denied to him by his actual home life. In the section that follows, I discuss the critical role that imagination and memory play in the formation and articulation of self-concept in this memoir. Jack’s creative self-fashioning and imagination are adaptive insofar as they encourage him to rise above his present social circumstances and imagine a better life for himself. Narratologically speaking, such moments of future-oriented thinking serve to link the text’s various temporalities and to demonstrate the continuity of remembered and imagined scenarios, as well as the function of artifice in memoir.

Lies abound in This Boy’s Life. Jack is a pathological liar who juggles multiple and contradictory personae at once. The good son and the recluse sniper, in Utah he pushes the boundaries of the identities he selects for himself. Even before Jack tells his first lie in the narrative, however, he recalls the lies that his father told. While en route from Florida to Utah, Toby decides that he wants to change his name to Jack. Less effeminate than Toby and reminiscent of Jack London, the name Jack Wolff signals a change from shy and weak to brave and self-sufficient. By changing his name, Toby is able to fulfill his “dreams of transformation,” as he says at the beginning of the second chapter (8). These dreams are bound up with “Western
dreams, dreams of freedom and dominion and taciturn self-sufficiency” (8). Like June Jordan, at the beginning of her memoir, Jack dreams of the wilderness and surviving without the aid of his parents or other adults. This desire for transformation is, of course, related to the precarious dynamic that he finds himself in with his mother and his absentee father.

In response to Jack’s first act of self-fashioning, his parents have two very different reactions. His mother bargains with him: if he attends catechism classes he can take the baptism name Jonathan and shorten it to Jack. His father, on the other hand, tries to prevent him from changing his name. In a comical scene, Jack recalls the conversation that he has with his father about the importance of his name: “It was, he said, an old family name. This turned out to be untrue. It just sounded like an old family name, as the furniture he bought at antique stores looked like old family furniture, and as the coat of arms he’d designed for himself looked like the shield of some fierce baron” (9). The irony of the scene is that Jack’s father insists that he uphold the lies that he created for his family background rather than pursue his own act of self-fashioning. The antique furniture, coat of arms, family name, and, as Jack later points out, his religion (Episcopalian) are all counterfeit. Jack’s family “had always been Jews” (9). But when ten-year-old Jack speaks with his father about their family lineage and history the truth of his father’s ancestry is concealed: “I had to wait another ten years before learning this” (9).

Jack’s first act of self-fashioning in the narrative is to distance himself from both his parents by changing his name: “I didn’t come to Utah to be the same boy I’d been before” (8). Yet his dreams of transformation become part of a cycle that is repeated throughout the text. As Jack and his mother continuously re-settle in new states, he senses the possibility for
metamorphosis in each new setting. When he moves to Chinook to live with Rosemary’s fiancée Dwight and his family, he dreams of becoming the scholar and athlete that he already imagines himself, but never actually succeeds in becoming. Such future-oriented imagining and simulations—as re-naming himself and choosing new identities—allows Jack to cope with his family’s neglect of him and his needs while plotting out positive possible future circumstances. Such episodic simulations also affect the mental health of the subject as Ali Sarkohi, Jonas Bjärehed, and Gerhard Andersson observed in their study on future thinking memory and autobiographical memory in subjects with major depression: “the ability to imagine both positive and negative plausible future experiences is important for psychological well being” (261).

Wolff is “dedicated to blurring the distinction between actual and ideal selves, to living a lie of success because the truth of growing up amidst so much transience and defeat is intolerable” (221). Nowhere is his dedication to blurring the lines of subjectivity and engaging the imaginative qualities that also underpin memory more apparent than in the letters that he writes throughout the narrative. The first set of letters he writes are to a pen pal in Phoenix. Jack writes to Alice “at least once a week, ten, twelve, fifteen pages at a time” (13). What begins as a class exercise—in which students write monthly letters—becomes the first and primary outlet for Jack’s episodic simulations and demonstrates a sophisticated textual self-fashioning. He tells Alice stories about life on his ranch, “the Lazy B.,” and his “encounters with mountain lions, rattlesnakes, and packs of coyotes” (13). Although Jack observes that Alice’s letters are “terse and irregular,” he imagines that she is in “awe” of him and dreams of one day “presenting [himself] at her door to claim her adoration” (13). Writing letters about his idealized and
imagined life—and attributing to Alice feelings of respect and wonder—is how Jack “passed the
hours after school”; however, when these activities fail to produce a positive outcome for his
goals (to satiate his loneliness and need for respect and affection) he seeks more violent outlets
(13).

Guns and other military paraphernalia are featured prominently in the narrative and often stand in for the respect and power that Jack so desperately craves but fails to earn without them. Rosemary’s boyfriend, Roy, gives Jack a Winchester .22 rifle. And while Jack promises to obey his mother’s rules about handling the gun only with adult supervision, he finds himself alone after school quite often and breaks his promise. The rifle, as Jack says, becomes an integral part of his identity: “A weapon was the first condition of self-sufficiency, and of being a real Westerner, and of all acceptable employment—trapping, riding herd, soldering, law enforcement, and outlawry . . . it completed me when I held it” (23). The uses of the gun quickly graduate from inspection into marching and drilling. Then Jack starts aiming at people outside of the apartment. One day, he pulls the trigger: “I had been aiming at two old people, a man and a woman, who walked so slowly that by the time they turned the corner . . . my little store of self-control was exhausted. I had to shoot” (25). Jack hits and kills a squirrel; later, he and Rosemary bury it together.

In the sniper scene Jack is unable to rely solely on imagined scenarios for gratification, instead he engages in a dangerous and potentially deadly outburst. Once he realizes his mistake he seeks a version of religious forgiveness: “I did an imitation of somebody praying, and then I did an imitation of somebody receiving divine reassurance and inspiration . . . I forced a feeling
of warmth into my chest” (26). Unable to reconcile his cruelty towards animals with his feelings of guilt and remorse, Jack turns to a clichéd act of religious penance but fails to find peace through his imaginative practice. Unlike in confessional autobiographical narratives, where the protagonist seeks and finds religious enlightenment (such as Augustine), Jack produces faux absolution. In fact, he is unable to carry out his self-induced penance: to stay away from the gun. While he tries to avoid the apartment after school, he longs to take the rifle out again because of the power it lends to his sense of self: “All of my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me” (27). Later in the narrative, such martial figurations of his identity influence his decision to join the army: a decision that he describes as “homecoming” because of its structure and pre-assigned identity types (286).

Because of identity’s complicated connection to memory, it is hard to envision a life narrative without a life at its center (51). Eakin suggests that “we are conditioned to count on others to articulate their identities for us in the stories they tell about themselves” because the articulation of identity is a messy and subjective process; individuals with neurodegenerative diseases and issues that affect memory further complicates these processes (52). Such questions about the centrality, coherence, and permanence of identity, and memory processes as past phenomena, are interrogated by Jack Wolff each time that he asserts that he does not know who he is. A common statement for adolescents, perhaps, but one that aims at the heart of the autobiographical process, in that it questions the existence of the self outside narrative form. Wolff’s life narrative is particularly self conscious of allowing us to engage memories from past
experience in a future-oriented manner, so that memory seems to assist in setting goals and planning. But the use of memory for planning compromises that which is remembered. By virtue of its status as a document of past events, created and sustained after the fact, memory’s articulation in life narrative is one that crisscrosses past, present, near future, and distant future temporalities. An undertaking that helps to make sense of past events and connect them to present moments, as well as to anticipate and imagine the future, writing life narrative brings to light memory’s multiple valances and uses as an aesthetic and thematic construct. Life narrative also splits subjectivity (sometimes doubly so, as in graphic narratives) between a narrator and an author. As the character Jack is pulled between different impulses of self-fashioning and future-oriented simulations, the author Wolff is working through making sense of these past experiences through connecting them to other temporalities in his life’s timeline.

In some respects, This Boy’s Life reads like a book of manners for young men making their way in the world. Inspired perhaps from the title and purpose of the official Scout magazine (Boy’s Life), the memoir is preoccupied with the steps that are necessary to move beyond one’s social station in life: most of these steps begin with the undertaking of some form of narrative creation. Jack admits on a number of occasions to his snobbery and his belief in a type of social and cultural inheritance. Such beliefs lead him to a grand undertaking of creative self-fashioning in which he forges transcripts, recommendations, and other autobiographical information on applications to exclusive private schools. Jack’s belief in the possibility of creatively re-imagining the self through narrative is a sentiment with deep roots in the autobiographical tradition. Yet the actions that he undertakes to realize this “miraculous change” of new
personhood is extraordinary because of its admitted reliance on fiction and artifice (89). Yet artifice is not necessarily the correct term because of Jack’s relationship to his episodic simulations: his belief in their potentiality and therefore their truth. In fact, Jack’s relationship to “reality” is more ambivalent than his relationship to his imagined life, as he admits when he receives the application forms and realizes that he is in over his head, so to speak: “When the forms were all in, I sat down to fill them out and ran into a wall. I could see from the questions they asked that to get into one of these schools, let alone win a scholarship, I had to be at least the boy I’d described to my brother and probably something more” (209). As he realizes that he cannot provide proof of the “circumlocutions” that he constructs, he considers giving up: “Being realistic made me feel bitter. It was a new feeling, and one I didn’t like, but I saw no way out” (209). Reality—if we can label his life in Chinook as such—is more difficult to accept than the possibilities that such simulations as his application forgery provide. Adaptive in the sense that they help to maintain psychological well being, and anticipate future outcomes that can be far more positive than present circumstance, acts of self-reinvention (episodic simulations) allow their creator to utilize mnemonic resources in clever and dialogical ways. The expression of such processes in narrative reveals the various ways in which the genre of life narrative recruits and translates cognitive phenomena in aesthetic structures. Constructed, combinatorial, and reliant on memory in its representation of self-concept, Wolff’s memoir exposes cognition at work.

With the aid of his friend, Arthur Gayle, who provides him with school letterhead and blank transcripts, Jack succeeds in forging his applications. As he did when he wrote the “Lazy
B.” letters, Jack writes life narrative to escape a poor home life, thus creating (not exactly wholesale) the person he wishes—and in some part believes—himself to be:

I wrote the first drafts deliberately, with much crossing out and penciling in, but with none of the hesitance I’d felt before. Now the words came as easily as if someone were breathing them into my ear. I felt full of things that had to be said, full of stifled truth. That was what I thought I was writing—the truth. It was truth known only to me, but I believed in it more than I believed in the facts arrayed against it . . . These were ideas about myself that I had held on to for dear life. Now I gave them voice. (213)

This scene epitomizes what I identify as the driving impulse, one might say compulsion, to write life narrative and to fashion the self through narratives that are inspired by memory and its attendant cognitive processes (such as episodic simulations). Jack harnesses his imaginative capacity, as well as his autobiographical planning to produce a narrative that feels more accurate than the life he lives. Bailey calls this compulsive self-fashioning “the necessary lie that is autobiography” (221). The referential uncertainty of the genre compels authors to soldier on in the face of unstable memories, unsavory experiences, and unfulfilled (future) wishes. The point that *This Boy’s Life* drives home a number of times is that the development of the self—much like the process of remembering—is a messy process made authentic through personal convictions and narrative structures, as well as cognitive processes related to memory and temporality, such as past and future thinking. If as Bailey suggests, “Wolff presents the developing self as a fiction that is occasionally transformed into actuality, only to be exposed subsequently as a fraud,” then I argue that life narrative is a genre that attempts to untangle these
messy threads of identity construction and bestow agency on otherwise powerless agents (220). Jack wishes desperately that his episodic simulations were his actual life, which helps him to carry his acts of self-fashioning to the point where the lies are made true, as his acceptance into The Hill School suggests. Although the cycle is ultimately a sad one in which Jack finally escapes Chinook and Dwight only to fall behind at Hill and eventually drop out, lying saves him from further abuse and affords him some semblance of the self sufficiency that he’s craved from a very young age.

In addition to the complex engagement with memory as traces of past phenomena and enabler of future-oriented episodic simulations that include daydreaming, planning, and imagining, This Boy’s Life also offers insight into the function of theory of mind and disembodiment in the protagonist’s point of view. When Jack moves to Chinook, Dwight’s set of lies replaces his own. Instead of playing the street-hardened delinquent, Jack is forced to play the happy son, newspaper boy, and Boy Scout. When he and Dwight visit Rosemary in Seattle, Jack reinforces the lies of his life in Chinook in ways that are disembodied: “Watching myself with revulsion, aghast at my own falsity yet somehow helpless to stop it, I simpered back at him and laughed when he invited me to laugh and confirmed all his lying implications that we were pals and our life together a good one” (99). Such moments of cognitive complexity in which Jack watches himself from a distance, or watches others watching him, are indicative of what Lisa Zunshine calls “mind reading” where we “attribute mental states to ourselves and others” (xi). Many of Jack’s poorly planned and reckless actions—stealing his step-father’s car for joyrides, check forgery—as well as his dreams of metamorphosis are influenced by similar moments of
complexity in which he anxiously believes his interior world is being scrutinized by people he interacts with. Throughout the text, Jack imagines certain characters—Sister James, Dwight, a school nurse, etc.—to see right through him and to “not like what they saw” (11). Such moments show a break between Jack’s internal world and external reality: at points he attributes preternatural abilities of “mind reading” to certain characters, imagining that they can read his bad thoughts, understand his motivations for reckless behavior, or, conversely, sense his underlying “nobility and grit.” One such instance occurs during a basketball game when Jack suffers a minor injury playing against a team far more capable than his own. As the opposing team scores ever more points, Jack begins to limp across the court. Yet his attempt to manipulate the sympathies of the audience also produces an out-of-body experience in which he imagines the audience watching him as he watches the audience (129). Such cognitive complexity—Jack watching himself react to and be shaped by the people in his life, not only the people at the basketball game—chips away at the notion of an authentic, coherent and autonomous self; although we wish to have “perfect access to the mind” these “mind reading” moments are only approximations, particularly when we are reading the minds of others (xi). Yet because of Jack’s imagination—his ability to project into the future and consider various outcomes from actions and experiences—these moments function as a means through which he comes to shape, craft even, his identity. Unabashedly aware of the role of narcissistic preoccupation with the self in the development of self-concept, Jack attributes to others a pronounced interest in him, which helps to guide his behavior and character development, regardless of whether or not other characters in the narrative think about him or understand him at all!
There is a connection between remembering and imagining that has neurological correlates. Utilizing the same areas of the brain and culling from the same data, “being able to access details from episodic memory may be an important and perhaps necessary condition of the successful construction of episodic simulations” (5). The connection between memory and imagination speaks to memory’s neurological functions and complexities; for the purposes of this project, however, it also shows us that the conventional ways in which we understand how memory functions within the context of autobiographical narrative are perhaps too simplistic to account for what takes place in the formation of life narrative. Understanding imagination as the flip side of memory complicates reading life narrative because it demonstrates—outright—the constructed and combinatorial nature of the genre. Such a cognitive approach also challenges our concept of memoir: especially as a project that occurs in the past because memory is not located in the past. It is stored, yes, but it is also recalled and remembered anew each time it is accessed; furthermore, memory is vital to the future in that it offers a metric with which to imagine future scenarios in ways that are similar to past events and plan accordingly. Life narrative, then, becomes less a document of and about the past and more a document about the future. Because of its reliance on artifice, lying, and imagining, This Boy’s Life calls to the fore some complexities inherent in the genre of life writing. A neuroscientific approach to reading the text offers a language with which to account for those complexities.

3. Naziphilia and Anti-Semitism

Although Wolff is given to describing bucolic scenes featuring rivers, wildlife, and the Cascade Mountain Range once he moves to Chinook, the most pervasive imagery in the text is much uglier because it is covered with the grit of martial fantasies and criminal intent. Jack is a
violent child with violent friends; therefore many of the descriptions in the narrative feature weapons, as well as the military. Given the prevalence of violence in the text and Jack’s glorification of it in his description, it is no surprise that images of World War II and the Holocaust pervade the narrative. Every space that Wolff traverses—Salt Lake City, Seattle, Chinook—is laden with references to Nazis, Axis and Allied forces, and Jews. As with the other memoirs discussed in these chapters, World War II has a significant impact on the narrative’s landscape, as well as the psychology of its characters. As the irony in the scene where Jack’s dad lies about his Jewish ancestry suggests, the devastation of the War and the anti-Semitism that accompanied it had staying power in 1950s American culture. Such traumatic cultural memories, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, help to shape life narrative’s articulation of personal memory; often inscribed over historical events of great social, cultural and ethical implication, personal memories and meaning-making structures—as we see in Jordan’s memoir—are profoundly impacted by communal events. In This Boy’s Life, imagery from the Holocaust and World War II are recruited in Jack’s process of creative self-fashioning.

Jack and his friends have a reverence for the Nazis that is connected to their own desire for power. Guns, which are perhaps one of the ultimate forms of power for those who are otherwise powerless, feature prominently in this text. Jack’s Winchester strongly influences his behavior in Utah, and shapes his opinion of Dwight. Towards the end of the text, Jack sells Dwight’s hunting rifles before leaving for private school. Throughout the text, there are multiple moments when Jack goes shooting, cleans his guns, marches with his guns, or lusts after guns. Even after he has a rifle, he wishes he owned a Luger: a gun associated with Nazi officers and
their brutality. Wandering around Pioneer Square in Seattle, he and his friends, the Terrys, “stare at guns in the windows of pawnshops” (41). Their fascination with the Luger is one akin to “passion” as Jack describes (41). He and the Terrys admire Nazi guns and watch sensational documentaries about Nazi atrocities and the fall of the Third Reich:

These glimpses of humiliation and loss lasted only a few minutes. They were tacked on as a pretense that the point of the show was to celebrate the victory of goodness over evil. We saw through this fraud, of course. We saw that the real point was to celebrate snappy uniforms and racy Mercedes staff cars and . . . men with Lugers and dogs ordering people around. (42)

In “Fascinating Fascism” Susan Sontag identifies the allure of Nazism as it is portrayed in popular art: “Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death” (3). Jack Wolff is drawn to fascism because of the power it offers to those otherwise powerless. The Nazis offered its members wholesale identity, authority, and a sense of belonging. Jack and the Terrys respond to this display of mindless unity and power in kind: “These shows instructed us further in the faith we were already beginning to hold: that victims are contemptible, no matter how much people pretend otherwise; that it is more fun to be inside than outside, to be arrogant than to be kind, to be with a crowd than to be alone” (42).

The Nazis’ overt demonstrations of power make Fascism appealing to Jack and his friends. Powerless on their own, they attempt to re-create some of the Nazis’ behavior by dressing up as S.S. officers: “Terry Silver had a Nazi armband that he swore was genuine, though anyone could see he’d made it himself . . . he would strut around and treat Taylor and me
like lackeys” (42). They prank-call people with “Jewish-sounding names,” throw eggs at cars, and steal from stores (42). These three boys form their own terror unit that identifies outsiders and punishes them. Yet most of their fascination with Nazis and their weapons seems divorced from the act of hating actual Jewish people. Although Terry Silver prank-calls people who he assumes are Jewish, he calls the man in the Thunderbird a “Yid” with little or no indication that the man in the car is actually Jewish (46). Anti-Semitism is simply another way to distinguish outsiders from insiders, much like Jack’s dad attempts to re-write his religion as Episcopalian to fit in with his wealthy second wife and his upper-class aspirations. Jews are the empty signifier to which characters attach their respective signifieds: they stand in for victims (in the case of the phone calls), wealthy aggressors (in the case of the Thunderbird driver), and social outcasts (in the case of Jack’s father). Wherever a discontented person appears in this narrative, a Jew also appears and stands in for the person’s hopes, losses, and frustrations.

Jews come to embody the complicated dynamics of victim and aggressor that Jack cycles in and out of in the narrative. The pervasiveness of World War II imagery also speaks to the war-like atmosphere of Wolff’s upbringing. Dwight and his family live in “a barracks where German prisoners of war had been quartered” (66). Although a heavy-handed metaphor, the former barrack that Jack shares with Dwight and his family serves to highlight Jack’s tenuous status in Dwight’s home and impress upon us the tyranny of Dwight’s behavior and the lack of freedom in his household. Forced to perform meaningless and illogical chores, such as husking chestnuts that are then left to molder in the attic, or scraping the last bit of inedible mustard crust out of a jar to prevent waste, Jack is often on the receiving end of Dwight’s cruelty and emotional
frustrations. That his Boy Scout manual is an outdated “1942 edition full of ‘Fighting Scouts’ keeping a lookout for Nazi subs and Jap bombers” further strengthens the connection between World War II imagery and Jack Wolff’s childhood (102).

Because of the credibility that they lend to his various attempts at self-fashioning, the Boy Scout’s uniform and merit badges are quite significant to Jack. He “develops a headwaiter’s eye”: an ability to “read” the uniforms of other troops and “know exactly who was who” (102). And when he gathers with other troops he “establishes ties” with boys from other groups (161). As Sontag explains, “Uniforms suggest fantasies of community, order, identity (through ranks, badges, medals which ‘say’ who the wearer is and what he has done: his worth is recognized), competence, legitimate authority, [and] the legitimate exercise of violence” and Jack is certainly susceptible to the power that the badges and uniform of the Boy Scouts offers (4). There is flair to Jack’s inter-troop networking and his strategic badge applications that overshadows his thirst for knowledge about other places and various survival methods: telling interests given Dwight’s abusive behavior. During a yearly gathering of the tribes, Jack and his friend Arthur plan to run away from Chinook. Jack packs an overnight bag with civilian clothing so that when he runs away his uniform will not identify him (160). Before Jack is able to enact his plan to escape Dwight, however, he befriends a particularly orderly and snappily dressed troop from Ballard. After watching the Ballard boys do their drill exercises, he gets caught up in performing his “bluff conventioneer’s talent for working the floor,” thus deferring the moment when he and Arthur are supposed to escape from the carnival, after the tribe meeting (163). Ultimately, Jack
loses all his money to carnival games and “treating” the Ballard boys. He and Arthur never get the chance to run away to Alaska (164).

Jack fails to carry through his carefully planned escape because he is caught up first by the Ballard boys’ aura of authentic militarism: “They were all business, these Ballard boys—crisp, erect, poker-faced, responsive to nothing but their Scoutmaster’s voice” (161). After he befriends them and tells some tales about his town—such as one about a man with a hook hand who escaped from a mental asylum—he is unable to divorce himself from such a powerful group (162). In an attempt to win their affection and friendship he pays for their food from his runaway fund (164). He also falls prey to a carnival game bait-and-switch routine where two men named Smoke and Rusty offer him a free game of “Blackout” and then exploit his desire for a larger prize by upping the ante for each successive game (165). The opening lie that they tell, which draws Jack to them, is that Smoke had once been a Boy Scout (164). With this first lie they attract Jack to the game and then fleece him of his entire runaway fund. Once he has run out of money the two men move onto the next potential player: “‘You there, Carrot-Top—that’s right, you—don’t be shy, come on up, first game’s on the house. Used to be a Scout myself’” (167). Jack is particularly susceptible to this kind of con because, while he is successfully playing the game, it involves the illusion that he is powerful and popular. Jack attracts a “small crowd” and garners the cheers of the Ballard boys. Additionally, for the time that he is playing Blackout, he is the object of Smoke and Rusty’s attention. These feelings, which are akin to affection and camaraderie, motivate him into spending his modest fund. The scene ironically demonstrates that “the liar” is easily misled by more practiced liars.
The victimization of children by adults occurs often in this narrative. Some forms of victimization, such as Smoke and Rusty’s routine, are relatively harmless. However, as Dwight and other adults in the narrative demonstrate, children are often at the mercy of dangerously fickle and uncontrollable adults. Mr. Mitchell, the civics teacher, is one such adult who falls into this other, more actively dangerous, category. Both a teacher and an “unofficial recruiter for the army,” Mitchell frequently tells his students about his experience fighting during World War II: “He sometimes brought in different items he had taken from [soldiers’] bodies, not only medals and bayonets, which you could buy in any pawnshop, but also letters in German and wallets with pictures of families inside” (182). As Jack observes, Mr. Mitchell has some very suspect arguments regarding the nature of Nazi atrocity and the Holocaust:

He praised the courage and discipline of the Germans, and said that in his opinion we had fought on the wrong side. We should have gone into Moscow, not Berlin. As far as the concentration camps were concerned, we had to remember that nearly all the Jewish scientists had perished there. If they had lived, they would have helped Hitler develop his atomic bomb before we developed ours, and we would all be speaking German today.

(182)

The contradictory logic and inaccuracy notwithstanding, the teacher’s ability to both recognize and deny the Holocaust in one statement is frightening. However, for children to be learning from a man with such inconsistent logic seems more than frightening: it seems criminal.

Mitchell’s irrationality has even deeper roots than his behavior in civics class suggests, as Jack observes, “Mr. Mitchell also taught PE. He had introduced boxing to the school, and every
year he organized a smoker where hundreds of people paid good money to watch us boys beat
the bejesus out of each other” (183). Here, Mitchell introduces violent methods for boys in the
school to settle their problems. Beyond reinforcing militaristic forms of justice, such as the
grudge match, he also profits from his students’ issues. Jack and his friend Arthur are coerced
into fighting when Mitchell observes them bickering (215). The enmity that catches Mitchell’s
attention in the first place stays alive for weeks as Jack and Arthur drift apart yet they continue to
resent one another: “Arthur and I were moving apart, and had been ever since we started high
school. Arthur was trying to be a citizen . . . And yet, knowing him as I did, I saw all this
respectability as a performance and a strained performance at that” (217). In Arthur’s attempt to
be something he is not, Jack identifies a situation that is similar to his own. Their divergent self-
fashioning acts become the impetus for the grudge match, as Jack suggests:

He knew I was no outlaw . . . I could see him knowing it as he watched me with my
outlaw friends. This disbelief of his was vexing to me, as my own ill-concealed disbelief
in his respectability must have been vexing to him . . . I could not accept that he knew I
was not the person I tried so hard to seem. (218)

Jack maintains his distance from his best friend because he is unable to reconcile the people they
both desperately want to become with the people they are. The violence of the grudge match is a
communication act that holds up when words cannot suffice. The match is also a means by
which Jack receives positive attention from Dwight. Like Granville Jordan, Dwight reserves
“peculiar patience, almost tenderness . . . for instruction in combat” (219). With Dwight, Jack
behaves in the way he thinks most appropriate for his expectations. During the fight with Arthur,
every time he lands a blow, Jack imagines Dwight’s “pride” and “recognition” and “something like love” radiating towards him; identifying with his tormentor and behaving in kind, Jack performs the outlaw persona he so desperately wants to be (221).

Violence occurs often in This Boy’s Life. Wolff is the victim of Dwight’s violence as much as he is the aggressor in his fight with Arthur. However, as with the lies that swirl around in this narrative, the violence does not begin or end with Jack—the narrative ends, in fact, with Dwight attempting to murder Rosemary (285). Jack might express his admiration for Nazis and Lugers and appeal to the adults in his life for combat training, yet he is enabled and encouraged by the adults in his life to behave in this way. Jack learned through his own traumatic experiences that it is contemptible to be a victim. His various acts of self-fashioning, some of which produce violent personae, attempt to combat his feelings of helplessness. That, as a child, he figures out one of the core issues with the way we treat victims and their attackers—often punishing the former and thus tacitly rewarding the latter—is a testament to his adaptability and his desire to survive and thrive in the world. Against the odds of an abusive home life, an absent mother, and a shoddy education, Jack manages to escape from Chinook and attend an exclusive private school. Regardless of the other failures he endures before and after his escape, he manages to take control of his life when he leaves Rosemary and Dwight behind. Lying, and by extension autobiographical planning, plays a pivotal role in this autonomous act, but the presence of lying and imagination in the memoir also gestures towards the impossibility of guileless self-fashioning in life narrative.

4. Authenticity in the Age of Memoir
In previous chapters, I have identified cognitive markers whose operation in particular memoirs influence the aesthetic and thematic choices that the authors make. For example, because of Mira Bartók’s traumatic brain injury, which limited her ability to form new memories, she relied on mnemonic devices—such as the spatialization and visualization of memories—to record the final months of her mother’s life. Similarly, Alison Bechdel engaged memory bias in order to explore the mystery of her father’s life and death. My close readings attempt to demonstrate that whenever memory, as a topos, is present in a narrative, many of its neurological and physiological structures are also at work in the construction and elucidation of the story; however, the larger point that I make is that the very presence of these cognitive markers in contemporary American memoir troubles and upsets the genre of life. Memoir is based on memory, yet memory’s cognitive structures are unreliable: the contemporary American authors in my project call attention to and embrace, rather than patch over, this disturbing fact. This chapter focuses on an alternative understanding of memory that accounts for its role in goal setting and future-oriented planning, as well as its bolstering of imaginative processes. Memory, as Daniel Schacter says, serves adaptive functions, many of which are related to prediction, problem solving, and other future-directed processes. This Boy’s Life smartly captures the importance of the future—not the past—to someone who has been abused. Many of the processes in which Jack engages, such as self-fashioning and lying, are part and parcel of the imaginative processes that allow him to imagine another better life. They are the data that reads in the default network when those regions are supposedly at rest. And when he feels despair, as he does when his imagination and autobiographical planning fail him as he applies to The Hill
School, it is not because of his lying, but paradoxically because he cannot lie. He cannot imagine. He cannot plan for the future. Thus memory is important, not because it is in the past, but because it is an imaginative re-creation of the past in the present that often shapes the present as well as the future. As Charles Fernyhough notes, “autobiographical memories are not possessions that you either have or do not have . . . [memories] are mental constructions, created in the present moment, according to the demands of the present” (5). These constructions are also imperative to shaping future-oriented thinking, planning, and decision making.

Contemporary life narrative replaces the notion of a coherent, linear, autonomous self with a self that is created through performance, imagination, wishful thinking, and ultimately a cognitively complex narrative. The integration of neuroscientific research into literary criticism produces a generative reading of the work of contemporary American memoirists that replaces previous critical interactions with the genre that scholars such as Eakin argue leave “the place of self in autobiographical discourse . . . comparatively unexamined (64).

That Tobias Wolff rejects many of the conventions of autobiographical writing, such as “telling the truth, respecting privacy, [and] displaying normalcy” emphasizes the important work that contemporary memoir does to complicate the role of the self in narrative and to upend the generic constraints underpinning the literary form (50). A book about lying, irrational and often pointless violence, and the trauma of growing up in an abusive household, This Boy’s Life presents itself as part of that old familiar autobiographical tradition where rebellion, confession, and absolution occur in neat progression. Yet as Jack Wolff demonstrates when he prays for forgiveness after murdering a squirrel, his redemption is a form of self-deception. His sense of
self remains unclear. The confessional frame all but collapses as we watch Jack engage in infraction after infraction, often at the behest of the people around him, yet deliverance never arrives. Ultimately Jack is redeemed—if one can even call it that—by a major act of self-fashioning that involves a lot of deception, creative imagining, and future-oriented thinking; enabling him to leave Chinook behind. A happy ending is denied us, however, by Wolff’s final admission that he is kicked out of private school and his mother is almost murdered by Dwight after they both move back East.

Such a grim conclusion to Wolff’s memoir might gesture towards a moment in our society where autobiographical success stories and happy endings are out of fashion. However, given the reality television shows that advertise overnight success, wealth, fame and romance, and the popularity of celebrity twitter handles, this argument is not entirely true. *This Boy’s Life* is part of an emerging movement within literature that has an investment in and fascination with the mind and does not shy away from addressing the complexities of human consciousness, perception, or memory. Jack’s fascination with people viewing him as he lies, or his ability to move outside of himself to observe as he engages in his various disruptive behaviors, suggests the importance of theory of mind to the figuration of the self in this narrative. Wolff—like many of the other authors in this project who write multiple life narratives—is never completely satisfied with his self-fashioning, hence his obsessive fear that people will see through his personae to something far more sinister in him.

This tension between not knowing the self and fearing that the self is evil, sinister, or even “grotesque”—a fear that is rooted in philosophical and scientific arguments for or against a
core self—unfolds in *This Boy’s Life*. After the prayer scene, Jack admits to still struggling with whether or not to handle the rifle. He admits to the power that an image of himself armed has over him:

> Though I avoided the apartment, I could not shake the idea that sooner or later I would get the rifle out again. All of my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me. (27)

It seems almost cursory when Jack says that he does not know who he is. But perhaps this statement is more than an aside or an explanation for his desire to feel powerful. Perhaps Wolff is drawing attention to the role that life narrative plays in the quest to shape and define the self instead of the self shaping and defining life narrative (64). Life narrative is “an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one’s self,” yet those memories and states are in constant flux—affecting by people, external events, wishes, biases, cognition, and a multitude of other factors—thus, life narrative enables authors such as Wolff to explore what it means to have an unclear sense of self, as well as to identify the personae that are most appealing and why (64). Such figurations of how the self emerges and is shaped foreground the role that life narrative plays in the construction of identity. Though his story, Wolff demonstrates that creating life narrative is an imaginative process that involves embracing and exploring the unknowns as much as the “knowns” that influence self-concept. We do not have entirely stable core selves, yet we are not entirely without self either.75
Chapter 6
Refuting Folk Conceptualizations of Memory in Cultural Production

Our culture is preoccupied with memory. Television shows such as *Once Upon a Time* feature mass amnesia; commercials for Alzheimer research dramatize people disappearing from the memories of the afflicted; magazines, blogs and other periodicals celebrate scientific studies of false memory implantation in rats and of successfully erased localized (traumatic) memories. Since beginning my research, I have been struck by how multifaceted and ubiquitous memory-related concerns are in our culture and how this preoccupation finds expression in scholarly inquiry and in academic contexts, but also in popular culture and various media. In this conclusion, I begin by offering one final, popular, example of an exciting field in which memory studies is being applied in novel and generative ways: the gaming industry. In doing so, I hope to illustrate how “folk” memory structures have influenced the ways in which memory narratives—in books, but also in movies, television, video games, and even medical and health industries—develop and proliferate. “Folk” memory structures—including Freudian repression and screen memories, recovered memories, and outright magical memory structures—are ones that this study systematically challenges. My reference to *Assassin’s Creed II*, however, also gestures—ever so tentatively—towards the possible manipulation of memory through technological, pharmacological, and neurological augmentation. The game plays with such popular concepts as extended mind theory and cybernetic immortality, through its figuration of memory as a biologically translatable entity: akin to DNA and genes.
In the winter of 2013, I started playing the video game *Assassin’s Creed II*, developed by Ubisoft Montreal (2007). The third installment of the game, released in late 2012, was widely reviewed: including by *National Public Radio* and other respected media outlets. The novelty of including a half Native American half English protagonist, who speaks Mohawk, marked the game as a significant departure from earlier figurations of ethnicity and race in the video game industry. *Assassin’s Creed II* is less groundbreaking in its use of language and culture but still quite innovative. Set in Renaissance Italy and in the present or near future, the game opens with a man held prisoner in a lab. Desmond Miles is rescued by a scientist who worked for Abstergo Industries. Together they steal information about a high tech machine called the *animus*, whose mystical function includes imprinting its users with the memories of people from the past and allowing them to relive their predecessors’ experiences. Desmond finds himself in Renaissance Italy reliving the memories of his ancestor, Ezio Auditore da Firenze. What then follows is an investigation into various conspiracies that involve the Assassin’s Creed (a hero organization) and the Knights Templar (a villainous organization). Eventually, the game spins out of control and Ezio/Desmond uncovers that humans were placed on Earth by an advanced alien civilization. The world is about to end—the apocalypse ushered in by the Knights Templar—and the player is left poised for some type of epic battle that will ensue in later installments of the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise. Then, the game ends.

Plot notwithstanding, the concept of the game is compelling for a number of reasons, most of which have to do with the ways in which it conceptualizes memory. Memory is DNA; it is ancestry. It is able to be performed—enacted really—by Desmond because of his biological
lineage. However, as anyone who has played the game knows, there are limits to memories. Certain areas in the rather comprehensive map of Renaissance Italy are blocked off from players. When Ezio ventures into these spaces, he is immediately booted out: white light suffuses the screen and Ezio is once again in a zone that is safe and familiar. Such figurations of memory as accessible, locatable in the past and containing a map-like comprehensiveness are tantalizing but ultimately wrong. We cannot leap into a machine and travel back in time to relive the experiences of our ancestors. And if we could these memories would probably be far less comprehensive than the maps of Renaissance Italy that the game so prominently features: the maps are filled with historically-based and factual elements.

Assassin’s Creed II reveals many of the common cultural assumptions and mistakes that we make about how memory functions; shaped by a type of “folk” understanding of memory, we assume memory is in the past, reliable, stable, and accessible. My project has tried to counter these assumptions through close readings of the frequent moments in life narratives where memory goes haywire: when it is lost wholesale (The Memory Palace), or is biased (Fun Home), when it is affected by traumatic experience (Soldier and Maus) or is put to use for imaginative purposes and future-oriented thinking (This Boy’s Life). As historian Alison Winter observes, the study of memory is widespread and often lacks consensus. But even more than disagreement among fields, memory is a hotly contested topic because it shuttles between the figurations of laypeople and experts (1). Because almost everyone has memories, it is difficult to counter what seems to be true about memory’s various functions. Memory’s various flaws—its biases—are also, paradoxically, what allows us to form coherent narratives about our lives. It’s hard not to be
tricked by memory’s processes because they appear so seamless, so reliable, and so accessible. These illusions about memory drive our impulse towards creating life narratives; memory is the brass ring that is only just outside of our grasp. As we come back to our memories, they seem to move closer to capturing the real thing. The cognitive-neuroscientific structures of the memory process give us a sense of seamlessness with regards to our perceptions; this physiological seamlessness gives rise to the folk understanding of how memory works, but also enables and fosters a rich interior world that is marked by its autobiographical and narratological features. One might say that our brains are wired to produce life narratives of one sort or another.

In *Unable to Remember but Unwilling to Forget* I attempt to dispel many of the common misconceptions about memory because these misconceptions drive the ways in which critics and readers approach and understand the genre of life narrative. As John Eakin explained to me during the process of writing this book, the state of life narrative literary criticism, sadly, is still one in which scholars dismiss or ignore the role of memory in the creation of the genre. To understand life narrative one needs at least a basic understanding of the neurological and cognitive processes of memory. For these processes give rise to life narrative even as they, paradoxically, frustrate our ability to come to definitive conclusions about our memories and experiences. As I have emphasized in this project, we write *in spite* of these frustrations and flaws.

I hope this project breaks some new ground in its application of neurological research on memory and perception to life narrative. But there is a diverse and growing field of cognitive literary studies that has inspired my work. The questions I try to answer about the role of
memory and perception in life narrative can be applied to any genre or field in which memory is a subject of interest. My close reading techniques demonstrate that there are literary and aesthetic correlates to neurological phenomena. In chapter two I examine the relationship between ekphrasis and flashbulb memory. In chapter four I examine the similarities between narrative compression and expansion and “brain time.” References to mnemonics and the method of loci in The Memory Palace, bias in Fun Home, and imagination in This Boy’s Life are all concepts that have a home in literary studies as well as brain science. Placing these two fields in conversation illuminates, nuances, and broadens the analysis of life narrative; it also challenges and redefines many of the long held assumptions that we have about how memory functions in memoir. Trauma is no longer about repression but about recursion; memory is no longer solely rooted in the domain of the past, but also in that of the future.

Yet for all that we know about how memory functions in our world today, we know precious little about how memory will function in the future; this ignorance, I think, is irresponsible. Although we might proclaim that we are at the end of remembering, that our memories will all soon be externalized, that we are post-human, and that our minds extend far beyond us, I think it is important to approach the future of memory from a critically engaged standpoint that considers bioethics. With brain computer interfaces, a “forgetting pill,” and false memory implantation all possible we stand poised to live in a futuristic world in which some distant version of Assassin’s Creed II might be plausible. Scientists will soon be able to chemically and optically target and manipulate (erase or falsely implant) memories: the
ramifications of such practices are widespread yet hold uncertain consequences at the current moment.

This project began with the assumption that narrative is an important place in which to attend to articulation of self concept. As one of the driving forces in the development of identity, and in the articulation of life narrative, memory is a vital component to this project. Life narrative, however, is also significant for another reason, which I elaborated in my fifth chapter: life narrative helps us to arrange our experiences and memories into a meaningful story. The heart of the autobiographic process, then, is that it questions the existence of the self outside narrative form. As people who are unable to process and store memories might be described as being “without identity,” someone without a sense of autobiographical narrative (written or spoken or otherwise conveyed) might likewise be said to be lacking a fundamental part of their self-concept; here, I return again to the Alzheimer’s commercial and the image of people disappearing from the “mind’s eye” of the afflicted.

Of course, such ruminations venture into phenomenological and, broadly speaking, philosophical understandings of identity. When I first started this project I was obsessed with a variation on a tree falls in the woods question, which I formulated thus: If someone has an inaccurate or otherwise faulty memory—perhaps disproved by a family memory, as Mary McCarthy’s memories of her childhood were—yet she still believes the memory to be true or accurate, how are we, as readers and critics, supposed to approach and understand the articulation of that memory? Should we trust the subject/author’s internal sense of her mnemonic world or should we apply an external and objective metric of analysis to that memory? I realize
now that I was playing with the distinction between internal and external conceptualizations of memory, which Allison Winter argues is one of the reasons why memory studies is so controversial (8). If a memory feels true, how then can it be otherwise? We stand on tenuous ground when we try to distinguish between real and false or otherwise inauthentic memories. As such, my project seeks to move past such rudimentary distinctions and to offer a more robust critical methodology for examining life narratives—or any narratives, for that matter—that place memory (in all its nuance and complexity) at the center of their aesthetic framework and representative structure.

This project extends the field of cognitive literary studies while reining in critical analysis of life narrative by offering formalist-inspired close readings of literary texts. Integrating cognitive neuroscience and its research on memory and perception allows for a wider ranging discussion of the genre. At the same time, it also enables a type of close reading that moves beyond the dichotomy of life narrative as a mixture of fact and fiction. As I said at the outset, life narrative is not a mixture of fact and fiction; it is creative reconstruction just as our memories are reconstructive and associative. Contemporary authors of life narrative embrace the reconstructive and therefore cognitive model of memory. Scholars interested in life narrative and memory studies ought to do the same.
Notes

1 See the work of critics and scholars Daniel Schacter, Elaine Scarry, Nicolae Babuts, Alan Richardson, Monika Fludernik, Roger Porter and Daniel Reisberg for research that bridges literary studies and cognitive science.

2 See, for example, the rise of graphic narrative and its indoctrination into the academy, first with a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* in the winter of 2006 and then with the formation of the first graphic narrative discussion group at the MLA at its annual conference in 2012.

3 See Sacks’ *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

4 Whether implicitly or explicitly, memoirists use the cognitive structures of memory—recall, assimilation and reconsolidation—to organize their narrative, make sense out of experience, shape their sense of self and of others, and imagine/plan for the future.

5 See Cathy Caruth, Ruth Leys, Shoshana Felman, and for visual culture see Victor Burgin.

6 Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

7 See example Augustine’s *Confessions*.

8 Addiction narratives, abuse narratives, survivor narratives, etc.

9 See Rousseau’s *Confessions* and Franklin’s *Autobiography* for even earlier examples of the devices that writers utilized in order to establish an unquestionable truthfulness that realistically was unachievable.

See Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate* for a detailed description of the Cognitive Revolution’s various stages and its influence on how we view human behavior, perception and memory.

See Brian Rotman’s *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being* for a discussion of how technology has shaped our linguistic structures, and our perception of the world, as well as how we mediate and articulate notions of the self (5).

See Elaine Scarry’s work on “the deep structure of perception” (38).

See Timothy Dow Adams’ *Light Writing and Life Writing* for an elaboration of the argument that “autobiography is not simply nonfiction” (xi). Even the presence of images calls into question the referential status of autobiography (xi). Indeed Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith, and James Olney, have all established the fictive impulse in the autobiographic act.


The quote that Adams cites from St. Augustine is an excellent example of the complex interaction between the senses, memory and our understanding of the world: “Memory brings forth not reality itself, which is gone forever, but the words elicited by the representation of reality, which as it disappeared impressed traces upon the mind via the agency of the senses” (xi).

In the nineteenth century Auguste Comte argued that a science of the mind was impossible, “The mind . . . can study all phenomena but its own” (Hothersall 1). In the twentieth century, J.B. Watson reiterated Comte’s argument, “psychology was no longer the science of the *mind* and had no further use for introspection” (468). Yet William James, in “Are we Automata?” argued
against popular assertions that consciousness didn’t exist and advocated for a natural science of the mind (40).

18 In Mind: Introduction to Cognitive Science Thagard suggests that George Miller, along with Noam Chomsky, John McCarthy, Marvin Minsky, Allen Newell, and Herbert Simon are the founders of cognitive science.

19 Other founds of modern psychology include Wilhelm Wundt, Gustav Fechner and Hermann von Helmholtz.

20 The seven “sins” that Schacter outlines—transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence—are common ways in which memory malfunctions. Yet he pointedly argues that our memory systems work well, suggesting that these flaws are a byproduct of the adaptive features of memory (184).

21 See Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore: “The personal world of the body is a redoubt, a place to turn toward. If it is suppressed or emptied of meaning and memory in architecture, how can it react effectively to external stimuli? . . . To diminish the importance of the body’s internal values is to diminish our opportunity to make responses that remind us of our personal identity” (49).

22 See Francis Yates’ The Art of Memory: Selected Works, Volume III for a detailed discussion of the first recorded account of the use of mnemonics and the three surviving ancient texts that make detailed reference to the art of memory: Ad C. Herennium libri IV (oldest), Cicero’s De oratore, and Quintilian’s Institutio oratoria (2).

23 In order to preserve what I consider to be one of the most fascinating aspects of The Memory Palace, I include Bartók’s chapter drawings at the beginning of each paragraph, where I focus
my analysis on specific images, in the hope that the reader gets a clear sense of Bartók’s pairing of visual and textual mapping. The included images are illuminating details that punctuate the beginning of each of Bartók’s chapters, offering a visual map through her memories and embellishing her already richly imagistic text.

24 Joshua Foer defines the gaming industry more broadly to include the memory games he investigated as a journalist and then participated in and wrote about in *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*. Memory games occur on the city, state, national, and international levels. At times Foer likens these memory games to Olympics for the mind.

25 Bartók makes numerous references to fairytales (pages 18, 19, and 71). She also relies on the thematic and structural elements utilized in fairytales to tell her story. Relying on myth to explain her mother’s condition is an extension of the fairytale aesthetic in this narrative, and one that allows Bartók to put a name to her mother’s terrifying and chaotic behavior.

26 The image of Death, the rider, is one that takes it inspiration from the *Book of Revelations* 6:8: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”

27 Although the image of Death is fatalistic—a portent of destruction and ruin—for Bartók, the white horse and its rider represents a wish for the triumph of justice: for Norma’s security in the face of her increasingly debilitating mental illness. Bartók’s appropriation of apocalyptic
imagery for healing and preserving purposes underscores her complicated relationship to her mother.

28 In addition to cabinet, Wunderkammer can also be translated as a chamber or room of wonders. The ambiguity in the translation of the term is mirrored in Bartók’s shifting description of her memory palace: she writes about rooms, but she draws her memory palace as a cabinet, or an altar. The absence of a visual palatial structure is off-set by Bartók’s creation of a text that mimics the order and space of a palace: her narration is an interrogation of and gesture towards the homing of space, or how a family home is constructed and maintained.

29 See Nicholas Carr, Adam Gopnik, Sherry Turkle, and Brian Rotman.

30 Plath’s poem “Daddy” is another text that might be used to discuss cultural memory and the prevalence of World War Two analogies in traumatic narratives.

31 In addition to the memoirs covered in this project by June Jordan, Alison Bechdel, Art Spiegelman, and Tobias Wolff, see Mary Karr’s The Liar’s Club and Lit, Jeanette Walls’ The Glass Castle, Alison Bechdel’s new memoir Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama, Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, David Small’s Stitches, Marco Roth’s The Scientists, among others.

32 See Timothy Dow Adams’ Light Writing and Life Writing.

33 For more information on Jordan’s collaboration with R. Buckminster Fuller on the “Skyrise for Harlem” architectural project see Cheryl Fish’s “Place, Emotion, and Environmental Justice in Harlem: June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller’s 1965 ‘Architextual’ Collaboration.” Discourse 29.2-3 (2007): 330-345.
It is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of texts that Jordan has written. Jewelle Gomez suggests that, at the time of her death, she was the author of twenty-six books including three plays, and a number of collections of essays and poems; however, Angela Ards, in a recent (September 21, 2011) lecture at Harvard University, updates these numbers suggesting that she was the author of twenty-eight books. Interestingly, even the author’s biography on www.junejordan.com is vague.

For a critical examination that frames her work within the context of her life and death see the anthology *Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan* edited by Valerie Kinloch and Margret Grebowicz (2004). See also “June Jordan’s Manifest New Destiny: Allegiance, Renunciation, and Partial Citizens’ Claims on the State” by Brian Norman (2004), and Cheryl Fish’s “Place, Emotion, and Environmental Justice in Harlem: June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller's 1965 "Architextual" Collaboration” (2007).

By dearth of scholarship I refer exclusively to scholarship on June Jordan’s memoir. I am not referring to a dearth of scholarship on African American female authors, writ large. For a treatment of African American female novelists please see *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* by Madhu Dubey or *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* by Barbara Christian. For a comprehensive discussion of feminist authors of stories and novels see Carla Kaplan’s *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*. I had the pleasure of examining June’s baby book at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute in the fall of 2011. Jordan uses narratives from her baby book in her memoir, such as the circumstances surrounding her birth. In the baby book, Mildred assumes the voice of June and
writes from her perspective about the heat wave in which she was born—this scene shows up in the prologue of *Soldier*. A rhetorically interesting text, June’s baby book demonstrates the importance of life narrative in the construction of her identity, by herself and others.

One of the only other critical pieces that, briefly, engages with Jordan’s memoir is “Writing War, Writing Memory,” by Jane Creighton, which is included in *Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan* (2004), edited by Kinloch and Margret Grebowicz.

In Jordan’s memoir Cousin Valerie is described as an unhappy, jealous, and superficial girl who, at a young age, tries to suffocate June when she is still just a baby (10). There are many motivations behind writing life narrative and responding to life narrative, and Kinloch’s project seems to be Orridge’s rebuttal to Jordan’s characterization of her and her family.

See Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, or Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*.

See Robert B. Stepto’s *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, and in particular the practice of “authenticating narratives,” in which “the tale is *subsumed by the authenticating strategy*; the slave narrative becomes an authenticating document for other, usually generic, texts” (5). This practice removes agency from the author of the text, as it places primacy on the audience and the authenticating authority (16).

In the fall of 2011, while examining early drafts of *Soldier* at the Schlesinger Library, I discovered that as Jordan kept revising her drafts she not only changed the title of the project but she also changed her writing style.

For further elaboration on the complicated relationship between June and her mother see the essay “Many Rivers to Cross,” from *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (2003). The scene that imagines Mildred’s wedding day, in *Soldier*, echoes “Many Rivers to Cross” in that it describes her as lifeless.

See the “African dance” scene in *Soldier* for an example of how Jordan struggles and ultimately fails to find an “authentic” racial and gendered identity (114).


In the un-excerpted version of “War and Memory,” published in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (2007), she makes reference to a number of different traumatic and violent moments in American history.

There are a number of missing documents and photos that make explicit reference to Jordan’s son Christopher David Meyer. In Jordan’s archive collection, these documents and photos have been replaced with yellow omission sheets; they will be withheld for a few more decades, to protect Meyer’s privacy.
See Hillary Chute, Anne Cvetkovich, Valerie Rohy, Adrielle Mitchell, and Robyn Warhol, among others.

There are a number of authors that engage in autobiographical “genre busting” notably Marco Roth (*The Scientists: A Family Romance*) and Dave Eggers (*Zeitoun, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, among others). Although the focus of this project is on the inclusion of neuroscience in the formal and thematic constructs of memoir, a number of authors, most notably Eggers, challenge the distinction between autobiography and biography by collapsing narrative perspective and introducing multiple people’s life stories into a single book.

See Anita Shreve’s *Testimony* (2008)—another contemporary American text with an enigmatic narrative center focused on sexual crimes at an exclusive New England private school—in which documentation is both a critical narrative device and one that undercuts the possibility of ever “knowing” the exact details of the characters’ crimes.

In “Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home” Julia Watson makes very brief mention to the graphic narrative’s use of collage, arguing that “Bechdel’s rich exploitation of visual possibilities places *Fun Home* at an autobiographical interface where disparate modes of self-inscription intersect and comment upon one another” (32). However, I draw a novel connection between *Fun Home*’s collage aesthetic and its exploration of how memories are recalled and reconsolidated.

See website (http://scruss.com/wal/) for a public domain web reproduction of *What a Life*

Bechdel’s most recent memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) continues *Fun Home*’s interrogation of memory and subjectivity formation; however in place of the archive as
the major organizing aesthetic, she relies upon dreamscapes. A memoir that utilizes the therapist-patient dynamic to explore the author’s theory of mind, Bechdel’s latest text signals a continuation of the cognitive turn in her work.

Unlike memory repression, a controversial theory that suggests that the unconscious mind suppresses the recall of certain traumatic memories, memory confabulation is the process by which we remember differently from an actual occurrence. Not necessarily tied to traumatic memory—and certainly accessible by the person remembering—confabulation is a form of “Memory distortion rather than memory loss . . . [that] occurs because remembering is often a reconstructive process” (Moscovitch 226).

Here I’d like to make the distinction between unconscious processes and the unconscious mind. I use the former term similarly to cognitive neuroscientists such as David Eagleman and Mahzarin Banaji. Cognitive neuroscientists have tried to divorce the term unconscious from Freudian notions for that term, suggesting that while there are processes that are non-conscious, such as implicit memory, learning, and bias, these processes have nothing to do with a Freudian schematic (id, ego, super-ego) that characterizes thoughts as inaccessible. For further distinctions between these two forms of unconscious see John Searle’s *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. MIT Press, 1994, pp. 151-173.

Another possible interpretation of Bechdel’s causal explanations for her father’s death is that she engages the post hoc fallacy, (*Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*), which works in a similar way to hindsight bias in that they both retroactively find explanations for particular circumstances or events that might not logically be related; however, Bechdel is honest in admitting that she *wants*
to find explanations for her father’s death—whether or not those explanations are factual or not—and these explanations are (counter to the post hoc fallacy) probable if not actual. Memoir is not logos-centered so much as it is meaning-centered: logic and meaning do not always align.

58 See the work of Lisa Hull Reed, Marita Sturken, and Julia Watson.

59 To see a reproduction of the photograph of Alison dressed as her father, side-by-side with the panel from *Fun Home*, on page 197, of Bruce Bechdel as a “malevolent presence” see figures four and five in Robyn Warhol’s “The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home.*” *College Literature* 38.3 (2011).

60 See the work of Gillian Whitlock, Julia Watson, Ariela Freedman, and Julia Watson, among others.

61 In *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman includes a section titled, “Searching for Memories of Anja” in which he includes testimony from women who were with his mother in the camps. Although many of the details are contradictory, one woman, Renya Ostry, mentions that she and Anja were moved to Ravensbrück after leaving Auschwitz (279).


63 See “Prisoner on the Hell Planet’” (1972), *Breakdowns: From Maus to Now* (1977), *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@squiggle*! (2008), and *MetaMaus*. (2011) for examples of Spiegelman’s preoccupation with these themes.

64 See page 218 of *The Complete Maus* for example of how Vladek’s physical act of walking in the present evokes the past act of walking during Auschwitz *Selektions*. For an excellent close

65 For another similar moment where the past and the present seem to crash together in a disturbing way see the prologue to Maus, beginning on page five, where Vladek questions the nature of Art’s friendships by comparing them to his own experience with “friends” during the Holocaust.

66 See Spiegelman’s MetaMaus, pages 28-31, for a more detailed discussion of the negotiation between father and son over historical (in)accuracy.

67 For example, James Young, Dominick LaCapra, and Keith Harrison.

68 See page 206-207 of MetaMaus for Spiegelman’s discussion of creating the timeline.


70 See Inventing Iron Man: The Possibility of a Human Machine by E. Paul Zehr, a Professor of Neuroscience and Kinesiology.


72 See Rousseau, Franklin, Thoreau, and Saint Augustine.

73 See page nine of This Boy’s Life for the scene with Jack’s father lying about his religion.

74 See pages 78, 99, and 129 in This Boy’s Life for examples of theory of mind in action in the narrative.

75 See Eakin’s Living Autobiographically (page 45-50) for a thought-provoking discussion of “. . . the prerequisites of having an identity in our culture” (50).

Bibliography


----. Father’s Day Card. Box 3, folder 9: Radcliffe Institute Schlesinger Library,
Cambridge, date unknown. Print.


Mitelman, Geoffrey A. “Jonah Lehrer and the Betrayal of Trust in the Internet Age.” *The


Tulving, Endel and Martin Lepage. “Where in the brain is awareness of one's past?” *Memory*,


