

1 ❖ Identity and the Coming-of-Age Narrative

A great deal has been said about the heart of a girl when she stands “where the brook and river meet,” but what she feels is negative; more interesting is the heart of a boy when just at the budding dawn of manhood.

—James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography
of an Ex-Coloured Man*

Little by little it has become clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

“Read this—you’ll love it.” With these words, my mother hands me the copy of *Little Women* her aunt gave her when she was twelve and plants a seed that, three decades later, will grow into this study. At age twelve, I am beginning to balk at *everything* my mother suggests, but being constitutionally unable to resist any book, I grudgingly begin to read Louisa May Alcott’s novel. And like generations of girls before me, I fall in love with funny, feisty Jo and weep when Beth dies. Like Jo, I try to be good, but I have big dreams that distract me from my daily duties. Jo voices my own secret desires when she tells her sisters that she wants to do “something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten when I’m dead. I don’t know what, but I’m on the watch for it and mean to astonish you all someday” (172). My mother keeps me steadily supplied with “underground” literature—girls’ books—and while I feign disinterest, she is right. I do love these books, all of them: Alcott’s sequels to *Little Women*; Anne Frank’s diary; *Jane*

Eyre, Willa Cather's complete works. At fourteen, I ask my ninth-grade English teacher if we will be reading Cather, but her face tells me she has never heard of my current favorite. I will have to wait twenty years, until graduate school, before I can talk about Cather in school.

While coming of age, my reading life is thus split between school reading and private reading, but it is women's literature that feeds my soul. It also confuses me. Many of the books my mother gives me glorify goodness, duty, and romance, but in the world outside those books, it is the early 1970s. Everybody says "do your own thing" and "if it feels good, do it." My own mother tells me I should never depend on a man to support me: "Go to college, be self-sufficient, so when you do marry, you won't be financially dependent." I agree wholeheartedly, but I am swept away by the romance in my books, which tell me, like Jo March's mother tells her, that "to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman" (118). I am calling myself a feminist at fourteen, buying *Ms.* magazine, reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and watching the horizon for the appearance of Mr. Rochester.

Nietzsche was right; all writing is autobiographical in some sense, regardless of the explicit subject matter and regardless of whether we call it fact or fiction. We write to extend our love affair with an idea or image, or we write to understand something we have experienced, directly or indirectly. The author of a book on "geek culture" tells a radio interviewer that in his youth he was smart and different, and thus ostracized. His book about the subculture of technologically savvy "geeks" is a recovery effort aimed at rescuing the image of people like himself in mainstream culture.¹ T. S. Eliot certainly wrote in part to prove his worthiness in elite British literary circles with whom he desperately wanted to be associated. Virginia Woolf's anger at her exclusion from membership in that same club is woven into much of her prose.² Simone de Beauvoir's massive study, *The Second Sex*, was called into being by its author's knowledge of her own status as Other. And my study is no different.³ Its origins are in my own coming of age and the confusion I felt about what it means to be a woman. Faced with conflicting narratives of womanhood, none of which are explicitly spelled out, I committed many social blunders but eventually (well into adulthood) reconciled myself to being a walking contradiction. Still, there was—and is—great pressure on all of us to create order out of chaos and to present ourselves coherently. The world wants to know how to interact with us, and it does not know how to address itself to individuals who signal multiple or oppositional identities. The imperative to develop a coherent identity that meshes with society's

dominant ideologies is unspoken, but individuals who transgress cultural norms are quickly brought into line or ostracized. This dynamic reaches critical mass in adolescence, when individuals in the West are tacitly expected to coalesce their identities and complete the journey to a unified selfhood. Given the social pressure to conform, I began to wonder how an individual could find the courage and power to resist culturally sanctioned roles. More specifically, I wanted to understand how girls become women and how they cope with the conflict between their own desires and the social repression of women's desire. Though I came of age as the second-wave women's movement was gaining a foothold in American culture, I did not then believe that these conflicts mattered in any significant sense. Born too late for consciousness-raising groups, and too early to take our equality for granted, women of my generation, race, and class assumed we would go to college and "do" something, but we struggled with conflicting ideologies of femininity. We did not hide our achievement around boys, but we were thought pushy if we took the initiative in dating. We got the culture's messages about free love, but when we acted on them we were sluts. We were expected to excel, but quietly and passively. Worst of all, we did not talk to each other about these issues in the way that women ten years older than us did, as serious discourse about the place of women in Western society remained cloistered in relatively remote (from our adolescent lives) locations. Like our mothers, we did not know that other girls felt the same confusion and discontent that we did, leaving many of us convinced that we were aberrations.

My mother enrolled in college when I was coming of age, and I watched as she transformed into a blue-jean-wearing undergraduate who plunged into the history of American slavery because she had been profoundly moved by the civil rights struggle as it took shape in the late 1940s and 50s, when she was coming of age. Still unable to resist a book, I read much of what she read. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. *Manchild in the Promised Land*. *Soul on Ice*. I could not have articulated it then, but I was drawn to these texts because they showed me that I was not the only one who felt out of step with my culture. More than that, I learned that there were literally millions of alienated human beings in America who, for a variety of reasons not of their own making, did not flourish in mainstream society. But their stories—and my own—stayed on the sidelines of the American master narrative. The autobiographical texts that form the basis of my argument here thematize the cultural alienation and confusion that continue to resonate for me, leading me to ask how writers are able to overcome the socially determining limits faced by American women.

Stories of resistance and difference have always been in circulation, but they are typically silenced in public discourse because they fail to invoke the universal subject of liberal humanism. In general, narrative knowledge is delegitimated in Western societies when it fails to conform to the empirical knowledge that has been valorized historically by elite white males. Thus, the stories and experiences of everyone else have been suppressed by those who control the terms and conditions of scientific discourses. But as Jean-François Lyotard argues, the rules of empirical knowledge are established in a circular, self-referential fashion, so finally “there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts” (29). While the knowledge that is disseminated through narration is often dismissed by dominant ideology, for women and other socially marginalized groups traditionally excluded from socially sanctioned forms of learning, narrative has been the primary means of sharing the knowledge that is necessary for survival. Lyotard calls narration the “quintessential form of customary knowledge” in that it inscribes a society’s criteria for cultural competence, and allows its members to determine the validity and performance of any given narrative (19–20). By means of narrative and anecdote, for instance, women have shared their unquestionably empirical knowledge of childbirth with each other and subsequent generations, though the validity of that knowing has often been ignored or dismissed in male-sanctioned medical discourse.

In the West, we have privileged the consensus of empirical experts’ knowledge at least since the Enlightenment, and this consensus dismisses narrative knowledge as unverifiable and therefore worthless. Lyotard contends that narration helps create and sustain social bonds, unlike scientific knowledge, which is “no longer a direct and shared component of the bond” (25). Certainly, it is more than mere coincidence that groups who rely on narrative to create knowledge have been constructed as primitive or inferior by groups that seek to control knowledge by subjecting it to scientific proofs. Oral cultures and groups, traditionally excluded from elite education, have been subjected to the cultural imperialism of scientists who dismiss narrative knowledge as unverifiable through argumentation or proofs, and therefore not genuine. Such cultures are subsequently classified, according to Lyotard, as different: “savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children. At best, attempts are made to throw some rays of light into this obscurantism, to civilize, educate, develop” (27). Lyotard argues, however, that scientific and nar-

rative knowledges are each judged by a separate set of governing rules, and that the validity of one kind of knowledge cannot be judged by the rules of the other (26). Moreover, Lyotard correctly contends that scientific knowledge cannot prove its superior position as the “true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all” (29). In other words, in addition to presenting the requisite proofs and argumentation, scientific discourse—ironically—necessarily includes narration as it builds a case for its own superiority. Additionally, to qualify as true learning, scientific knowledge must present a coherent narrative without gaps or contradictions that might be construed as false proofs or faulty argumentation, and in this sense, scientific knowledge enjoys a symbiotic relationship with liberal humanist selfhood, which posits a similarly seamless account of the autonomous individual. But, as Lyotard contends, echoing John Donne’s 1624 *Devotion*, “no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before” (15).⁴

Women have always understood identity as complex and interconnected, and we have historically relied on narrative to convey our contradictory, contingent truths and to foster that human connectedness. As Alison Jaggar wryly suggests, women never would have devised the liberal humanist account of identity with its conception of individual autonomy and its valorization of the mind over the body which sanctioned a division of labor that allowed a few elite males to concentrate on mental activity while everyone else attended to the quotidian, physical necessities of everyday life. Furthermore, argues Jaggar, “[i]t is even harder to imagine women developing a political theory that presupposed political solipsism, ignoring human interdependence and especially the long dependence of human young” (46). The story of human connection in Western societies, “the other side of the story” in Molly Hite’s phrase, has been told by women and, for most of history, in private. Furthermore, the relatively few women’s narratives that did gain public recognition have been viewed as if they were merely a mimetic transfer of the author’s life into text (Hite, *Other Side* 13). As Michel Foucault has argued, every member of a society knows the “rules of exclusion”—the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (“Discourse” 216). Because women’s discourses were potentially dangerous to the continued dominance of Western liberal ideology, women’s narratives and texts have been carefully regulated to allow for

inclusion only those accounts that confirm dominant ideology. The medieval definition of madness exemplifies Foucault's understanding of how exclusionary practices work: "a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered null and void, without truth or significance" (216). We need only substitute the word "woman" for "man" in Foucault's formulation to find a profound description of the place of women in Western culture, for while a madman might reverse his exclusion by reinscribing dominant ideology, a woman who shifts course and voices the same discourse is still "just" a woman. Her discourse can never be that of the "common discourse of men." For Foucault, discursive exclusion relies on institutional reinforcement from schools, the publishing industry, and other practices to police its borders and "exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse" (219). The exclusion of women's experiences and points of view from public discourses is the direct result of these institutional pressures that have silenced the experiences of women and other marginalized groups. Women's knowledges remained largely underground, dispersed, because they were publicly constructed as insignificant for failing to reflect universal truths. And what was true for women's experiences was, in turn, reflected in social attitudes toward the experience of girls. Nothing in female experience resonated with the common discourse until very recently in history, and so it has been defined as insignificant.

Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we might agree with James Weldon Johnson that a great deal has been said about "the heart of a girl" as she makes the transition into womanhood. We have witnessed nothing short of a revolutionary shift in paradigm about women in American society in the last forty years as nearly every assumption about women has undergone intensive scrutiny, questioning, and reassessment. But in 1912, when *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* appeared, the details and meanings of a girl's passage from childhood to womanhood held significance primarily in the circumscribed private domestic sphere inhabited by women. Denigrated for lacking universal values and consigned to the sentimental realm, literary texts focused on girls' coming-of-age issues received scant public or scholarly attention before the final decades of the twentieth century.⁵ A great many assumptions lie at the core of this ancient silence; the idea that woman is an uncomplicated being whose life course is dictated by biology and nature has been argued and defended by thinkers from Aristotle to Freud and beyond. Indeed, this is *the* master narrative of womanhood in Western society and it carries the weight and authority of more than two thousand years of philo-

sophical and scientific traditions. Yet in spite of that tradition, the lives of American women have changed more radically in the last forty years than in any other comparable period in history. This sea change became possible because women not only *imagined* a changed social landscape, in Raymond Williams's terms, they also took action to overcome the "determining limits" of white patriarchal capitalist hegemony (86). In Carolyn G. Heilbrun's view, the task of her generation of feminists has been more "to dismantle the past than to imagine the future" (72), but articulation of women's lives under patriarchy could not avoid imagining alternate ways of being.⁶ The work of imagination and deep social change has reached every sector of American life where women exist, from the small consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s to organized activist groups to rigorous scholarship in the academy, and while there continues to be vocal, sometimes violent resistance to the increased social and political power women wield, there is little question that feminism has succeeded in changing American culture. To all appearances, *this* women's movement has created lasting social change. Even the most strident enemies of feminism acknowledge by their energetic attacks its far-reaching impact and influence—even acceptance—but I find myself returning again and again to the narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and his comparison of male and female coming-of-age experiences. It might be easy to dismiss his statement as a typically male view of womanhood, but I wonder if Johnson has in fact articulated what women themselves feel. *Little Women's* Jo March wants desperately to be a boy because she understands that adventure and power belong to males while women must be content with "working and waiting."⁷ But even in the twentieth century, Maxine Hong Kingston writes of her longing to be a boy, that her parents might take pride in her achievements. I can dismiss the first part of Johnson's statement—"A great deal has been said about the heart of a girl when she stands 'where the brook and river meet'"—as the dubious assertion of an earlier age, but it is much more difficult to dismiss what immediately follows in Johnson's text: the narrator's assertion that "what she feels is negative" puzzles and angers me simultaneously. Do most girls feel negatively about becoming women? What is the cause and nature of that negativity? What *does* it mean to become a woman in twentieth-century America?

These are the foundational questions of my study, and while I cannot claim to answer them empirically or definitively, I have undertaken the work in part to take issue with the continued devaluation of girls and women in American culture, which also grounds the implicit assumption in some feminist theory that a negative view of womanhood *by women* is "natural" and

understandable given the many restrictions and the suppression of self that are ostensibly unavoidable when a girl comes of age. While it has been politically necessary and expedient (in order to force social change) to highlight the ways and means of women's oppression, chapter and verse, here I will argue that in spite of the unquestionably repressive culture faced by American women of all backgrounds throughout history, female writers of what I call the coming-of-age narrative resist negative constructions of womanhood and actively create oppositional identities for themselves. In order to create such an identity, however, the writer must also reject conventional literary genres, whose ideologies make the construction of alternative identities impossible.⁸ Instead, women writers created a specific type of text—the coming-of-age narrative—that subverts traditional literary forms in order to construct new forms of subjectivity and resist the male-defined discourse of womanhood.⁹ While it would be naive to ignore the ambivalence with which many girls have approached a future of performing a socially acceptable American womanhood, which Annie Dillard compares to a living death, in the coming chapters I will argue that girls do not suffer gladly the inevitable march to their socially mandated adult roles. As powerful as the master narratives might be, they are riddled with contradictions and outright lies, a fact recognized and exploited by female American memoir writers as they resist hegemonic interpellations and attempt to claim a degree of agency while still acknowledging the ineluctable social contexts that help determine their identities. Moreover, it is apparent that women who write coming-of-age narratives construct these oppositional subjectivities only in retrospect. In other words, the act of writing one's coming-of-age experience is also the act of ordering the conflicts and confusions—even chaos—related to the construction of identity in adolescence, a feat not easily accomplished *in medias res*. Women who write coming-of-age narratives construct discursive selves actively engaged with American ideologies of womanhood in its myriad manifestations. In addition, these texts violate the traditional boundaries of autobiography and fiction by subverting the reader's desire for coherent narratives that clearly signal their status as either truth or fiction and that will reinscribe and verify a unified selfhood. By fusing and blending narrative devices, these texts use language and the act of narration to challenge hegemonic constructions of identity and womanhood, and create a form of what Catherine Belsey has termed the "interrogative" text, which positions the author as a contingent, contradictory subject and raises more questions than it answers for the reader (91). While realist texts present a fixed identity that reinforces the reader's identification with the universal subject, the interrogative text calls

forth a reader who is similarly alienated from dominant discourse and who identifies with a fluid, often contradictory subject position. As Leigh Gilmore writes of postmodern autobiographical practices, these texts constitute a “site of identity production . . . that both resist and produce cultural identities” (4). Moreover, these sites of identity production are constantly shifting, and privilege contingent subjectivities by refusing to repress discourses that contradict the assertion of autonomous selfhood. The coming-of-age narrative foregrounds the pain and confusion that accompanies a conflicted subject position—we all want to *belong*, somehow, to a culture that recognizes only the coherent subject as normal—but these texts argue that normality is, in the end, chimerical. And that insight is finally productive of power and agency for women. By focusing on adolescence, by definition a time of rebellion and resistance, and by foregrounding contradictory desires and discourses, the coming-of-age narrative provides a congenial form for women writers to successfully question the power of dominant ideologies to construct their lives.

The proliferation of second-wave feminism, as well as critical theory’s movement toward poststructuralism, has helped to encourage and validate a massive increase in the publication of women’s narratives. However, with few exceptions, previous studies implicitly view women (to recast Sartre’s famous critique of Marxism) as if their lives began with their first romance, or with marriage. Even those studies that focus on the female *Bildungsroman*, such as Rachel Blau du Plessis’s work on the narrative strategies of twentieth-century women writers and Barbara White’s work on fictional representations of female adolescence, often focus on the teleology of adolescent quest, rather than with the childhood that preceded it. Indeed, the most influential studies to date have mainly been concerned with fictional representations of women’s lives, and use autobiographical and other nonfiction texts of women writers primarily to bolster their claims. Furthermore, previous studies have argued that quest and romance are rendered mutually exclusive in women’s literature, and implicitly suggest that romance always forecloses quest. In contrast, many coming-of-age narratives refuse the either/or opposition, insisting instead that romance *and* quest are entirely compatible, and thus valorize *both* the self-in-relation and individual quest. My intention is to broaden the scope of literary and cultural analysis of women’s lives by focusing on the transition from childhood to womanhood as it is constructed in autobiography and memoir. And because there is a deeply ingrained tendency to read autobiography as unproblematically truthful, I make extensive use of feminist poststructuralist theory, which

suggests that, while experience plays a major role in determining what sort of woman the child becomes, what is critical is how she creates meaning from those experiences from the discourses available to her *when she writes*. The Freudian narrative of so-called normal femininity is regularly challenged in twentieth-century coming-of-age narratives, as is the conception of an essential womanhood (defined as self-in-relation) offered by liberal feminist interventions such as that of Belenky, et al. While these texts do lend credence to poststructuralist theories of subjectivity as a process, they repeatedly assert the primacy of experience as producer of truth. But truth here is a local and specific truth; few female autobiographers in any historical era have rhetorically suggested that theirs are universal stories. Furthermore, most of the writers in my study tacitly recognize the unstable nature of truth.

These texts demonstrate how twentieth-century autobiography constitutes a sphere in which the dominant American ideologies of womanhood are frequently and radically challenged and profoundly revised. While I do argue that all writing is autobiographical in some sense, and further that texts identified as autobiography are nonetheless fictions constructed by the writer to make “sense” of her life, these narratives present a far more complex picture of female gender formation and practices than that found in most fiction precisely because of the ideological restrictions of fictional forms. And while I would agree with du Plessis that the twentieth century has seen a shift in the teleology of women’s lives as depicted in fiction, I argue further that many autobiographies go beyond simply *imagining* a different life trajectory for women—they show women *living* it, full of contradictions, but effectively resisting society’s scripts for women.

RECREATING WOMANHOOD

My goal is to build on a growing body of scholarship that deals with the construction of womanhood by analyzing the ways in which subjectivity and identity¹⁰ are constructed in twentieth-century American coming-of-age narratives by women. While these texts do provide evidence that growing up female in America is still a sometimes painful experience, they also demonstrate a great diversity of experience, much of which is joyful and gives lie to the considerably flattened and simplistic view of women’s lives expressed most memorably by Sigmund Freud in his exasperated question: “What do women want?” Freud arrogantly answered his own question at great length,

assuming he was more qualified than women themselves to answer the question; Virginia Woolf imagined Freud writing on women as “labouring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it that did not satisfy him; he must go on killing it” (31), and contends that only by calling women inferior could he see himself as superior (35). Women’s own narratives of coming of age answer Freud’s question quite differently than he did; any acceptance of a “lack” based on gender is entirely missing from these memoirs, although their authors certainly recognize that, as women, they are perceived as inferior by American society. Instead, these narratives often reflect the widening horizons for women in American culture and a strong resistance to normative femininity; female quest takes many forms, and successful resistance to gender norms becomes possible and even acceptable, if still sometimes unconscious or covert. Du Plessis argues that when women as a group are successful in questioning social gender norms, female quest narratives in novels will no longer routinely resolve in marriage or death for the heroine (4). In the memoirs I examine in the chapters ahead, there is a consistent thematization of quest in lives that span the twentieth century, but here, unlike in the novels discussed by du Plessis, narrative choices are not finally limited by the romance plot. I suggest then that the narrative choices in fictional accounts of women’s lives have been far more constricted than those found in women’s coming-of-age narratives.

Women autobiographers are no freer from gender norm pressures than their fictional counterparts, but their narratives resist the suppression and limitations of their opportunities and choices, and this resistance is ultimately productive. In addition, the arguably artificial boundaries between fiction and autobiography produce a paradoxical reader reaction; we are less forgiving of seemingly unlikely events or attitudes in fiction, but in a nonfiction text there is a greater suspension of disbelief, allowing the writer greater latitude in the construction of truth. Of course, in real life, preposterous (or what Nancy Miller would call “implausible”) events and coincidences do indeed occur, but as readers we have more structured expectations of fictional plot movement and character behavior.¹¹ This phenomenon may explain why female autobiographers construct themselves as less restricted in life choices than their fictional counterparts, even at this late date. Although she did not write an autobiography, Louisa May Alcott will serve as an example of this point. Alcott never married, choosing instead to support her parents and sisters through her writing, while she does not (or cannot) allow her fictional alter-ego, Jo March in *Little Women*, to break with social norms. Indeed, Jo is

persuaded to give up her career of writing adventurous “sensation” stories so that she may become a more suitable wife in her fiancé’s eyes. Alcott’s life was more complex than this brief rendering suggests, but the point is that while women might commonly live lives that do not measure up to the mythic norm, their fictional narratives suggest much less room to negotiate gender norms than actually exist. While this might suggest the writers are exhibiting classic false consciousness, I see this pattern as an example of counterhegemony at work. Raymond Williams defines hegemony as a complex concept of political and cultural dominance, gained through an ongoing process of consent,¹² and argues that the window for resistance to hegemony lies in the imagination of individuals (86). Thus, by imagining an altered view of the self, the individual reclaims agency and resists society’s interpellation. And, as Barbara Bellow Watson contends, women’s literature enacts the abstract politics of womanhood through highly specified characters, contexts, and meanings (112). The writers considered here do not consciously set out to reimagine womanhood, but in carving out space for alternative subjectivities, they are rewriting the social scripts allotted to women.

My purpose then is to examine the ways women from a variety of backgrounds construct their subjectivity in their coming-of-age narratives. Following a theoretical thread on the nature of subjectivity beginning with Hegel and Marx and continuing through the feminist poststructuralist revisions offered by critics such as Chris Weedon and Patricia Waugh, I argue that the texts of women’s coming-of-age narratives contest the tenacious hold of the liberal humanist notion of self on Western notions of subjectivity. Implicitly and explicitly, these texts assert that the self does not exist outside of language, historical context, or culture, and they echo Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that women are made, not born (301).¹³ Yet, coming-of-age narratives also assert the embodiedness of identity, often through an apparently unconscious search for bodily knowledge. The physiological changes of female puberty seem to work against the cultural pressure to ignore the body, resulting in a notable bodily presence in the narratives I examine here. A woman’s understanding of her identity and how she came to be the person she is, as related in these narratives, generally resists socially determined roles and life trajectories, if sometimes in less than forthright ways. This is in marked contrast to women’s writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the hegemony exerted great pressure on girls who longed to “jump at the sun,” in Zora Neale Hurston’s phrase (*Dust* 21), to come back into line and fulfill their womanly destiny as defined by social and cultural norms.¹⁴ Further, the texts I consider here refuse the overdetermined sub-

jectivity suggested by Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) as well as later poststructuralist assertions that pronounced the "death of the author." Considered as a body of texts, twentieth-century women's narratives argue that it does indeed matter who wrote the life being examined and that the writer's agency is a given while simultaneously acknowledging that gender and other subject positions are socially constructed. This view is no less ideological than the one that burdened previous generations of women writers, but it does modify the strict opposition of individual agency and constructed identity, a significant move toward the self-determination called for by the women's movement. American women's coming-of-age narratives demonstrate the complexity and infinite diversity of American women's lives; once we read them, we realize it is nearly impossible to essentialize women as long as their stories are told—and heard.

Furthermore, these texts evince a complex subjectivity which cannot ultimately be reduced to archetypes or to a single philosophical stance. The liberal humanist paradigm of human nature retains a tight grip on Western culture, if these texts are any indication, because most reflect the cultural imperative to fix subjectivity and produce noncontradictory narratives of selfhood. While race and sex theoretically should not figure in the liberal notion of human 'essence', in practice these discourses and others do indeed work to fix subjectivity. Some autobiographies will inadvertently encourage a reader to interpret the subject's identity through a single lens, resulting in, for example, Elizabeth Wurtzel's subjectivity seeming to originate in her clinical depression in *Prozac Nation* (1994); likewise, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* seems to suggest that his subjectivity is determined by race. The implications of their titles aside, Wurtzel and Wright both actively resist narrow identities as, respectively, a "depressive" and a "black boy" with all the cultural baggage those terms imply. Both seek to deepen their subjectivity through assertions of intelligence and multiple subject positions beyond the ones suggested by their titles. However, adolescence—coming of age—is by definition a time when identity is fluid and contradictory, and thus provides solid evidence for the notion of constructed subjectivity. And, as I argue in detail later, while there is the appearance of fixed subjectivity in the texts, readers, as well as the autobiographers themselves, deconstruct and reconstruct the subject in light of what Norman Holland calls their own "identity theme" (815). Thus, while there might be a sense of coherent subjectivity on the part of the autobiographer at the time of writing, readers reinterpret the text in light of the immediate cultural context in which they read, creating additional opportunities for subversive or alternate meanings.

Although philosophy and the social sciences can provide literary analysis with useful insights, it is difficult to use social theory unproblematically to analyze women's coming-of-age narratives since it tends to describe human development in prototypes and universals that invariably reflect normative male development. But even for male development, psychology theory makes broad assumptions about class, race, and ethnicity, which results in partial insights and a great many caveats. Nonetheless, I will make limited use of psychological theory in the coming chapters to pinpoint the discursive practices that create the boundaries and teleologies of coming of age in a particular time and place. In part, my analysis is modeled on the aims of contemporary anthropology, which is to say that my intent is to describe the specificity of cultural experience through the examination of coming-of-age narratives. These texts are what Clifford Geertz defines as "first-order" interpretations—the creator of the text is playing the part of the "native" in cultural anthropology, and in that role, she lays claim to being the primary and privileged interpreter of her experience. But it is important to emphasize that the writer's role in narrating her own life is an *interpretive* one; even she has no direct access to the "truth." As a literary critic, then, I am here creating second- or even third-order interpretations (15). Applying Geertz's framework of ethnography to the study of the coming-of-age narrative encourages a healthy, respectful stance to the exercise and, most important, privileges the *interpretation* of experience rendered by the autobiographer. While I will offer an analysis of subject construction in a number of texts, I will attempt to do so from an "actor orientation" in order to understand—and interpret—the social, political, and historical forces that help the narrator to construct her identity and subjectivity in particular ways. Geertz points out that this is ultimately an unattainable goal, but a necessary foundation for doing ethical and informed ethnography—and by extension, interpreting narratives of real peoples' lives. Mindful of Rabinow's critique of Geertz's removal of himself as subject in his ethnographic writings, I have provided what I hope is a sufficient sense of the "identity theme" that I bring to my readings of these narratives. I choose them (or they chose me) because, in one way or another, each reflects some aspect of my own experience, so in attempting to make sense of the meaning of the texts, I am also creating meaning of my own experiences.¹⁵

Having defined a distinct genre of American women's literature that I call the coming-of-age narrative, I will explore the implications of my argument in the context of the current debate on identity politics in the academy. As Linda Martín Alcoff notes, "[t]he constitutive power of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other forms of identity has, finally, suddenly, been

recognized as a relevant aspect of almost all projects of inquiry” (*Who’s*), and thus, the fact that the narratives I have discussed here provide evidence of the social construction of subjectivity is hardly a radical assertion at this historical moment. But I want to argue that, for women writers, the coming-of-age narrative constitutes an alternative literary form that allows the writer to claim agency in the construction of her identity, while also acknowledging the role of social discourses in determining subjectivity. Because these texts often deny the distinction between fiction and fact as key to the truth value of a text, the coming-of-age narrative is a genre that resists discourses that fail to describe the writer’s knowledge and experience by subverting the ideological premises of traditional literary genres. In other words, the conventional plots, characters, themes, and ideological bases of fiction and autobiography are revised or erased in the coming-of-age narrative, which allows the writer to inscribe an alternative subjectivity and reclaim agency in defining herself. The writer’s self-definition arises from direct experience in the world as well as from the discursive formations specific to her historic location, and these narratives strongly affirm the role of experience in identity formation. Arguing against the notion that experience is a direct source of truth, the coming-of-age narrative demonstrates the ways in which the meaning of experience is mediated, not only by ideology but also by other experience. Identity is thus conceived of as cumulative, with each experience mediated by everything that has come before and subject later to reinterpretation in light of new experiences.

Furthermore, while I have carefully avoided making generalizations about women’s lives in my readings of these texts, by locating the coming-of-age narrative in texts across race, class, and time, I implicitly suggest that commonalities do exist. More specifically, the central ideological assumption of the coming-of-age narrative is that identity is created in the context of human relationships. All acknowledge the power and pressure of social norms, but the specific norms vary according to the writer’s historical and cultural location. There is, therefore, no monolithic femininity invoked in the coming-of-age narrative, but rather, many versions of femininity, which are highly specified within racial, class, and ethnic discourses. Often, too, a girl coming of age will have to contend with the discourses of womanhood as it is defined within her community, as well the definitions imposed from outside. What remains, then, when all the historically and socially specific factors eliminate the possibility of essentializing what it means to become a woman in America, is a self that, like other selves, “you find through love and through your relations with family and friends” (Culler 115).

The credit for this view of subjectivity and identity formation belongs to feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow, who have been subject to much criticism in recent years for purportedly essentializing women but whose description of female development has not only evolved into the master narrative of womanhood—it has gained widespread currency across the gender divide as well. Before feminists described the ways in which women construct identity, the master narrative of American identity held that the individual is autonomous and that identity is inherent within each person; the world of relationships and ideas was irrelevant to the nature of the true self. Imperceptibly, however, the master narrative has radically shifted to valorizing the self-in-relation to such a degree that it has become hegemonic. Women continue to be held accountable for their ability to nurture relationships, and if a woman does not define herself in terms of her relationships (wife, mother, daughter, friend), she runs the risk of being an “unnatural” woman (or worse). Increasingly, however, public discourse is acknowledging the centrality of relationships for American men as well. But while American culture periodically suffers spasms of backlash against the “feminization” of selfhood, through comic jabs at the “sensitive” male who is in touch with his feminine side, and through the attempts of some feminists to divest themselves of any vestiges of traditional signs of femininity, the discourse has changed. In her 1999 study of American men, Susan Faludi argues that the grand narratives of American manhood evinced an opposition between

the vision of the man who stood apart from society and the man who was a part of society; the loner was not the ideal. The “Indian Fighter” was ultimately a homesteader. Daniel Boone was not simply a tale of a frontiersman taming the world with his rifle and his knife. Essential to the myth of his journey into the wilderness was his return from it to retrieve his family and establish a new community (10).

Unable to live according to the myth that has been handed down to them, American men are, according to Faludi, deeply alienated and disillusioned. The myth has worked to isolate men from the people most likely to care for and about them while simultaneously encouraging them to devote their “true” selves to the public world of work. Yet men who have given the best of who they are to faceless corporate entities too often find that their loyalty is not returned. Having thus neglected self-in-relation in favor of self-isolation, many American men feel, as Faludi puts it, stifled.

Related to the recognition that men have been as alienated as women by the myths of the autonomous individual is a trend in popular psychology that is concerned with the nurturance of boys in American culture. In his 1999 book *Raising Cain*, Daniel J. Kindlon argues that boys are harmed by the cultural perception that their primary developmental task is to separate from relationship and establish themselves as independent, self-sufficient individuals. As a result, boys are emotionally conflicted because, according to Kindlon, a great need for connection clashes with a boy's recognition that he is expected to sever his dependence on relationships (3).¹⁶ The current assumption about manhood is that, to be healthy, it must be nurtured through a variety of relationships, including those with women, beginning with the mother. Though I do not argue that this account constitutes a universal narrative on manhood, it has gained cultural capital in the past twenty years, and there is little public debate about its merits. Counterhegemonic discourse on identity formation has thus become hegemonic, and evidence for its dominance can be found in the fact that many male coming-of-age narratives written in the latter part of the twentieth century thematize the self as constructed in relationship.

But in an article for *The Nation*, Patrick Smith critiques what he considers the excesses of contemporary memoirs, calling the worst of them "intellectual frauds" for valorizing the private realm at the expense of what he considers the much more valuable public realm. Smith produces only women's texts as examples of memoirs that "privatize" history and "refus[e] the challenge of unburying the past as it really was," and thus he reproduces the ancient critiques of women's literature. In other words, Smith argues that by articulating the private realm, women writers do "violence" to history. But Smith praises *Angela's Ashes* and other (mostly male) texts for their "dedication to public discourse . . . or to some object or event outside the self. . . . The power of [*Angela's Ashes*] lies in its account of an emerging consciousness—a universal experience that is rarely articulated well." The traditional critiques of women's texts are, in other words, alive and well, even in ostensibly left-wing periodicals. Smith's definition of the correct purpose of autobiography as that of articulating the "emerging consciousness" *within* public discourse is limited and limiting in its notion of what constitutes consciousness, and it is resisted in both male and female coming-of-age narratives. To suggest that consciousness is significant only in the context of public discourse is to deny the constitutive element of the vastly more influential private world of relationship. The world of the child and adolescent is almost by definition private, and it is during this time that

most individuals consolidate and define the major elements of their identities. In other words, to recast the example that Smith finds exemplary, *Angela's Ashes* follows the emerging consciousness of a boy within the context of the domestic sphere of family relations, and gradually widens the scope of that consciousness as McCourt enters the adult world. Indeed, the very title of McCourt's text—referring to his mother—is suggestive of the critical determining influence of human connection upon identity construction.

In my view, the problem lies in the fact that the canonically exemplary coming-of-age narrative of the socially isolated and alienated individual is rarely successful. Huck Finn's coming of age is arrested because finally he is unable to reconstitute the self in light of his experiences. At the end of the narrative, Jim has joined his family, and Huck is left standing on the margins of society, attempting to persuade himself that a solitary life in the territories is preferable to the comforts and supports of human company. And Holden Caulfield, that other archetypal American literary male, has a mental breakdown because the prospect of being emotionally self-sufficient is simply too painful—the expectation that he do so creates an untenable inner conflict. The autonomous individual is profoundly alone and lonely. In contrast, women, who have long labored under the expectation that they *must* cultivate relationships to the exclusion of all else, have created a rite of passage in the coming-of-age narrative that refuses the binary opposition and recognizes the multivalent desires of the individual—for relationship *and* for agency.

In order to contextualize my argument, in the next chapter I provide a brief overview of the significance of women's narratives in the American feminist movement. In my view, the core issue at the heart of all feminist scholarship and activism is the struggle over female subjectivity, and so I have situated my analysis in Western philosophical theories of the subject in order to trace the origins of current autobiographical practices. Women's political activism has been deeply informed by and responsive to the Enlightenment ideal of selfhood, and consequently, autobiographical texts by women political activists, artists, and scholars have contributed significantly to dismantling that ideal.

In the third chapter, I examine the evolution of adolescence as a concept in American culture generally, and in American literature specifically. Recognized as a distinct phase of development only in the last century, adolescence and its specific features are now the focus of greatly detailed study in certain fields, most notably in psychology. Until very recently, most such studies have used male models as the norm and, as a result, their findings are often

of limited use in understanding female development. I also review an anthropological perspective of adolescence, beginning with Margaret Mead's influential study of Samoan culture. Although her work has become highly controversial, I borrow from her methods (albeit lightly) and that of more recent anthropological theory to widen the lens in my analysis of literary texts. Finally, I explore the idea of "coming of age" as it occurs in literature beginning with the *Bildungsroman*, and the ways in which women writers have altered the traditional genre to reflect diverse patterns of development. The aims of *Bildungsroman* and autobiography converge in the latter part of the twentieth century, resulting in blurred genre distinctions and a radically revised narrative structure. I offer my views of what coming of age means, and argue that the proliferation of its treatment in American letters provides a useful indicator of the changing conceptions of identity.

Next, I turn to Annie Dillard's 1987 *An American Childhood* and Anne Moody's 1968 *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. While these texts are radically different in form and content, their authors from opposite ends of the social spectrum in terms of privilege and social standing, I have chosen to discuss them in tandem to highlight how those differences function in an autobiographical text and indeed might serve to determine its form. As Sidonie Smith has written, Dillard's very title seems to invoke a universal subjectivity with the modifier "American" attached to another general category, "childhood" (*Subjectivity* 131). Dillard makes a seemingly transparent assumption that she is describing a universal version of childhood, an observation borne out in the text by numerous references to what "any" child feels or experiences, but also contradicted by a richly specific textual self. Following Smith's observation, I argue then that, in contrast, Moody's title invokes a highly specified subjectivity, placing her text/life story in a particular locale, and thus creating specific expectations in the reader. Unlike Dillard, who writes that she "slid into [herself] perfectly fitted" (11), Moody slides into herself and finds the fit uncomfortable and ill-sized. The pain and conflict that accompany her attempts to create an identity she is comfortable with are never fully resolved in her text, and she remains an unfinished subject to a greater degree than is evident in traditional autobiographies. Indeed, the coming-of-age narrative is distinguished in part by a provisional subjectivity forged in ideological conflicts and subject to change as a direct result of subsequent experiences.

Chapter 4 considers the problem of genre boundaries and truth in autobiography in my discussion of Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1955) and two texts by Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). McCarthy answers anticipated

questions about the reliability of memory through the use of italicized passages in which she deconstructs her narrative, and explicitly admits to using the conventions of fiction to fill in the gaps. In contrast, Hurston's autobiography is, according to Robert Hemenway, full of unacknowledged lies, while *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is widely understood to be an "autobiographical" novel that is revealing of aspects of Hurston's life about which she remained silent in *Dust Tracks*. These texts raise complex questions about the writer's obligation to be truthful, and the complementary problem of how, as readers, we ought to address the unavoidable gaps and silences (in Macherey's terms) of any autobiography.

In chapter 6, I discuss the conflicts and issues surrounding the hybridization of identities—national, ethnic, religious—that are the hallmark of many immigrant coming-of-age autobiographies. The tension and confusion that accompany a child's negotiation of her parents' identity with an "American" identity results in a particular and specific journey through adolescence that differs substantially from that of a child whose parents' national/ethnic identity is not in flux. The autobiographical text of a first-generation American girl is deeply informed by the conflicts between two cultures in addition to the contradictions already inherent in a single culture. In addition to the usual host of identity issues that beset a girl as she comes of age, she must also negotiate the difficult terrain of ethnic subjectivity. Textual representations of these issues are as varied as the number of combinations of cultures possible, and while I do not suggest that the texts I have chosen for this discussion are necessarily representative of all such autobiographies, they do illustrate the specific difficulties of identity formation in the context of major cultural differences. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) begins with her mother saying, "You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you," thus setting the stage for Kingston's difficult lessons in the secrecy and silence surrounding women's lives that is typical of Chinese culture in opposition to the relative openness of American culture. Kingston's text juxtaposes myth and realistic narrative as a formal device that highlights the conflicting discourses and ideologies she negotiates in the process of constructing a workable identity. Kate Simon's 1982 *Bronx Primitive* also exhibits the tensions inherent in immigrant subjectivity, but where Kingston is sometimes paralyzed by the conflicts between Chinese and American norms, Simon quickly learns to take advantage of the contradictions in order to do as she pleases, even though she is initially confused by the contradictory messages of her parents and the wider society. As she grows older, she flatly rejects much of the Old World interpellation of Jewish female subjectivity

offered by her parents. Furthermore, *Bronx Primitive* provides a reasonably explicit model of Williams's model of imagining agency, and the ways in which naming the contradictions in ideology allows for resistance to the norm.

Arguing that the construction of identity varies according to the particular historical moment of the events narrated (but perhaps more importantly, the moment of writing), I interrogate the construction of female identity in the coming-of-age narrative. The institutions, practices, and prevailing hegemony at the time of writing exert certain limits on what the writer can and cannot say, and on what discourses of womanhood will be tolerated. While I would not argue that the decisions a girl makes in adolescence will determine the woman she will become in any permanent sense, the process of coming of age does involve examining one's choices and deciding—consciously or not—what direction one's life will take. Alternatively, she might watch in dismay as her horizons shrink, her choices become limited, and her life is seemingly mapped out for her. Nonetheless, it is in adolescence that she learns, sometimes forcefully, exactly what forms of subjectivity and narratives are available to her and which forms will cause her to be marginalized. Of course, assenting to one of the socially sanctioned subjectivities available to her will still not guarantee social acceptance. If Anne Moody had accepted the hegemonic view of black womanhood, for example, it might have resulted in her personal safety but not widespread social approval and acceptance. It is in adolescence that the child becomes mother to the woman.

Throughout the study, I'm making a primarily positive argument about the apparent increase in a woman's range of acceptable subjectivities, and their ability to resist social "limits and pressures" to create new discourses of womanhood. I do not deny the genuine pain and conflict that are the consequences of rejecting received notions of womanhood, but ultimately, this dynamic makes alternative forms of subjectivity possible—even necessary.