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## Reconstructing Blank Spots and Smudges: How Postmodern Moves Imitate Memory in Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*

Reflecting on her first memoir in her most recent book, *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr observes, “The self who penned [*The Liars' Club*] formed the filter for those events. I didn't fabricate stuff, but today, other scenes I'd add might tell a less forgiving story” (23). *The Liars' Club*, which defined Karr as an influential figure in the genre of memoir, recounts her experiences growing up with an unconventional family in a small Texas town. As Karr tells Terry Gross in a September 2015 interview on *Fresh Air*, she is never sure she has described the full truth when recounting her memories, and she sometimes fears that she has not “gotten things right” (“Mary Karr on Writing Memoirs”). Despite Karr's frank misgivings, *The Liars' Club* received positive reviews, most of which praised Karr's work in terms of its authenticity. *The New York Times* hailed it as “a wonderfully unsentimental vision” (Kakutani). *The LA Times* commended Karr's “unqualified emotional honesty” (McFadden). In a foreword to the twentieth anniversary edition of *The Liars' Club*, Lena Dunham suggests that Karr's “refusal to *lie*” is what continues to entice readers (xii, emphasis in the original).

Invoking the dichotomy of truth and falsehood, though, does not do justice to the complexities of Karr's work. What makes *The Liars' Club* compelling, even twenty years on, is Karr's use of postmodern discursive strategies. Despite being written after the putative death of postmodernism in the early 1990s, *The Liars' Club* marks itself as postmodern through its emphasis on fragmentation and indeterminacy. Although “postmodernism” is rarely considered a compliment now, removed as we are from the heyday of the cultural movement, postmodern techniques continue to shape how we tell stories about ourselves. I argue that postmodern moves, such as those made by Karr in *The Liars' Club*, resonate with us because

they approximate the psychological processes of remembering our experiences and constructing our identities.

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The postmodern perspective emerged from the social upheaval of the 1960s, matured in the post-structuralism and deconstruction of the 1970s, and declined after finding its way into pop culture in the 1980s. Chaos, discontinuity, and the blurring of boundaries became the overriding tropes of the postmodern aesthetic. By the mid-eighties, these features so dominated mass culture that Frederic Jameson could identify popular movies such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Chinatown*, and *Star Wars* as postmodern works (Jameson 169-70). By 1989, however, postmodernism began to wane as the Berlin Wall fell. As Josh Toth and Neil Brooks note, postmodernism “is typically defined by its opposition to all latent utopian impulses” (210). When the symbol of “the utopian promise of communism” fell, so too did the last of postmodernism’s competitors, securing “the victory and hegemony of a distinctly postmodern, or late-capitalist, ideology” (Toth and Brooks 210). This victory was short-lived because postmodernism thrived on its oppositional nature, rejecting the stability of concepts such as truth. As the dominant cultural force, postmodernism lost its ability to defend the position of *other* because suddenly everything seemed to qualify as *other*. David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris point out that the term postmodernism has been so broadly applied that it now “describes essentially nothing” (xii). In the absence of resistance, postmodernism ceased to be an innovative concept. Even those who locate the death of postmodernism after 1989 claim that it passed shortly thereafter. By 2002, prominent postmodern scholar Linda Hutcheon proclaimed postmodernism to be “a thing of the past” (5).

Yet postmodern strategies continue to inform the stories we tell about ourselves, particularly in personal nonfiction such as memoirs. In *The Liars’ Club* Karr describes growing up in a town she calls Leechfield, a place permeated by the “rotten-egg smell” (33) of oil refineries and once voted “one of the ten ugliest towns on the planet” (34). Her mother was a passionate woman whose spontaneity and

excitement always made Karr feel “on the edge of something new” (58). At times her mother’s vivaciousness veered into instability, though, and *The Liars’ Club* is framed around a significant moment in Karr’s childhood: the night her mother suffered a nervous breakdown, set household belongings on fire, and cornered her children with a butcher knife. Karr revisits the night when her mother was “taken Away...for being Nervous” at the beginning, middle, and end of her memoir, each time examining it from a different angle (6). The first instance occurs as a flashback and describes the night’s aftermath, focusing on visual and auditory impressions. The second instance retells the events chronologically as Karr remembers them and emphasizes her emotions. The third instance reevaluates Karr’s understanding of the night based on new revelations from her mother. Karr continues to loop her narrative back to the traumatic event as a means of understanding it. “I had a tormented past,” she tells Gross on *Fresh Air*, “and really started into this business I think to scratch at and route out the truth of my less-than-perfect childhood. So—so I keep scratching—I’m just somebody who scratches and picks and worries the bone of things over and over” (“Mary Karr on Writing Memoirs”). Although Karr claims to seek out truth, the manner in which she describes the process does not indicate she believes there is a single, objective Truth to be found. Truth-seeking, as depicted in *The Liars’ Club*, is an endless, ever-changing quest rather than a journey with a fixed destination.

The traditional role of a memoirist or autobiographer is to explain what happened, where and when it occurred, and why the event was significant. Karr opens *The Liars’ Club* with no such sense of certainty: “My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark” (3). To begin with a paradox is a postmodern move. In a single line, Karr states that the memory that most defines her childhood is simultaneously highlighted by a flash of knowing and obscured by the unknown. To be sharp is to be sure, and to have a sharp memory is to be confident of its veracity. Just as she claims to be in possession of such a memory, though, Karr calls into question her own credibility. Although the single instant may be illuminated, can we trust it if it is bookended on both sides by absence? Karr’s stark imagery emphasizes

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the confused contrast between light and dark, which indicates that this life story privileges visual and physical impressions over a predictable story arc and values contradictions over easy answers.

Karr's imagery builds throughout the first paragraph as the darkness of the scene is further punctuated by colors. She recalls a doctor with "watery blue eyes" who wears "a yellow golf shirt unbuttoned so that sprouts of hair [show] in a V shape on his chest" (3). She also describes wearing a nightgown that features "a pattern of Texas bluebonnets bunched into nosegays tied with ribbon against a field of nappy white cotton" (3). Visual images dominate the opening paragraph. The only emotion Karr records is a vague unease. In this initial retelling, she does not explain why the doctor is examining her. Although she likes the man personally, she "[doesn't] much trust him" (3). Karr avoids repeating mere facts about the situation and instead focuses on affect rendered in intense, choppy fragments. The doctor's blue eyes and Karr's worn nightgown are simply sensory recollections that hold no meaning on their own, and Karr works to piece them together into a more logical narrative of moving parts. As Karr observes, "[i]t took three decades for that instant to unfreeze" (3).

These vivid impressions were uninterpretable when remembered in isolation, suggesting a breakdown in the signification chain of Karr's memory. Such a disruption in signification, David Harvey notes, is a postmodern consequence that "reduce[s] experience to a 'series of pure and unrelated presents in time'" (53). The postmodern perception of language as an infinite chain of signifiers was a rejection of Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the clearly bifurcated linguistic sign. In the posthumous publication of his lecture notes in 1916, Saussure asserted that language is more than simply naming and classifying objects or emotions. Ideas cannot exist before words because the linguistic unit is the associative total of an idea, or a psychological concept (the signified), and "the impression [the concept] makes on our senses," or a sensory sound-image (the signifier) (841). The relationship between these two elements creates a word (the sign) that holds meaning. Saussure's view of language as a fixed system influenced the work of structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes and Northrop Frye in the 1950s and 1960s.

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As the West entered the postindustrial, postwar era of late capitalism, however, semiotics, the study and interpretation of signs, was replaced by deconstruction, the post-structural move to dismantle systems of binaries. Although signs themselves are arbitrary—there is no particular reason that the letters *r-o-s-e* should call to mind a flower—structuralism rested on the foundation of stable signifying relationships. For post-structuralists working in the postmodern period, though, language is not a closed, stable system; it is, as Terry Eagleton puts it, “a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements” (112). Language, according to post-structuralist Jacques Derrida, is what happens when “an infinite number of sign-substitutions” engages in freeplay (916). Language is a chaotic, unending domino chain of signifier-signifieds. The meaning of the word *rose*, for instance, cannot be considered stable if it can elicit very different responses from audiences. One person may picture a red flower, another may picture a pink flower, and yet another may picture a figure standing up, as in the past tense of *rise*. As a result, we can never fully articulate ourselves because each word is a slippery stand-in for a thought—or, in Karr’s case, for a clear memory—which has already escaped us.

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*The Liars’ Club* begins with a flurry of sensory flashes. Acknowledging that she cannot interpret their meaning on her own, Karr broadens her focus to explain how she eventually unfroze that striking moment and stitched together a story from disparate reminiscences. Comparing notes with “[n]eighbors and family” allowed her to “turn that one bright slide into a panorama . . . [and] [i]t was only over time that the panorama became animate” (3-4). Thirty years of personal retrospection and research revealed further details: Dr. Boudreaux, the town family doctor, gently asks her questions in her bedroom; her parents are absent; Sheriff Watson stands in the doorway and holds her sister, Lecia; and the neighbors gather around outside. As Karr describes it, though, the process of remembering these details is not as simple as summoning memories at will. Instead, remembering is a form of recreating, and Karr is only able to craft a coherent narrative when she removes herself from its center to observe her memory from its edges.

Existing at both the center and the periphery of her own story, Karr demonstrates another tenet of postmodern thinking: the breakdown of an immovable and objective center. The concept of a transcendental principle or foundation has traditionally guided Western thought. Although it has taken various forms, humanity reaches for a metaphysical worldview oriented around a stable center in order to make sense of our experience. According to Derrida, we construct this center or “organizing principle” in order to limit the chaos of existence (915). “[B]y orienting and organizing the coherence of the system,” Derrida writes, “the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form” (915). However, Derrida continues, if the center is considered “unique” and separate from the “totality,” or the rest of the system, then it cannot actually be part of the system at the same time: “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*” (915). If Truth is the “organizing principle” of the world, then it must be located in the center of that world—but at the same time, it must also be in existence somewhere outside of that center in order to create the world, or the totality, in the first place. It is a paradox that Derrida calls “contradictorily coherent” (915), suggesting that the idea of a center or transcendental signified is a necessary yet artificial component of life. We create such meanings in order to make sense of our experiences, but we must also be cognizant of the ways in which they are mere constructions. Karr gestures toward this postmodern paradigm in the opening of *The Liars’ Club* as she describes actively building her memory of a life-altering childhood event by focusing on the disconnected slivers not only of her own recollections but also those of other people involved.

The fragmented nature of Karr’s memory is reflected in her syntax as well. She begins sentences with the coordinating conjunction *but* frequently, breaking a grammatical expectation that *but* should be used only to contrast related ideas within a single sentence. Instead, Karr employs the conjunction as an abrupt transition between separate sentences. She encloses the first thought by ending its sentence with a period, forcing the contrasting thought that follows to begin with an unconventional *But*. With the

disruptive visual effect of that *But*, the two-sentence structure emphasizes the disconnect between the two ideas more than a traditional one-sentence structure would. For instance, when describing her sister's attitude in her first retelling of events, Karr writes, "She was known for mocking nuns in public and sassing teachers. But I could see that she had painted a deferential look on her face" (4). First, Karr presents her sister's reputation as an outspoken, opinionated youth. Ending the sentence at "teachers" seems to make a definitive statement about Lecia's personality. We feel as if we know Lecia, too, because we can identify the stereotype Karr has established. In the next sentence, though, her use of "painted" suggests that it is Lecia's act of dissembling, rather than just her attitude, that is disconcerting. Joined only roughly, the sentences convey Karr's internal struggle to reconcile two inconsistent facts. Beginning the second sentence with a capitalized *But* reenacts at a syntactic level the jarring sense that Karr felt as Lecia, the one stable figure in her life, cast off her characteristic impudence and further destabilized Karr's grasp on her memory.

A similar pattern appears in Karr's second rendition of the night, which describes the events leading up to the encounter with Dr. Boudreaux that opens the memoir. As her mother tosses toys into a large backyard bonfire, Karr imagines her neighbor, "old Mrs. Heinz," standing at her kitchen window and watching the commotion: "She's wiping off the last plate from the drainboard and watching us and wondering should she come out. But she thinks better of it" (153). For a moment, we hope—as Karr must have hoped—that Mrs. Heinz will mediate the dangerous situation. Karr dashes those hopes and magnifies her fear by breaking apart these two related, yet contrasting thoughts. In both instances, Karr's syntax augments the function of a humble contraction. It no longer simply shows difference; it conveys the completely unfamiliar and unexpected tone of the night and suggests that Karr is unable to process the complexity of the event within a single thought.

Karr's use of *but* is only one way she disrupts the smooth flow of her narrative. In the opening sequence, she also plays with language when she turns her attention from visual to auditory observations.

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As she watches the flames of the bonfire in her backyard, the existence of which is unexplained at this point, she writes, “And the volume on the night began to rise” (5). Karr personifies the sounds of people responding to an emergency. The vehicles arriving and adults asking questions become “volume,” an entity that not only becomes audibly amplified, but also, through her use of the verb *rise*, transcends the chaos of the scene. The jarring poetry of this line subverts our expectations of how a dangerous situation, rooted in physical details such as a fire and a knife, should be described.

As the scene expands beyond her bedroom, Karr recollects additional auditory clues in incomplete form: “More door slams, the noise of boots, and some radio static from the cruiser in the road” (5). Listing the noises in a sentence fragment suggests that the sounds piled on more quickly than she could evaluate them, creating a sort of auditory catalog in her memory that stuck with her but would require sorting out later. She also describes pinching her sister’s ankle with a single word: “Hard” (6). To convey this information, Karr could have written, “I pinched my sister hard,” or even, “I gave my sister a hard pinch.” Embedding the adjective within a complete sentence would lessen its effect, though. When it stands alone, “Hard” calls attention to the physical act and the creation of pain. The first time that Karr attempts to recapture this night, she is overwhelmed with sensory information that she cannot immediately process. The combined stylistic effect of these syntactic moves is a feeling of disjunction. The reader is as disconnected from and unsure of the event as the narrator is.

After presenting her reader with visual and auditory impressions from the night, Karr acknowledges that she is deliberately keeping information from her reader:

Because it took so long for me to paste together what happened, I will leave that part of the story missing for a while. It went long unformed for me, and I want to keep it that way here. I don’t mean to be coy. When the truth could be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out. But some ghost of an event may stay in your head. Then, like the smudge of a bad word quickly wiped off a school blackboard, this ghost can call undue attention to itself by its very



vagueness. You keep studying the dim shape of it, as if the original form will magically emerge.

This blank spot in my past, then, spoke most loudly to me by being blank. It was a hole in my life that I both feared and kept coming back to because I couldn't quite fill it in. (9)

Here Karr speaks not only to the fragmentation of her memory but also to the indeterminacy of truth. In his comprehensive work *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey identifies a key characteristic of postmodernism as “its total acceptance of . . . ephemerality . . . [and] discontinuity” (44). When Karr notes that “part of the story . . . went long unformed,” she calls attention to the way in which her memory held no distinct shape of the evening. Her use of “unformed” tells us that although the memory was not clearly delineated, it still existed, however amorphously. A clearer account of the night existed somewhere—as evidence, the second iteration of the night, halfway through the book, includes details that explain what prompted the arrival of Dr. Boudreaux and Sheriff Watson—but Karr suggests here that her mind walled it off, dropping it into a deep “hole” as a way of negotiating her emotional pain.

The image of a “blank spot” that communicates through its emptiness echoes the paradox that opens the book, in which Karr’s “sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark.” By the time she reaches this aside to the reader, though, Karr’s relationship to her memory has changed. She is no longer a passive observer waiting for a single instant to be illuminated. Instead, she actively engages with her memory. While the “blank spot” keeps her at a distance, its hollowness does not signify a lack of meaning. Rather, this memory above all others “sp[eaks] most loudly to [her],” and she responds by “coming back” to it time and again. Here, her memory becomes more than just an overload of the senses. It is a quest to recapture “the original form,” despite its tenuous nature. In this direct address to the reader, Karr does not merely embrace her fleeting, chaotic memory; she also mimics it for her reader. By gradually parceling out information, Karr encourages the reader to participate in her search for an accurate account of that night—but not for an all-encompassing Truth.

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As she sifts through her own mental images and the recollections of others to “paste together” her memories, Karr never once refers to the process as a pursuit of truth. Tellingly, she includes the word *truth* in a statement that declares its obscurity: “When the truth could be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out” (9). The sentence that follows suggests that once “the truth” is obscured, it cannot be reincarnated in its exact form. Instead, a “ghost” remains in the memory. When Karr develops her version of events, she is still working with a “ghost” rather than “the truth.” She embellishes the ghost, fleshing it out with physical details and sensory perceptions, but she cannot bring the ghost back to life.

This rejection of absolute Truth is the subject of much criticism surrounding postmodernism. The deconstructive moves of post-structuralism eliminate any distinction between a center and its related structure. Rather than embracing a solitary statement of belief that explains the world, “[p]ostmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is” (Harvey 44). But if everything is arbitrary and subjective, and nothing can be determined for sure, where does our social responsibility lie? If postmodernism reduces us to “prisoners of our own discourse,” as Eagleton suggests (125), and if all our political and civil rights issues are simply linguistic constructions, then why bother to take a stand on any issues at all? Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb excoriates postmodernism for denying “that there is any such thing as knowledge, truth, reason, or objectivity” and for refusing “to aspire to such ideals, on the ground that they are not only unattainable but undesirable—that they are indeed authoritarian and repressive” (86). She fears that a relativistic reinterpretation of history has eliminated the very possibility of objective fact and thus accountability.

In the genre of memoir, this has become a matter of particular concern. Hoax memoirs received a great deal of coverage in the early 2000s. In 2005, James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, marketed as a memoir about the author’s struggles with addiction, garnered the coveted status as a pick for Oprah’s Book Club and became a best-seller. Almost as quickly it became the focus of controversy when an investigative website “subsequently revealed that some of Frey’s claims in the book were false or exaggerated” (Rak

224). In early 2008, Margaret B. Jones's *Love and Consequences: A Memoir of Hope and Survival*, published as a true account of a mixed-race child who faced sexual abuse and gang violence, received critical acclaim—until it was “exposed as a complete fabrication” (Bollinger 207). Later that same year, the publication of Herman Rosenblat's memoir, *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love that Survived*, was cancelled. Similar to the Frey case, Oprah Winfrey provided an initial platform for Rosenblat's story of surviving the Holocaust when she invited him on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, but his account of marrying the young girl who once threw apples over the fence of a concentration camp and saved his life was shown to be not just unlikely but downright impossible: “No such fence, it was noted, existed; it would not have been possible for a civilian to gain such access to a prisoner in the camps” (Garber 189). In 2011, investigative journalist and author Jon Krakauer revealed *Three Cups of Tea*—a supposedly legitimate record of Greg Mortenson's work to build schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which subsequently earned Mortenson a Nobel Peace Prize nomination—to have glaring inaccuracies (Baker n.p.).

These scandals illustrate the vulnerability of personal storytelling in a postmodern context. If truth is not just elusive but is actually non-existent, then can a distinction between fiction and non-fiction survive—and does it even matter? What relevance does Karr's memoir hold for readers if it cannot depict the truth with certainty? What response are readers to make to her claim that she simply does not remember everything that she is attempting to narrate? Why should readers bother to explore the life stories of others through literature if they may be full of falsehoods and fabrications?

It seems easy to throw your hands up in postmodern nonchalance and declare, “It's all relative!” But Karr suggests that although our memories may include “blank spot[s]” or mere “ghost[s] of an event,” these gaps are neither fabrications nor weaknesses (9). Instead, Karr welcomes them in her narrative, scrutinizing them to see what multi-faceted truths may lie beneath their “vagueness” (9). She frequently employs the auxiliary *must* to indicate that she is drawing inferences based on evidence rather than recalling an actual, fixed memory. Because she remembers “big triangles of red light slash[ing] across the room,”

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she concludes that “[t]here must have been an ambulance outside” (5). She also deduces that she “must eventually have told Dr. Boudreaux there weren’t any marks on [her]” (5). Similarly, when she recalls feeling fear about where she and her sister would have to spend the night, she writes, “It was my habit at that time to bargain with God, so I imagine that I started some haggling prayer about who might take us home. *Don’t let it be the Smothergills*, I probably prayed” (8). In all three instances, Karr does not shy from stating that she does not actually remember these events. She acknowledges her deductive reasoning in a way that presents her inferences as logical and yet also leaves room for alternate events and interpretations. At times, Karr even explicitly acknowledges experiences that run counter to her own. Karr claims that she and her sister feigned grief over their grandmother’s death as a means of scoring “cookies or Kool aid” or even “a Popsicle” from sympathetic neighbors (47). She follows this assertion with a parenthetical aside that offers an opposing perspective: “If I gave my big sister a paragraph here, she would correct my memory. To this day, she claims that she genuinely mourned for the old lady, who was a kindly soul, and that I was too little and mean-spirited then to remember things right” (47). Lecia’s memory, while contradictory, does not invalidate Karr’s own perception. While her sister believes memories are “right” or wrong, Karr more generously allows both versions to exist simultaneously.

In other instances, Karr does not even attempt to form a conclusion because she readily admits that she lacks the evidence to do so. Describing her initial encounter with Dr. Boudreaux, she writes, “I wasn’t crying and don’t remember any pain” (3). Later, after more law enforcement and emergency response officials arrive, she writes, “I don’t remember talking” (5). After an extended, page-long description of her fear of being placed under the care of her “famously strict” neighbors (8), the Smothergills, Karr ends with this anti-climactic statement: “I don’t remember who we got farmed out to or for how long” (9). Ironically, although she vividly recalls being repulsed by the thought of the Smothergills, she has no actual memory of whether or not she was subjected to such a fate. Postmodern critics, Harvey tells us, deplore any attempt to create a “coherent representation” of an experience because it is

“repressive” (52). Karr’s straightforward confession that she does not remember certain details suggests that she is also not limiting herself to a single or true “coherent representation” of her childhood. If she were, she would never be able to move past the first five minutes of this traumatic event because she would be stuck at “I don’t remember.” By allowing her lack of memory to contribute to her narrative nonetheless, Karr signals an acceptance of the indeterminacy of postmodern life.

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As Karr demonstrates, the rejection of a defining Truth is not a rejection of truth altogether. Although postmodern critic Ihab Hassan claims that the indeterminacy of postmodernism led to a contemporary “crisis of personal and cultural values” (19), he also supports the notion of multiple truths existing within a postmodern framework. Hassan writes, “It is repugnant to pretend that the atrophy of transcendent truths licenses self-deception or justifies tendentiousness” (20). Similarly, Stanley Fish posits that postmodernism does not advocate for a total relativism that excuses any and all actions, no matter how abhorrent. In an opinion essay written shortly after 9/11, Fish argues that postmodernism “maintains only that there can be no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one.” What postmodernism strives for is the articulation of specific experiences rather than the “empty rhetoric” of “universal absolutes” (Fish). It is not beneficial to label our enemies as irrational or evil and stop at that; rather, we need to recognize that they act rationally within a framework that we reject. For Fish, multiplicity within a postmodern framework does not lead to anarchic and immoral relativism. Instead, it encourages empathy and understanding by recognizing the existence of competing, and often discordant, perspectives. Relativism, according to Fish, “is simply another name for serious thought.”

Karr invites her readers to engage in this process of “serious thought” by declining to fulfill the conventional expectations of a nonfiction author. One of the most striking postmodern moves that overlays *The Liars’ Club* is a chorus of “I don’t remember.” Whether writing fiction or nonfiction, writers traditionally take on the role of an authority figure. Although a fictional narrator may be unreliable, readers

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instinctively trust the author to guide them through the characters' world. Readers instill an even greater trust in nonfiction writers, assuming that they have done their research, if they are reporting on the lives of others, or that they are telling the unadulterated truth, if they are recording events from their own life. To understand this in structural terms, readers and authors have spent the majority of literary history in a binary system that privileges the authority of the author over that of the reader. With the advent of deconstruction, however, this power structure imploded. The author is influential only because of the existence of a reader, which indicates that both author and reader wield influence on each other. There is no privileged position; the binary falls apart. Karr explicitly dismantles this binary herself through her unusual formatting of dialogue and her informal, confessional tone.

The long-established conventions of modern narratives, whether fiction or nonfiction, dictate that each new line of dialogue should begin a new paragraph, making it easy for the reader to follow conversations. Karr spurns this advice, choosing instead to embed lines of dialogue from other people within her own reconstructed memories. For example, Karr combines her impressions of Dr. Boudreaux's examination within her emotional and physical impressions of the moment:

I had tucked my knees under [my nightgown] to make it a tent. He could easily have yanked the thing over my head with one motion, but something made him gentle. "Show me the marks," he said. "Come on, now. I won't hurt you." He had watery blue eyes behind thick glasses, and a mustache that looked like a caterpillar. "Please? Just pull this up and show me where it hurts," he said. He held a piece of hem between thumb and forefinger. (3)

Splitting Dr. Boudreaux's comments off into their own paragraphs would separate his voice from Karr's voice as a narrator, but Karr wants readers to remember that her account is first and foremost *her* account. She can only speak to what she (or perhaps her sister, who was also in the room) heard Dr. Boudreaux say or to the emotions his presence evoked in her. By inserting his words within her own, Karr reminds the reader that she is speaking only of her own experience.

This formatting decision is a subtle way in which Karr deconstructs the binary of author-reader. She uproots it more obviously in her direct address to the reader toward the end of the passage, where she explains why she chooses to leave “part of the story missing for a while” (9). Initially, it seems as if Karr is making a play for authorial power by holding back a significant part of her story, but she offers an apology right away: “I don’t mean to be coy” (9). In fact, rather than grabbing for power, she readily acknowledges that not only does she not possess traditional truth-telling power, she also does not believe such absolute objectivity is possible. She is attempting to recreate for the reader the confusion she felt first as a child and later as an adult trying to remember and make sense of the incident. Although Karr does admit to withholding information, she also acknowledges, as discussed earlier, that she cannot recreate the exact truth anyway—she can only conjure a “ghost” of it, “like the smudge of a bad word quickly wiped off a school blackboard” (9). The reader relies on Karr to tell a story, and the story relies on Karr’s memory to guide its development. When her memory fails her, the chain of signification is disrupted, and Karr must instead grasp at other images and ideas floating within her memory. Derrida describes freeplay, or the space in which language occurs, as “an interplay of absence and presence” (925). By locating her memoir within this freeplay space, or the undefined “sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions” coexist (Derrida 916), Karr forgoes the privileged status of author.

In *The Liars’ Club* Karr shows a keen understanding of how the limitations of our memories affect our perceptions of ourselves. She internalized the negative emotions of that traumatic night from her childhood in ways that shaped her identity as “both a flincher and a fighter” (10). She notes that she was as quick to cry as to punch a playmate, and she attributes this in part to the deep burial of her memory: “[M]y mind simply erased everything up until Dr. Boudreaux began inviting me to show him marks that I now know weren’t even there” (10). The gaps in her memory that inhibit her from possessing a complete account of events illustrate postmodern thought, which insists that “we cannot aspire to any unified representation of the world, or picture it as a totality full of connections and differentiations” (Harvey 52).

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Postmodernism complicates the actions of remembering and recording history—yet, like Derrida’s “contradictorily coherent” paradox of a center that exists both within and beyond its totality, these complicating factors are what draw us back to postmodernism when, like Mary Karr, we want to tell stories about our lives.

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Autobiographical memories provide the foundation for our life stories—who we are, where we have been, what we have done. Psychologists have described autobiographical memory as “memory for information related to the self,” as opposed to the simple recall of facts or events that had no significant bearing on our lives (Brewer 26). To illustrate the difference, James Pennebaker and Amy Gonzales describe a study that surveyed random respondents and college students about their reaction to the 1991 Persian Gulf War. They report that “[j]ust before, during, and following the six-week war . . . the average person reported talking about the Persian Gulf War 7.1 times per day, and thinking about it 11.2 times per day” (172). Two years later, a follow-up survey with the college students found that they were unable to recall the most basic facts about the event and that “their memories for the war had evaporated” (172). Because the war did not have a significant, long-term impact on their lives, the students did not file the event away as part of their self-defining autobiographical memory. Although the Persian Gulf War seemed memorable to the students while it was occurring, it was not ultimately tied to their individual sense of achievement, which is a crucial aspect of autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memories, tied as they are to progressing toward goals, create a unique record of “personal change throughout life, contributing to the maintenance of identity” (Smorti and Fioretti 298).

Forgetting details about the Persian Gulf War—or any other major historical event, for that matter—obviously does not indicate that the event did not actually take place. Although the fact of the war is true, as in accurate, it does not provide a consistent reference point across the autobiographical memories of everyone who was alive at the time. This anecdote illustrates the way our autobiographical memories



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sift through the data of lived experiences and gauge their relevance to our self-conception. We construct (and sometimes revise) our identities based on our interpretation of autobiographical memories. Not all memories hold equal importance in the creation of our identities, though. Just as we may misplace our car keys, a common example of short-term memory loss, we may also forget experiences from our past if they did not register strong emotions. Whether positive or negative, our emotional engagement with experiences dictates the extent to which they are not only remembered but also spackled onto our ever-evolving sense of self. Events and interactions that fail to inspire intense emotions and “do not activate an adequate level of specific attention” are thus forgotten (Smorti and Fioretti 298).

As Douwe Draaisma, a professor of the history of psychology, points out, we tend to think of remembering and forgetting as mutually exclusive. *Forgetting* seems to signify *not remembering*, but this conception does not leave room for the blank spots or ghosts of memories that we all carry. Echoing Karr’s metaphor about a smudged chalkboard, Draaisma asks, “But where in this dichotomy do you fit the memory of what you have forgotten? . . . If you can remember that you have forgotten, something has plainly stayed behind in the memory, something like the discoloured patch on the wall whose outlines tell you what used to hang there for years” (227). The night of her mother’s breakdown carried strong emotional consequences for Karr. Although details of the night remained hazy for years, Karr did not lose the memories due to a lack of emotional engagement in the episode. Instead, her memories fell (or, as Karr suggests, were perhaps pushed) into the nebulous space that exists between forgetting and remembering in which memories are dormant but still present. Obscured memories can be jolted back to an alert state by something as simple as a scent, as when the smell of shorn grass “carries [Karr] back to a particular cool day when [she] lay down within the careful lines of [her] own grass house,” resting in the football field and watching the clouds (64). Other memories require distance and contemplation to become clear, as when Karr’s memory of her mother’s breakdown reawakens slowly and in pieces, “like a scene in

some movie crystal ball that whirls from a foggy blur into focus” (4). At each step in the literary reconstruction of her childhood, Karr reenacts the imperfections of autobiographical memory.

In postmodern parlance, a better term for such shortcomings might be *indeterminacies* rather than *imperfections*. Memory, like language, eludes stability. As psychologist William Brewer notes, emotionally charged personal memories “are typically accompanied by a belief that they are a veridical record of the originally experienced episode. This does not mean that they are, in fact, veridical, just that they carry with them a very strong belief value” (35). Memory provokes belief but not necessarily factual accuracy. Halfway through *The Liars’ Club*, in the second retelling of the night, Karr watches her mother advance toward her and her sister with a butcher knife that “holds a glint of light on its point like a star” (155). As Karr holds still and “lock[s] her scaredness down in [her] stomach,” her mother puts down the knife without ever harming her daughters. Karr then listens to her mother call Dr. Boudreaux, sobbing into the phone, “Get over here. I just killed them both. Both of them. I’ve stabbed them both to death” (157). In this version of events, Karr distinctly remembers that although her mother threatened grave violence and even mistakenly believed she had caused it, the butcher knife never touched Karr’s body. But the first time Karr shares this story with readers, she doubts this outcome: “I don’t remember talking. I must eventually have told Dr. Boudreaux there weren’t any marks on me. There weren’t. It took a long time for me to figure that out for certain, even longer to drive my memory from that single place in time out toward the rest of my life” (5). Karr’s initial belief that the incident must have left some record on her body was not accurate, but it nevertheless provided a framework for how she perceived herself. She writes that the feeling “that [her] house was Not Right metastasized into the notion that [she herself] was somehow Not Right, or that [her] survival in the world depended on [her] constant vigilance against various forms of Not-Rightness” (10).

Dr. Boudreaux’s assumptions about what had transpired, fueled by her mother’s delusional confession and her own disorientation, were absorbed into Karr’s autobiographical memory. She believed

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that the smudge on the blackboard of her memory contained the trace of physical abuse, and only after years of revisiting that moment was she able to discern that the smudge hid the threat of danger alone, which, although undoubtedly traumatic, is factually distinct from bodily harm. The fact that she misremembered the details of the event does not undermine the authenticity of the emotions she presents in the first, incomplete retelling. The deep, unbelieving dread that permeates Karr's memory the second time around starkly contrasts the vague confusion and mistrust she describes to readers at the beginning of the memoir. Because that initial disquiet profoundly contributed to her sense of self, though, it is as legitimate as the raw fear she relived once she finally brought the full extent of that memory to the forefront of her mind.

Although they may be concealed at times, emotionally significant memories, in postmodern fashion, resist closure. Karr reminds us of this yet again when she returns to that fateful night for the third time at the close of *The Liars' Club*. Twenty years after the event, Karr confronts her mother and learns that prior to marrying Karr's father, her mother had started another family with another man. That original family was living in New York City during World War II when the young mother returned home from work one night "to find her entire house empty, her family gone" (313). Her husband left no trace of his whereabouts and Karr's mother had no means of contacting her two children. Although she later tracked them down, the children were effectively eliminated from her life when their stepmother informed her that they wished to remain with their father and his new family. In this moment, Karr realizes that her mother's heavy drinking and irrational actions stemmed from the guilt and yearning she felt for her lost children. Karr's revelation embodies a key feature of postmodernism, "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents" (Jameson 179). Her perspective of the event, while still propelled by her mother's delusional violence, now also widens and allows empathy for her mother, a complex woman who was trying to excise the demons of her own troubled past.

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Learning about the lost children adds another layer of nuance to Karr's autobiographical memory, but research suggests that the effect is created not just by a simple awareness of facts. When psychologists Andrea Smorti and Chiara Fioretti asked participants to perform a Memory Fluency Task, they found that the emotional tenor of participants' memories changed when they were translated into stories. Memories that were only recalled and cataloged in a list were associated with *either* positive or negative emotions. When participants expanded those memories into detailed narratives, however, the memories were associated with *both* positive and negative emotions because the "[n]arratives were more complex than memories" (305). Narrating them as a story alters the emotional valence of memories and because memories provide scaffolding for our identities, "these transformations that arise by narrating a personal experience radically change self-conception and the perception of events" (306). In addition to influencing our sense of self, constructing stories from lived experiences has even been shown to have physiological effects. When social psychologists used a computer program, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (known as LIWC, or "Luke"), to identify patterns in people's writing, they reported that writing about traumatic experiences leads to measurable benefits: "[T]he mere act of translating emotional upheavals into words is consistently associated with improvements in physical and mental health" (Pennebaker 4).

Thus, narrating our memories is recognized as distinct from just remembering an event. After we narrate a memory, whether in speech or writing, "that memory contains not only the encoding of the events but the rehearsals and the elaborative rehearsal represented by narratives in situations" (Smorti and Fioretti 313). Every time we transform a memory into a story through the act of narration, we add another layer onto the memory, making it a memory of a narrative told about a memory. Our identities transform in relation to autobiographical memory, and through narration, "that memory becomes endlessly a memory of a narrative in relation to a memory of a narrative and so on" (Smorti and Fioretti 315). When she admits that she is withholding information in the beginning of *The Liars' Club*, Karr seems

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to be acknowledging the multilayering of memory. She anticipates that her reader's reaction to her story will evolve as her memory is translated into—and influenced by—her narrative.

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Memories of lived experiences are fragile, inconsistent entities, subject to change through our interaction with them. When we revisit memories, we can change their emotional charge and recover seemingly lost details. Through narration, we enhance their structure, further intensifying some aspects while downplaying others. Reconstructing autobiographical memories, in short, resembles the infinite, interconnecting network of postmodern signification. By situating her life story within a fragmented mental landscape, Karr demonstrates how effectively post-structuralist and deconstructive techniques can be applied to resurrect personal memories. In *The Art of Memoir*, Karr writes, “The trick to fashioning a deeper, truer voice involves understanding how you might misperceive as you go along; thus looking at things more than one way. The goal of a voice is to speak not with objective authority but with subjective curiosity” (48-9). Despite the fluidity and openness that some consider a shortcoming, postmodernism shows us how to navigate our pasts in a productive way. As Karr shows us in *The Liars' Club*, we can write our way out of one self and into another while also acknowledging the authenticity of each self. Our selves, like our memories, are multi-layered and dynamic.

It is not Karr's refusal to lie, as Lena Dunham suggests, that marks *The Liars' Club* as true. Rather, it is Karr's acceptance of her truth's subjectivity and multiplicity that appeals to readers. After hearing her mother's confession, Karr wishes to be filled by “the clear light of truth,” imagining that “the legendary grace that carries a broken body past all manner of monsters” at the end of life could have illuminated her and her mother, even though she recognizes that such light may be “just death's neurological fireworks, the brain's last light show,” rather than a universal Truth. Still, she understands the impulse toward such a light, admitting it is “a lie [she] can live with” (320). As Karr reaches for truth while reinforcing its constructed nature, she embodies the postmodern paradigm and demonstrates that although postmodernism as an era

may be past, its strategies of fragmentation and indeterminacy, in their mimicry of our own subjective memory process, continue to play significant roles our personal stories.

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