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Liberation, Renewal, and the Re-Imagination of Self: *Wild and Garlic and Sapphires*

Sarah Foust Vinson and Susan Larkin

Women's autobiographical works have not only been reclaimed in the last decades, they have consistently topped the bestseller lists. Contemporary women's memoir in the United States offers a range of stories and experiences that seem to offer both a sense of possibility and a feeling of limitation. Possibility manifests in the sheer diversity of experiences and lives available to women. Limitations emerge as familiar struggles and challenges arise even amidst this diversity. These forces and influences that define and shape lives are, obviously, many and varied. However, although the stories of women's lives are vast and diverse, certain commonalities emerge. When Phyllis Rose edited *The Norton Book of Women's Lives* in 1993, her introduction, which is a masterfully sculpted and thought provoking text in itself, comments that "if one story dominates, it's the liberation narrative" (31). She continues, "As I see it, the literature of women's lives is a tradition of escapees, women who have lived to tell the tale. By and large, they seem determined to prove that womanhood is no handicap, that women can live as freely as men" (Rose 32). More than twenty years later, liberation is still a potent aspect of many stories. Another potent aspect is the rebirth that liberation brings. In more contemporary memoir, you can see multiple stories where liberation from limiting forces is not the end of the story, but often a midpoint, or even the beginning. More stories are exploring the re-imagining and renewal that are possible after liberation. These processes bring their own challenges and victories as new subjectivities and discourses must be navigated.

Liberation and renewal seem often to be determined by the ability to don subjectivities that allow women to enter into particular societal discourses. We are born and raised within certain discourse communities. These interpolate us, leaving us as ideological beings. These discourse communities shape our subjectivities even as our participation in the community shapes the discourses in which we participate. Depending on the discourse, this participation can be particularly empowering, particularly oppressive, or, most commonly, a mixture of both. Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse in *Discourse and the Novel* examines the impact of discourse communities on our subjectivities. Bakhtin suggests, "our tendency to assimilate others' discourse takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming in the most fundamental sense." Indeed, the discourses in which we participate "determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior" (532). He goes on to distinguish between authoritative discourse, that is, that which has status and is acknowledged and recognized, "the authoritative world (religious, political, moral; the word of a father, of adults, and of teachers, etc.)" (532), and internally persuasive discourse, or that which is fluid and comes both from inside ourselves and from our interactions with other discourses. For Bakhtin, authoritative discourse tends to not resonate with us internally, which is in contrast to internally persuasive discourses that are often "denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and [are] frequently not even acknowledged in society" (532). Authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourses are often in conflict with each other, and it is the authoritative discourse that "demands our unconditional allegiance" and "permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transition" (533). Unlike the more static

authoritative discourses that Bakhtin feels we must either accept or reject and cannot edit or manipulate, internally persuasive discourse can and should evolve: in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal even newer “ways to mean” (534).

These newer ways to mean allow an individual to progress in their own “ideological becoming” (532). Ideological becoming is predicated on a continual re-imagining of the self. This re-imagining is a product of both the internal and external discourses in which we participate. Bakhtin suggests that in order to develop an individual’s own voice, it is first necessary to experiment with, engage, and consider these other discourses. However, movement between discourses can be challenging. While there may be possibilities in participating in new discourse spaces, it can be difficult to move beyond or to liberate oneself from an existing discourse, and this, in itself, can be limiting. Attempts to move between spaces, take on new subjectivities, and participate in new discourses can be fraught in that alternate discourses require adherence to different conventions, particular knowledge, specific resources, or particular traits. Moreover, society limits movement, and often power, by making passage between discourse communities difficult.

Engaging with a discourse requires an individual to manifest a subjectivity that allows access into that community. Often, that means learning the new social conventions necessary to participate in the new discourse. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains, “Any social convention is like a ‘script,’ which suggests sequences of action and response, the meaning we give these, and the ways of organizing experience by choices, emphases, priorities” (2). Learning the new script when inhabiting a new subjectivity requires a sense of performance, for it requires conscious effort and often new experience or knowledge to maintain. It can also require individuals to challenge their own ideological positioning as they participate in the new discourse. Sidonie Smith, in discussing performativity and autobiography, notes, “Every day, in disparate venues, in response to sundry occasions, in front of precise audiences (even if an audience of one), people assemble, if only temporarily, a ‘life’ to which they assign narrative coherence and meaning and through which they position themselves in historically specific identities” (17). As speaking individuals, we are often conscious that we are participating in a new and different discourse, and are aware of the new experiences or knowledge needed to maintain that subjectivity. Smith describes this as “interiority” and comments that “the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling” (18). Thus, the subjectivity that we are occupying at any moment is a melding of both the previous self and the current performance. This melding that is required to inhabit a new subjectivity often requires one to challenge his or her previous ideological being or “ways to mean,” but these precise challenges lead to progress, in Bakhtin’s words, in an individual’s “ideological becoming.” These points of tension can lead to powerful shifts in one’s sense of self.

The impact of inhabiting subjectivities and engaging with different discourses is apparent in many contemporary women’s memoirs, but perhaps most interestingly in Ruth Reichl’s *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise* and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*. Reichl and Strayed are different—very different—women with lives and stories that bear little resemblance to each other. However, together the two provide insight into the power and possibilities inherent in engaging and moving between different discourses. They offer portrayals of how to re-imagine oneself. Their renewals reveal that stepping into another subjectivity can be a very powerful act.

In *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise*, for example, Reichl seems very aware of the performative nature of donning new subjectivities as a food critic who visits restaurants in various disguises, and in so doing, she illuminates the possibilities and limitations inherent in finding “new ways to mean.” As the *New York Times* food critic, her words have become part of the privileged, authoritative discourse of the highly lauded *New York Times*. In her role as critic, her discourse is limited to the cognoscenti and requires one to critically engage with food and wine. However, food critics, if recognized, are feted outrageously at restaurants to encourage the best possible review. To avoid this, Reichl fabricates a number of disguises to give her a less ostentatious and more typical experience. She finds that continually re-inventing herself allows her to engage in the restaurant community in very different ways. As Leigh Gilmore observes in “Autobiographics,” “self-representation is constitutively shaped through proximity to those discourses’ definition of authority” (183). Thus, as Reichl dons disguises to escape the privileged experience of the *New York Times* food critic, she is working to distance herself from the authority of that position. These disguises allow her to liberate herself from the constraints of being limited to a single discourse. Reichl strives to be able to move between discourses and to gain from participation in both. She becomes increasingly aware of the power that comes from a particular discourse and the value in being able to continually redefine herself as she moves between subjectivities and contexts.

Reichl easily slips into and enacts the discourse expected of a highly respected food critic, which is demonstrated most clearly when she dines with Mr. Shapiro, who won a dinner with the *New York Times* food critic at a charity auction. Shapiro is obnoxious and pretentious with his knowledge and opinions from the start. In his initial conversation with Reichl, he comments that most “don’t know much about food and wine. I, however, am a food warrior. I have spent years studying gastronomy. And oenology” (245). This attitude is on full display when he joins Reichl and her husband for dinner. Shapiro debates every wine choice with the sommelier: “The favored wine, it seemed, was the ‘89 Clos de Vougeot. This was fine with Mr. Shapiro, who began quizzing the sommelier about the vineyard, clearly trying to trip him up. Failing to do this, he began holding forth about his own recent visit to the Clos and some of the astute purchases he had made on that occasion” (251). Reichl starts to match him:

I told him about translating for the great chef, years ago, when he was cooking at Mondavi, and how we had scoured the countryside for the cock’s combs he needed for his meal. Mr. Shapiro seemed impressed. He mentioned the Auberge de l’Ill and I told about the time I’d gone there with Paula Wolfert and Jim Villas. Next he described the great meal he had eaten at L’Esperance, and I described the way Marc Meneau had fed me and my friend David everything on the menu in one glorious and terrible five-hour meal. . . . Before long he was regretting the downhill trajectory of Roger Verge and I was bragging about the time I’d spent in his kitchen. (253)

When dining with Mr. Shapiro, Reichl seems compelled to ostentatiously prove her authority and finds herself unconsciously performing her role as food critic in a way that she later finds uncomfortable. Her husband noticed her shift in subjectivity and calls it to her attention after leaving the dinner early:

“I couldn’t stay and watch what you were doing. I hate it when you pretend to be that person.”

"What person?" I asked.

"The Restaurant Critic of the *New York Times*. The Princess of New York. Ms.-I-know-I-am-right-about-food-and-don't-argue-with-em. Take your pick."

"Was I that bad?" I whispered. My cheeks burned and I could feel the sweat prickling against my skin.

"Worse," he said. "You were the person you used to make fun of." I felt sick. But Michael wasn't finished. "You really enjoy food, and you're able to translate that pleasure for others. But if you turn into a . . . what did Mr. Shapiro call it?"

"A food warrior," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "If you let yourself become that. . ." He paused for a minute and then started again. "Last night this line from T.S. Eliot kept running through my head. It's from the *Four Quartets*. 'Garlic and sapphires in the mud . . . I remember that when you got into this it was almost a spiritual thing with you. You love to eat, you love to write, you love the generosity of cooks and what happens around a table when a great meal is served. Nothing that went on last night had anything to do with that.'" (255-6)

This conversation makes clear the competing demands of the different discourses that Reichl must occupy. Critics, particularly influential ones, are typically of the food warrior mold, and one writing for the *New York Times* speaks with a particularly authoritative voice. Reichl can effectively inhabit that subjectivity, but she desires other "ways to mean."

Reichl takes on the powerful voice of the authoritative food critic easily, which is part of the reason she is highly recruited by the paper. Still, as Reichl articulates her understanding of her audience, we see that she is already aware of the limitations of that discourse. During an interview, she tells the editor of the *New York Times*, arguably the preeminent newspaper in the world, "You shouldn't be writing reviews for the people who dine in fancy restaurants, but for all the ones who wish they could" (18). She realizes quickly that when she visits restaurants as herself, a powerful reviewer and food critic, she is treated to different seating, service, and even food. Thus, she explains, "One of the primary requisites of a good restaurant critic is the ability to be anonymous" (5). Her solution is "simple": "If every restaurant in New York knew what I looked like, I had to look like someone else" (24). Shifting her positionality through donning costumes allows her to change the context with informs her visits to the restaurants she will review, allowing her to give voice to her experiences from a different positionality. Instead of occupying the authoritative presence which her own body conveys—that of the *New York Times* food critic—Reichl wants to enter the discourse from the position of an anonymous diner. To do this, she manipulates her own context and inhabits new subjectivities. She constantly re-imagines herself and is able to morph into roles that allow her to change the way in which she experiences the different restaurants that she visits.

Still, as she begins the job, it becomes clear that she is expected by the editors and readers, as well as the prior food critic, to participate within the existing set of conventions and values of this discourse—they resist the impact that participation in alternate subjectivities have on her as a writer for the *Times*. Having visited Le Cirque dressed in the "dowdy" and "sensible" disguise of a "lady who lunch[es]" (28, 30, 25), and returning later as herself, the *New York Times* food critic, dining with the editor of the *Times*, she has two very

different experiences. To capture these differences, she writes two different reviews that she plans to run side by side accompanied by two different ratings. The editors determine that she must consolidate the reviews: "It's been decided. One restaurant, one rating" (42). While she ultimately follows the paper's formatting conventions by consolidating the two reviews, many readers are shocked that she would take away one of Le Cirque's stars. The Le Cirque review is perceived by many as another move that challenges the conventions of the paper that has traditionally held up this restaurant as one of the best. One reader tells her, "Shame on you, [. . .] You have destroyed the finest restaurant in America. Never fear; a year from now he'll still be here and you won't" (52). She also pushes up against the conventions of the *Times's* authoritative discourse when she decides to review Honmura An, a Japanese restaurant. She explains, "I had known that many readers would be upset by the review; after nine years of Bryan's frankly French sensibility, three stars to a Japanese soba restaurant was a big change. But I began to notice that Bryan himself seemed offended" (64). Indeed, Reichl describes how the previous *New York Times* food critic, Bryan Miller, has been sending letters to her bosses demanding that she be fired. Miller also talked to gossip columnists and claimed that Reichl had "'destroyed the system that Craig, Mimi, and I upheld.' He claimed that people came up to him every day to tell him that they didn't read the restaurant reviews anymore because they were 'irrelevant and trite.' He claimed that, thanks to me, the *Times* was losing its clout, and the 'it gets worse every day'" (240). While she speaks from within the authoritative discourse of the *Times*, and gains power through her subjective position within that discourse, she is also policed from within it and is expected to conform to the conventions that have traditionally defined it. Still, even as she participates in that discourse, both her approach to reviews and the reviews themselves reveal her struggles to escape its limitations. Moreover as she gains her own voice at the *Times*, it is a voice that is, inherently, shaped by the experiences she has performing other subjectivities.

While Reichl intends to participate in the restaurant discourse community from an alternate position—that is the very point of the costumes she dons—she is shocked by how completely she becomes defined by the personality that she is presenting materially. However, it is not shocking if one considers the complexity required for such performativity. Smith outlines the many tasks needed to perform a certain subjectivity: "Thus a specific recitation of identity involves the inclusion of certain identity contents and the exclusion of others; the incorporation of certain narrative itineraries and intentionalities, the silencing of others; the adoption of certain autobiographical voices, the muting of others" (20). Thus it is not just the questions of costume and demeanor that Reichl is working through, but also less visible considerations of positionality, audience, and interaction that are also taking place.

Interestingly, others quickly accept her new subjectivities. We see this when she is working to review Daniel, another highly acclaimed and well known restaurant. On one visit to Daniel, Reichl disguises herself as Brenda. Brenda is easy going and unsophisticated almost to point of sloppiness, but has a warmth and graciousness that draw others to her. Brenda is not the typical clientele of an upscale restaurant such as Daniel and stands out in the elegant environment. Another patron even tries to give Brenda and her companions advice, commenting, "they probably don't get to eat in places like this very often" (173). A similar thing occurs when she dines as Betty, the character Reichl calls "her invisible woman" (207). When she tells one of her dining companions that she regularly gets

bad service, her acquaintance, who does not realize Reichl is the *Times* food critic, responds, "You look like an old lady. And waiters consider old ladies their natural enemies. They think they will complain constantly, order the cheapest dishes on the menu, and leave a six percent tip. I have found that it is essential to appear prosperous when going out to eat" (215). In not appearing prosperous, Reichl successfully performs a personality that causes others to see her and interact with her not as a representative of the authoritative discourse of the *Times*, but as an entirely different person.

What Reichl does not expect, however, is the impact of her performances on her sense of self. Bakhtin argues that an individual's ideological becoming is "the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (532). Reichl offers a particularly interesting way to look at this because she is not just interacting with others, but with herself—she is constantly re-imagining and re-inventing herself. As she inhabits Brenda and Chloe and Miriam and the others, she is able to engage in discourses with a different material presence. At several points while she is inhabiting Brenda, she becomes jealous of the warm feelings that others have about her presence in this role. Her son notes that "Brenda's more fun" and Reichl herself comments that "Brenda's world was a gentler place than mine: people wished her well" (173). This offers a clear picture of how important material context is. It not only defines how others perceive Reichl, it also defines how Reichl interprets herself. She notes: "Brenda was my best self, the person I've always wanted to be" (174). What Reichl does not foresee is that just as she is participating in the world in new and different ways, the different subjectivities she inhabits are informing her own ideological becoming. During her first visit in disguise, she realizes, "I'm going to learn a lot, being someone else" (51). Reichl's realization illustrates one of Paul John Eakin's conclusions in *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Eakin asserts, "the process of self-discovery is finally inseparable from the art of self-invention" (55). Indeed, as Reichl reinvents herself, she also discovers herself anew. The constant re-imaginings of herself lead to a larger rebirth.

Not only does her experience of performing other subjectivities shape her ideological being, it also begins to shift her presentation of self when she is participating in other discourses. She finds her review of Daniel to be authentic to Brenda—her performed character—rather than to the Ruth Reichl, the food critic. The review is seen as innovative and strange, and Reichl realizes, "Ruth did not write the review. Brenda did" (179-80). However, materially, this discourse is presented through the personality of Ruth Reichl, *New York Times* food critic. Thus, it carries that authority with it. She finds this uncomfortable, for Brenda's voice—a voice of a newly performed subjectivity—shifts Ruth's authoritative presence. Still, this also evidences the power and the possibilities inherent in the ability to move between discourses and subjectivities, for those movements lead to the possibility of shaping and reshaping one's previous sense of self and voice in new and varied ways. As Mark Freeman notes, "[T]he very fact that I can, on occasions, move in the direction of becoming conscious of the ways I am determined, suggests that there exists a margin of freedom within which to think, act, be" (217). Reichl's experience illustrates both a consciousness of the ways she is "determined," as well as the potential "freedom" that such a consciousness affords.

Indeed, her experiences as Brenda, Miriam, and Chloe lead her to shift the way she uses her voice within the authoritative context of the *New York Times*—to at least some degree. She consistently finds herself policed and challenged, ultimately leading her to leave her position there, instead taking a position as the editor of *Gourmet*. Despite the resistance

she faces, her story shows the possibilities inherent in performing new subjectivities, and the impact that such movement can have on one's understanding of self. Her rebirth allows her to enter a more fulfilling and authentic space.

While Reichl's engagement with alternate subjectivities evolves through her intended performances, Cheryl Strayed dons a new subjectivity by deciding to go on a journey down the Pacific Coast Trail (PCT). By the end of her journey, Strayed illustrates how she has adopted another discourse—the discourse of the trail—as her own and has completely rebirthed herself. Strayed is looking for liberation from her current existence and the discourses which envelop and limit her. She has not been able to re-imagine a satisfactory life for herself, so she hits the PCT in hopes of a rebirth. As Strayed hikes, the PCT discourse, one far outside her own experience, begins to allow her to reimagine herself. For Strayed, “Another's discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our own behaviors” (Bakhtin 534). Just as Reichl realizes that performing different subjectivities has shifted who she is, so too does Strayed, but unlike Reichl, who always intended to leave her disguises behind and was surprised by their larger impact on her ideological becoming, Strayed sets out seeking the liberation of such a shift. In much the same way that Reichl donned disguises to change the context within which she interacted with the authoritative, Strayed changes her context. However, she does this more consciously and dramatically than Reichl, and, through these contextual shifts, Strayed finds renewal and a new, more powerful sense of self.

Strayed seeks out her journey in response to her current subjectivity; she finds herself “very loose” (3) in the world, her mother dead, her marriage in ruins, her sense of self diminished. The traditional discourses that had always defined her—those of daughter and wife—had proven insufficient as she confronted her mother's death and the breakup of her marriage. Moreover, she gains little power though her most recent affair with Joe, a man with whom she shoots heroin “in spite of the fact that I hadn't touched it since that time he'd come to visit in Minneapolis six months earlier” (66). Her stated goal in embarking on her hike down the PCT is to immerse herself in a new discourse, one that she ‘thought would both make [her] into the woman [she] knew [she could] become and turn me back into the girl [she'd] once been” (4). She is searching for a discourse and an experience different from her own that will somehow change her, while also bringing her back to herself. Indeed, she recognizes that her choice to take this journey on the PCT is about claiming some form of power, an idea highlighted as she reads Adrienne Rich's poem, “Power” out loud, “my voice rising about the sound of the wind battering the walls of my tent. I read it again and again and again” (60).

As she begins her journey, she is working to learn the PCT discourse. She realizes that hiking the PCT is vastly different than anything she has done:

I walked all the time. I walked for hours on end in my work as a waitress. I walked for pleasure and for purpose. . . . But after about fifteen minutes of walking on the PCT, it was clear that I had never walked into desert mountains in early June with a pack that weighed significantly more than half of what I did strapped onto my back. Which, it turns out, is not very much like walking at all. Which in fact, resembles walking less than it does hell. (50)

She has stepped into the discourse of the PCT, but is not equipped for it and does not yet understand it or appreciate it. While she hopes her journey will lead her to a sense of

personal revival and renewal, she is also frightened by the opportunity and unsure of her own abilities to survive and grow.

Not only does she not understand the new discourse, but her old modes of thinking inform her experience: “The voice inside my head was screaming, *What have I gotten myself into?* . . . So then I tried to simply concentrate on what I heard—my feet thudding against the dry and rocky trail, the brittle leaves and branches of the low-lying bushes I passed clattering in the hot wind—but it could not be done. The clamor of *What have I gotten myself into?* was a mighty shout. It could not be drowned out” (50-1). The precarity of her situation is terrifying in a way that it was not for Reichl, for Reichl always intended to return to her original subjectivity, while Strayed is working to move away from hers. The discomfort that occurs in shifting to a new and different subjectivity is visible and heightened due to what Strayed sees as the stakes of this journey. Strayed is fearful not only for her life, but also of her precarity of subjectivity. She is inhabiting an alien space and has to learn how to participate in the PCT discourse as she progresses.

Like Reichl, Strayed has moments where she is very conscious of her shifts in discourse. She articulates this as she is considering the possible hazards as she hikes:

I expected one [a rattlesnake] around every bend, ready to strike. The landscape was made for them, it seemed. And also for mountain lions and wilderness-savvy serial killers. But I wasn't thinking of them. It was a deal I'd made with myself months before and the only thing that allowed me to hike alone. I knew that if I allowed fear to overtake me, my journey was doomed. Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves, and so I chose to tell myself a different story from the one women are told. I decided I was safe. I was strong. I was brave. Nothing could vanquish me. Insisting on this story was a form of mind control, but for the most part, it worked. . . . I simply did not let myself become afraid. Fear begets fear. Power begets power. I will myself to beget power. And it wasn't long before I actually wasn't afraid. (51)

Being able to recognize and shift discourses is empowering. In choosing to “tell myself a different story,” Strayed is consciously working to shift into another discourse, which will allow her to re-imagine herself. What she articulates here is an understanding that the only way to be able to fully inhabit a discourse is to engage with and experience it.

Not only must she tell herself a new story, but she must also respond to others who see her new subjectivity as odd or inappropriate. Her participation in this new discourse ultimately contradicts traditional patriarchal thinking and values that have defined much of Strayed's life. Early on her journey, Cheryl meets Frank. As her decision to hike the trail contradicts what would seem “normal” for a woman, Frank asks her “What kind of woman are you? . . . Are you like Jane? Like the kind of woman Tarzan would like?” (73). He strives to find a way to understand her in the context of the discourses he already knows. She, in turn, feels the need to say she isn't hiking alone but that her husband will be joining her in a few days' time. She lies to help protect herself, highlighting the pervasive nature of the authoritative, patriarchal discourse.

As she moves on to eschew the discourse that would deem a journey like this silly and also inappropriate and dangerous for women, she must learn the language, script, and rules of the trail. She first attempts this through numerous conversations that lead to copious purchasing of supplies at REI. After the first day on the trail, it is clear how woefully

unprepared she actually is. Asking herself why she hadn't sought out people who had hiked the PCT, she admonishes herself: "I was a big fat idiot and I didn't know what the hell I was doing" (58). Still, as she hikes, she encounters others who teach her the discourse of the trail. Greg encourages her by acknowledging that it is always hard when one begins and teaches her to use a snow axe. Albert helps her repack her pack. Slowly, with some help, Strayed learns to navigate the trail.

Moreover, as she hikes, she becomes part of the discourse of the trail. As she adds notes to the trail registers, others mark her presence and wonder about her. Another group of hikers tell her that they've been following her for a long way, both seeing her tracks and her notes in the registers. She is part of their trail experience. Later, they give her the nickname, "The Queen of the PCT" (296). They give her this name "Because people always want to give you things and do things for you" (296). This leads her to realize: "All the time that I'd been fielding questions about whether I was afraid to be a woman alone—the assumption that a woman alone would be preyed upon—I'd been the recipient of one kindness after another" (296). This realization helps her shift from seeing herself as a victim to seeing herself as someone capable and empowered, as someone who can accept the support and help of others, but who is also able to navigate a challenge and survive. In other words, as she comes to find her place in the discourse of the PCT, it has shifted her understanding of her life, giving her new ways to mean.

Strayed's re-imagined self comes with new agency. In "Autobiographics," Gilmore notes that it is important to analyze "how women use self-representation and its constitutive possibilities for agency and subjectivity to become no longer primarily subject to exchange but subjects who exchange the position of object for the subject of self-representational agency" (183). Strayed has begun to find new ways to perform and to represent herself. These shifts bring agency. As Strayed embodies the discourse of the trail, not only does she find new ways to see herself, but she also uses the time and experience of the trail to process and understand in new ways the relationship with her mother, father, and her ex-husband. In *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*, Freeman argues that we are constantly reimagining the past, refiguring ourselves "anew through interpretation" (3). He further asks, "Don't we rewrite the other and our relationship to the other at the very same time that we rewrite the self?" (215). In other words, as Strayed comes to understand herself and her personal story differently, she also begins to see the stories of her loved ones in new and different ways. As she begins her journey, she is plagued by dreams of her dead mother who would command Strayed to kill her "Again and again and again," and "like a good daughter, [Strayed] complied" (26). Her mother's death has left Strayed haunted by the loss, broken and aimless. Visions of her mother come to her repeatedly as she traverses the miles of the trail, but through this new discourse and within this new subjectivity, she is able to confront and process her loss. For instance, she recalls a conversation with her mother before her death. In it, her mom highlights the traditional authoritative discourse expected of women: "I always did what someone else wanted me to do. I've always been someone's daughter or mother or wife. I've never been just me" (273). At the time, Strayed says, she just stroked her hand, as she was "too young to say anything else" (273). But now, revisiting this memory, Strayed is able to see it within the context of her re-imagined positionality and discourse as she had come to define herself as more than daughter and wife—she has also now embodied the role of hiker. It is at the end of her hike that she is able to claim a new understanding of herself and a way to manage the loss of her mother: "It took me years To be the woman

my mother raised. . . . I would want things to be different than they were. The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods. . . . It was a place called the Bridge of Gods” (27).

Similarly, on the trail she comes to see the role of her father in her life in a different way. She says, “That was my father: the man who hadn’t fathered me. It amazed me every time” (233). However, her experience on the PCT helps her to understand that relationship in a new way: “It occurred to me that I didn’t have to be amazed by him anymore. There were so many other amazing things in this world” (234). Likewise, she reframes her understanding of her relationship with Paul, her ex-husband. As she walks along the beach with Jonathan, she realizes she had camped at the same beach years before with Paul. She says, “I could feel the memory of it like a cloak on my skin. Who I’d been when I’d been here with Paul and what I’d thought would happen and what did and who I was now and how everything had changed” (257). Later, she writes Paul’s name in the sand, something she had regularly done when she was with him. This time, however, is different: “But as I wrote his name now, I knew I was doing it for the last time. I didn’t want to hurt for him anymore, to wonder in leaving him I’d made a mistake, to torment myself with all the ways I’d wronged him. What if I forgive myself? . . . What if what made me do all those things everyone thought I shouldn’t have done was what also had got me here?” (258). In this moment, she is able to face her past choices through the lens of her new discourse, letting go of some of the regret and hurt, and redefining those past choices.

Over the course of Strayed’s journey, she comes to embody—is reborn into—a new discourse, one that provides alternative ways of knowing and being, and liberation from the discourses that have previously defined and limited her. While adapting and learning the conventions of that new discourse was challenging, it also allowed her new, more powerful ways to engage with the world around her. As she contemplates the final moments of her hike, she says, “*Thank you*, I thought over and over again. *Thank you*. Not just for the long walk, but for everything I could feel finally gathered up inside of me; for everything the trail had taught me and everything I couldn’t yet know, though I felt it somehow already contained within me” (310). What is striking here is not only the knowledge she has gained, nor even her ability to embody a new way of seeing and being, but also the realization of “everything I couldn’t yet know” (310). At the end of her autobiography, Strayed quickly reflects on her life since finishing her hike. She says, “in four years I’d cross the Bridge of the Gods with another man and marry him in a spot almost visible from where I now sat. How in nine years that man and I would have a son named Carver and a year and a half after that, a daughter named Bobbi” (310). As she leaves the trail, she returns to the more traditional discourses of wife and mother, but she returns in a changed way. Her experiences on the trail will affect the way she understands and participates in the discourses of wifeness and motherhood. As she returns to that spot fifteen years later and she tells them “the story of the time I’d been here once before” (310), it is clear that participating in one discourse has indeed shaped and changed the way she participates in the other. Indeed, Strayed leaves her journey with a realization of the power that is possible through adopting and participating within multiple and new discourses, discourses that we can and must choose.

By the end of *Wild*, it is clear that Strayed now sees multiplicities rather than binaries. She sees possibility and power as she concludes: “It was my life . . . so very belonging to me. How wild it was” (311). It is no longer that she must be one thing or another, but that through the movement between subjectivities and discourses, one’s “ways to mean” are made large,

opening wild worlds of possibility and reimagination. In a more subtle way, Reichl has shown us the same idea. In bringing the voices of Molly, Brenda, Miriam, and her other disguises into her own voice as *New York Times* food critic, she has challenged the limits and begun to open up possibilities beyond her original subjectivity. The stories we tell of ourselves are, as Paul John Eakin argues, “necessarily mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourse in which they are expressed” (*How Our Lives* 4), but Strayed’s and Reichl’s narratives illustrate the possibility of movement between mediated cultural models, highlighting the limitations of individual subject positions and depicting the empowerment that comes through discovering new “models of identity” which lead to “new ways to mean.” Both Reichl and Strayed realize new aspects and potentialities in their own selves through their movement between discourses.

These autobiographies make visible how powerful and liberating the conscious decision to shift discourses can be, while also demonstrating how challenging such a move is. Indeed, not only is being able to perform a particular discourse important, but being able to choose, shift and move between different contexts is also meaningful, for it is in these movements that we can reimagine ourselves and our possibilities. Deciding which role to play, and then gathering the knowledge, resources, and other wherewithal to occupy that space can be frightening and challenging, but these choices can lead to agency and power. Reichl and Strayed demonstrate that making these shifts is daring, because shifting from one discourse to another inherently challenges existing discourses and subjectivities. Moreover, participating in a new discourse requires a period of precarity as you learn how to inhabit that alternate subjectivity. Still, Reichl’s and Strayed’s experiences reveal that we are ultimately limited less by the requirements of a particular role and more by our hesitation to step into new spaces, for it is through such moves that we can liberate and re-imagine ourselves.

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