humanities

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Let Seizing Truths Lie: Witnessing "Factions" in Lauren Slater's *Lying*

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Received: 11 September 2017; Accepted: 24 October 2017; Published: 31 October 2017

Abstract: In her memoir, *Lying* (2000), Lauren Slater fabricates most of her life narrative. Her text frustrates those who resent the combined fact and fiction—or "faction"—that she spins. This readerly response is understandable. Nevertheless, this article maintains that Slater lies in her memoir not to mislead readers but to witness traumas she struggles to access and articulate. Trauma and autobiographical theorists document the necessity of writing through—or "witnessing"—trauma to overcome it. When, however, a narrator is inhibited by what psychiatrists call "psychic constriction" (memory loss due to an inability to reconcile oneself with a painful past), she can become powerless to take the steps necessary to recover, as she cannot convey fully what she has suffered. Such is the case for Slater, who lies to witness ineffable traumas alongside her very inability to witness them. *Lying* also opens an important question about the reader's role in traumatic witnessing: how does one respond to the traumatic testimony of an unreliable narrator? In answer, inasmuch as one may resist Slater's memoir, one also has the ability to enter into and engage in her experience. In presenting this opportunity, *Lying* offers the writer-narrator and reader-respondent alike, a way to witness trauma together.

Keywords: trauma; memoir; witnessing; *Lying*; reader response

In their work with trauma victims, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub document the necessity of writing through—or "witnessing"—trauma to overcome it. To endure and prevail, they attest, the wounded subject must face her "buried truths" and "piece together" and voice a "fully-realized narrative" (Farrell 1998, p. 1). "The survivor", Laub maintains, must write her story "to survive" (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 63). Autobiographical critic Suzette Henke explains that writing to witness serves as a form of "scriptotherapy," a process that empowers survivors to "write out and through" the traumatic events in their lives (Henke 2001, p. 142). Life-writing, Henke explains, allows the traumatized subject to recall and reframe a once-splintered identity. Through witnessing, a writer serves as both an analyst and analysand of her psychic history; she can then reemerge in written form, as a newly empowered "I" (ibid, p. 142). If a survivor does not write her history, autobiographical theorist and memoirist Janet Ellerby maintains, traumatic aftermath intensifies (Ellerby 2001, p. 25). One may repress a traumatic memory for a period of time, but, until witnessed, the experience continues to haunt.[1]

[1] Recent research on trauma and postcolonial studies (e.g., by Michael Rothberg (Rothberg 2009) and Stef Craps (Craps 2013) has criticized psychoanalytic trauma theory for eliding the traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority groups, by assuming as "universal" a Eurocentric, mono-cultural, logocentric bias, which defines "trauma" as individual and psychoanalytic (versus communal and cultural) and "recovery" as secured exclusively through scriptotherapy (versus other modes, such as dancing, painting, meditation, and/or silence). While I appreciate this critique, this article nevertheless utilizes a psychoanalytic lens to analyze *Lying*, since Slater, a psychoanalyst and a writer, presents her trauma as a unique (or an individual)

In the memoir, *Lying*, author-narrator, Lauren Slater, employs scriptotherapy to witness inaccessible, unknown traumas through the overlapping metaphors of compulsive lying and epileptic seizing. More than the history she struggles to remember and convey, however, Slater's narrative opens certain aporias: what is the reader's role in witnessing? How does one respond to traumatic testimony, particularly when its narrator, like Slater's "Lauren,"[2] admits to being a "slippery sort?" (Slater 2000, p. 160). In answer, inasmuch as a reader may resist *Lying* (a natural response to the tale of a self-described liar and madwoman), one also possesses the opportunity to see through her eyes and read in her voice, and, in doing so, to access and work through her life experiences. That is to say, if a reader can engage in what it feels like to be the writer-narrator, while still sustaining a separate position and individual perspective as a reader-respondent, one can join the writer-narrator in witnessing.

Witnessing, I argue, is not one-sided but interpersonal: The writer-narrator (whom I term the *primary witness*) testifies in relation to the reader-listener (or *secondary witness*) who receives the narrative and attests to its veracity. I call the interchange between writer and reader, *dual-witnessing*, and the failure to engage trauma, *anti-witnessing*.[3] Autobiographical critics substantiate the dual nature of witnessing. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw emphasize that witnessing encompasses both the experience of those primary witnesses "who have suffered directly" and those secondary witnesses who "suffer with them, through them, or for them, if only by reading trauma" (Miller and Tougaw 2002, p. 2). Trauma theorists concur. "It takes two to witness the unconscious," Felman asserts (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 24). Laub corroborates that witnessing requires the "intimate and total presence of an *other*" (ibid, p. 70). In fact, a relational mode is denoted in the definition of the word, "witness." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a "witness" as both the speaker who bears witness "from personal observation" (OED 2017c, sense 6a) (the primary witness) and the "spectator or auditor", who bears witness to the speaker's trauma (ibid, sense 6a) (the secondary witness). Accordingly, if Slater is to surmount her trauma, she must do more than write to witness. Readers must witness *Lying's* contents in return. To clarify, to witness trauma secondarily does not mean that one becomes a survivor oneself. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun explains that the reader engages the writer's "victories, defeats, and silences" and "know[s] them from within" (Chun 2002, p. 162). At the same time, the secondary witness recognizes that she is not the primary witness: she has not suffered precisely what the primary witness has. Dual-witnessing is only possible when a secondary witness engages another's testimony without co-opting it.

For the survivor, the impulse to witness is simultaneously inhibited by what psychiatrist Judith Herman calls "psychic constriction," a state of indeterminate memory loss due to an inability to come to terms with the magnitude of a traumatic event (Herman 1997, p. 42). The constricted narrator, Herman explains, can find herself powerless to take the very steps necessary to recover, since she cannot convey fully what she has suffered (ibid, p. 7). Laub explains that, for traumatized subjects, "there are never enough words or the right words…to articulate the story that cannot be fully

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psychic shattering that calls to be processed through scriptotherapy, versus a larger, cultural catastrophe that could be witnessed in other ways. Given how Slater herself frames her narrative, this article does not debate the merits of psychoanalytic trauma theory, or the necessity of scriptotherapy, but explores instead (1) what happens to those, such as Slater, who resonate with writing as a form of psychic healing, but struggle to write through their individual traumas and (2) how readers can respond to such imparted testimony.

[2] I refer to the author of *Lying* as "Slater" and call her narrator "Lauren." These figures overlap (both are "Lauren Slater"), and it is not always clear how and when the two diverge and converge. Nevertheless, I wish to distinguish the writer's narrator, "Lauren," from the writer, "Slater," as "Lauren" is a character Slater creates to help her write through an otherwise un-witnessable past, and Slater exists outside of her memoir as the arranger of both "Lauren" and the traumas to which *Lying* testifies.

[3] The word "witness" exists as both a noun (the witness) and a verb (to witness). Similarly, the terminology I use to describe dual-witnessing includes both noun and verb forms: one can function as a "primary witness" (n) or secondary witness" (n). One can also "witness primarily" or write through one's traumatic experience (v) and "witness secondarily" or receive another's traumatic testimony (v). An anti-witness (n) refers to a reader-respondent who refuses to engage another's trauma. "To anti-witness" (v) is to disengage from the writer-narrator's traumatic narrative.

captured" (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 63). However much a narrator may wish to witness, words elude her. The harder she tries, the more difficult witnessing becomes. In attempting to write through trauma, a primary witness may discover that she cannot tell her story; she may not even know what it is.

Such is the case for Slater who admits that the "truth" of her history is emblematic, her nonfiction creative. In *Lying*, Slater fuses fact and fiction together into what I call "faction" (an amalgamation of truth and falsehood), because she does not trust her memory. Her inner narrator is unreliable. Slater wants to witness her story, but she cannot extract the truth from the haze of her imaginings. When attempting to recall her history, she confesses: "I had always believed there could be two truths, truth A and truth B". In her experience, however, "A and B were placed in a parallel position, …so I couldn't decide" what was real and what was not (Slater 2000, p. 94). Slater senses *something* traumatic happened to her, but she cannot work through precisely what that *something* is. She cannot separate A from B to witness either (or something else entirely).

Slater's struggle to separate fact from fiction when witnessing trauma is not unique to her; other memoirists have also explored the notion of "truth" in relation to traumatic memory in their work. Writer Dorothy Allison, for example, has struggled to witness the childhood traumas of physical and sexual abuse and the state-sanctioned stigma of being declared "illegitimate" on her birth certificate. When attempting to write through her trauma, Allison found that language failed to convey adequately her experience. She thus crafted multiple versions of her life story, first using fiction (in the 1992 novel, *Bastard out of Carolina*), then performance art, and, ultimately, a hybrid memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (Allison 1996), which combined the genres of fiction, performance art, photography, and non-fiction to witness trauma. Together, these texts speak to the continued need to witness in order to heal and the use of multiple genres (and varying, divergent forms of "truth") to do so. Similarly, Susan Brison, a philosophy professor at Dartmouth and a survivor of sexual assault, found the "challenge" of witnessing traumatic experience "daunting" (Brison 2003, p. xi). When she first sat down to write about her rape, she recalls, "things…stopped making sense" (ibid, ix). "I thought it was quite possible that I was brain-damaged", she confesses. "I couldn't explain what had happened to me" (ibid, ix.) Brison worked through her psychic constriction by publishing a memoir that both details and analyzes from a philosophical perspective, her assault and others' reactions to it. Brison was able to explain what happened (even when language failed her), by periodically stepping out of a traumatic space to analyze from a more distanced, academic perspective how the assault and others' responses to it shaped her traumatic aftermath.

The difference between authors such as Allison and Brison, and Slater, is that Allison and Brison know precisely what happened to them to cause the constriction that hinders scriptotherapy. The narrator in *Lying*, conversely, cannot locate the source of her trauma. Lauren feels compelled to write to witness, but she cannot identify precisely what traumas have shattered her, or how and when they originated. Instead, when asked to diagnose her illness, Lauren becomes constricted. When a police officer inquires whether or not she has epilepsy, she "want[s] to answer," but the words get "tangled in [her] throat" (Slater 2000, p. 43). When prompted to speak about the source of her sickness, she shuts down. Psychic constriction continues throughout *Lying*. A behaviorist encourages Lauren to describe her psychological "triggers"; she "s[ays] nothing" (ibid, p. 37). Her pediatrician asks her to explain what happened to her; she "searche[s] for the words" (ibid, p. 21). Even when Lauren senses she has improved, that "something had changed in me," she cannot witness "exactly what it [is]" (ibid, 56).

The use of "something" and "it" to describe Lauren's condition is significant, in that the pronouns are at once constrictive (indicating an inability to define what *it* is) and open and variable (suggesting that Lauren suffers from anything, everything, and nothing at once). As the English translation of Freud's *id* (Latin: "it"), *it* also expresses Lauren's unconscious, her "repressed [some]things" that, if she could "just let" "fly free" would help her "get better" (ibid, p. 81). While the writer, Slater, artfully conveys Lauren's constricted confusion, the narrator, Lauren, remains unable to decode what *id* is. However much she wishes to witness the "repressed [some]things" of her unconscious, they continue to elude her.

A psychically-constricted Lauren clearly *wants* to witness her traumatic history. When encouraged by friends at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to tell her tale—"Lauren, the story saves, Lauren" (ibid, p. 203)—she jumps at the opportunity: "This…was my chance to tell the truth. "They wanted my story, I would tell them my story" (ibid, p. 203). When she finds herself before the assembly, however, she cannot disclose the workings of her psyche. "In order to do it really right," she realizes "I would also have to admit I was not an alcoholic" (ibid, p. 192). (she has joined the group under false pretenses). Lauren longs to tell her listeners (and Slater longs to tell her readers) that "I suffered from a different disease" (ibid, p. 203), but she does not "really see how that could happen" (ibid, p. 192). Note that, even in disclosing her desire, Lauren does not pronounce what that "different disease" is (ibid, p. 203). She merely repeats that she wants to say *something* that remains unspoken. In this scene, Slater may actually come closer to witnessing than Lauren does, as Lauren fails to speak her trauma (a sense of catastrophe she cannot articulate), while Slater successfully writes through hers (the concurrent desire and inability to witness trauma). While speaking and writing may seem like similar forms of witnessing (both forms testify), psychological trauma and autobiographical theorists maintain that witnessing requires narrators to write, not just speak, through traumatic histories.

When trauma is not witnessed, Herman attests, it "surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom" (Herman 1997, p. 37), a *something* that manifests, in Lauren's case, as feigned and real seizures, compulsive stealing, and, ultimately, lying—that which helps her gloss over the inscrutabilities with which she wrestles. Lauren constructs fiction to witness truths she can neither access nor articulate. Fittingly, she first supplants truth with metaphor in Literature class, when she tells Sarah Kushner that she is dying of cancer (she is not), so that, out of pity, the popular girls will invite to her to their parties (they do) (Slater 2000, p. 66). From that moment forward, Lauren reconstructs her life through lying. Slater does the same, reminding readers that her memoir's "factions" gesture toward deeper truths. "I'm using metaphor", Slater writes, "specifically the metaphor of epilepsy, to tell my tale, a tale I know no other way of telling, a tale of my past, …of pains and humiliations and illnesses so subtle and nuanced I could never find the literal words" (ibid, p. 192). Her method becomes "a way of telling you what I have to tell you" (ibid, p. 6), a way to witness traumas that cannot but must be written.

To conflate indefinable trauma with epilepsy, a medical condition that affects other people more than figuratively, risks promoting ableism, the social discrimination against—and associated marginalization and oppression of—persons with disabilities. Ableism defines people according to their (dis)abilities and then classifies those identified as "disabled"—in this case, the epileptic—as inferior to those who are non-disabled (Linton 1998, p. 9). The comparison Slater draws between epilepsy and trauma fosters ableism in suggesting (falsely) that the condition of epilepsy is itself traumatic. Actual epileptics, however, may not classify their neurodiversity as traumatic, but simply as a different way of experiencing the world. The metaphor of epilepsy also encourages an ableist treatment of (and a victim-blaming mentality toward) post-traumatic experience, in linking post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the medical pathology of an individual, placing the burden of recovery on the "sick" individual, rather than on the conditions that created the trauma. Finally, the seriousness of epilepsy is reduced when Slater ties it to some uncontainable "truth"—especially if that truth is inextricably intertwined with both trauma and falsehood.

The metaphors Slater uses to describe her condition are undoubtedly problematic. Even so, Slater writes figuratively (or lies), not to misappropriate others' experiences or to manipulate her readers, "but for things beyond weight, beyond measure" (Slater 2000, p. 88). She exaggerates to witness unspeakable trauma. Lauren's neurologist, Dr. Neu, tells her: "In one sense you lied, but in another sense you didn't, because…you were only being true to yourself" (ibid, p. 202). Although Lauren bristles at Neu's characterization, Slater makes a similar point herself. She fashions falsehoods, as if "words might make" that elusive "*it* real" (ibid, p. 14). Her lies point to truth. In this sense, epilepsy marks a fitting metaphor, in Slater's words to "convey"—or witness—"her psyche" (ibid, p. 162). Slater offers the etymology of epilepsy as "com[ing] from the Greek word *epilepsia*, which means 'to take, to seize'" (ibid, p. 71). She does not mention that, in addition to "the act of

seizing" (OED 2017a, sense I), epilepsy also depicts "the fact of being seized (ibid, sense 1a). The author's disease thus signifies both its meaning (to seize) and its opposite (to be seized). Few illnesses could better describe Slater's psychic "thrash and spasm" (Slater 2000, p. 81) than one whose appellation is a contronym. Even within its own name, epilepsy denotes where Slater situates Lauren: at the crossroads of multiple discourses. The double meaning of the word "epilepsy" also mirrors the double meaning of the word "witness", a noun and a verb that denotes both the one who speaks or writes through trauma (the primary witness) and the one who engages it (the secondary witness) as well as the act of witnessing (speaking or writing through trauma) and the reception of witnessing (when a reader-listener engages another's traumatic narrative). In this way, the metaphor of epilepsy speaks both to Slater's seizing psychic condition and to the duality inherent in the act of witnessing.

Instead of lying to its readers, then, *Lying* successfully witnesses its writer-narrator's psychic truths. Like Lauren, Slater wants to be understood. She thus witnesses not only why she seizes but why she lies and how her lies function in her memoir. She explains: "If I were making the whole thing up…I would be doing it not to create a character as a novelist does, but, instead, to create a metaphor that conveys the real person I am" (ibid, p. 162). She later adds: "I do not know how to say the pain directly. I never have" (ibid, p. 204). Through "faction," Slater's memoir metaphorically witnesses a seizing consciousness that transcends language.

Lying depicts symbolic truths, but because Slater has acknowledged this reality—that exaggeration and falsehood are the only "truths" she knows—she is able to witness what would otherwise remain un-witnessable. "I am my best approximation of me," she writes. "I am not a fiction, but nor am I a fact" (ibid, p. 164). Lauren may not be a reliable narrator—there is no way to know which of her stories are factual and/or to what degree—but what Slater, as *Lying*'s arranger, does with her stories becomes more important than whether or not her "factions" happen to have happened. "Metaphor", Slater confirms, "is the greatest gift of language, for through it, we can propel…otherwise wordless experiences into shapes and sounds" (ibid, p. 219). Through *Lying*, Slater finds a way to witness that *something* that unsettles Lauren.

Acting epileptic and speaking lies, however, prove insufficient channels to release Lauren's quaking testimony. Slater cites *mythomania*, the compulsive need to tell stories, as a symptom of her "disease," but she also lists *hypergraphia*, "the driving compulsion to write," as a core element of her illness (ibid, p. 98). In order to witness, *Lying* suggests, Lauren must write. However Eurocentric and logocentric, the centrality of writing to witnessing is critically substantiated. Felman, Laub, Hampl, and Henke all assert that speaking testimony is not sufficient to overcome trauma. In order to heal, one must move beyond orality and physically record one's experience (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 63; Hampl 1999, p. 34; Henke 2001, p. 142). This assertion raises troubling questions for those who cannot write or do not relate to writing as a therapeutic process. Scriptotherapy, however, does resonate with Slater. The moment she realizes she can write her way out of illness, she celebrates: "something happened to me" (Slater 2000, p. 111). "I went straight to…my notebook. Holding my pen, I wrote faster and faster…The words were pure pleasure, physical rhythmic objects that released dreams like birds from a magician's fist…and when I was done, I saw a story before me" (ibid, p. 111). In this scene, rather than seizing, Slater is seized with inspiration. In writing, she discovers not only a story before her but her inner being, released "like birds" from a constricted psychic fist (ibid, p. 111). Writing proves restorative, helping both the author, Slater, and her narrator, Lauren, articulate a painful past.

In *Autobiographics*, Leigh Gilmore critiques autobiography and memoir for inciting authors to construct a falsely unitive "I" (Gilmore 1994, p. ix). Gilmore's view overlooks that life-writing, though necessarily self-absorbed, does not require authors to perform essentialized selves. Autobiography and memoir, Felman attests, can help traumatized persons witness memories, otherwise "overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be…assimilated into full cognition" (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 5). If Felman is correct, writers such as Slater can use their work to write through shattering experiences. In the preface to *Lying*, Slater makes a similar point through the character of Dr. Hayward Krieger, an expert she invents to define memoir as "a new kind of Heideggerian truth, the truth of the liminal, the not-knowing, the

truth of confusion" (Slater 2000, p. x). Rather than underscoring a unified "I", memoirs like Slater's open aporias of "I" and "you." Slater writes: "I am two separate people, just like me and you" (ibid, p. 173). In such passages, Slater does not assign a unitive "I" to her narrator, but instead exposes Lauren's multiple, contradictory selves that crash into and seize away from one another. In witnessing this liminal identity, Slater deconstructs Gilmore's essentialized "I." She also (perhaps unknowingly) underscores the process of dual-witnessing, when a primary witness (or "I") occupies the same psychic or textual space as a secondary witness ("you"), without merging wholly into the other.

The duality inherent in Slater's narrator is complicated further when Lauren acknowledges that she encompasses more than "two separate people"—"me and you" (ibid, p. 173)—but, like Walt Whitman, "contain[s] multitudes" (Whitman [1855] 2007, p. 67): "I didn't live [only] as Lauren," Slater writes. "I lived…as April, Bobby, Maria and Juliette. 'I am an epileptic,' Juliette said. …'I have seizures all the time'" (Slater 2000, p. 87). Within the supposedly cohesive genre of memoir, Slater's narrative voice is not unified. Instead, her work witnesses multiplicity—"April," "Bobby," "Maria," and "Juliette," written in both first person ("I am an epileptic") and third person ("Juliette said")—without erasing or diminishing elements of herself. In *Lying*, Slater breaks open the assumed authority of the autobiographical "I" by adding something more—that which Slater perpetually attempts to witness. Lauren explains:

> I'd like to…lay out the possibilities…(A) I have epilepsy…(B) I have epilepsy, but due to…the need to exaggerate,…you should believe only selectively what I have recorded here. (C) I don't have epilepsy at all,…but I do have Munchausen's, and what you have here before you is a true portrait of a…sick mind under siege…(D) I have neither Munchausen's nor epilepsy…but I did grow up with a mother so wedded to denial…that I became confused about reality and…fell in love with tall tales. (ibid, p. 161)

In mapping out these possibilities, Slater suggests that A, B, C, or D alone do not characterize Lauren or her condition. Lauren does not "simply" have epilepsy (A). Nor, according to her understanding of metaphoric and psychic truth, does she *not* have epilepsy (D). Rather, identity and experience are located at the intersecting incongruities of A through D: Her "truth" cannot be reduced to a single letter or explanation but is found instead at the juncture of those innumerable, conflicting *somethings* that exist within her, which can never be adequately conveyed. The only way to witness a slippery self, Slater suggests, is to write a slippery memoir. "I became a memoirist," she acknowledges (ibid, p. 144). "What else could I be?" (ibid, p. 144).

In *Lying,* Slater never clearly indicates whether or not Lauren witnesses trauma successfully. As her narrator's writer-arranger, however, Slater does seem able to write across the "A" through "D" factors to witness that she feels traumatized and is not sure why (which represents a kind of trauma in itself). *Lying*, then, speaks not to the factual truth of particular childhood memories (e.g., Lauren's battle with epilepsy and Munchausen's syndrome), but to the memoirist's struggle to witness ineffable experiences. "In this book," she writes, "I have finally, finally been able to tell a tale eluding me for years, a tale I have tried over and over again to utter, the story of my past…I have told it all [now] and it is relief…to put it to rest" (ibid, p. 220). Having witnessed her inability to witness, Slater concludes her memoir and affirms that she may now rest, psyche sated.

Where Slater ends, readers begin, a step that unlocks the second element of dual-witnessing: for a writer-narrator to witness primarily, readers must witness her story secondarily. A primary witness may not always know how her testimony is received. Slater, for example, cannot possibly know how each reader responds to *Lying*. One may wonder how dual-witnessing functions in such cases. In answer, I focus on the reception to the text itself. An attention to textual reception should not suggest that an author's experience is somehow less important than her published work. Instead, I argue that a sustained empathic response to both author and text is vital. With reception theorists, such as Stanley Fish (Fish 1970), Wolfgang Iser (Iser 1978), and Louise Rosenblatt (Rosenblatt 1978), I maintain that, while a reader cannot always communicate with an author, one can converse—or dual-witness—with a text. Reader-response critics maintain that reading is not only a passive, but also an active process (Jauss 1982, p. 19; Phelan 1997, p. 227; Goldstein and Machor 2008, p. xiv). When

reading, James Phelan explains, "the text acts upon us and we act upon it; the text calls upon—and we respond with—our cognitive, emotive, social, and ethical selves" (Phelan 1997, p. 228). The same, I argue, is true of witnessing, which, like reading, is neither one-sided, nor passive, but dual and active. Thus, while a survivor gains or suffers the most, depending on how her narrative is read, both dual-witnessing and anti-witnessing can take place beyond the purview of a writer-narrator. In such cases, the text itself serves as the primary witness, and the reader continues to function as the secondary witness.

Slater hints at the need to be witnessed secondarily in her use of the first-person plural to witness instances that appear to affect her alone. When speaking about her propensity for falsehood and fascination with epilepsy, for example, she declares: "We"—not I—"create all sorts of lies, all sorts of stories and metaphors. …Our stories are seizures. They clutch us, they are spastic grasps, they are losses of consciousness. Epileptics, every one of us; I am not alone" (Slater 2000, p. 197). One could read this statement as proof of Slater's projected hope that some "other" shares her reality. Her assertion also prompts readers to enter into her existence, to embrace her history, however foreign her experiences initially seem, so that writer and reader may collaborate.

Inspiring this dual-witnessing appears to be one of Slater's main goals in *Lying*. In testifying to her trauma, she simultaneously inspires readerly affinity and support. "Understand," she entreats (ibid, p. 84). She then spends the rest of her memoir pushing readers to realize her deceptively simple appeal. As *Lying* progresses, so too does the urgency with which the request to "understand" is presented, so that in detailing "how to market this book" (ibid, p. 159), Slater's need to be witnessed secondarily reads as almost desperate. "I am giving you a portrait of the essence of me", she writes, but "living where I do…in the chasm that cuts through thought…is lonely" (ibid, p. 163). She thus implores:

> Come with me, reader. Enter the confusion with me. …Give up the ground with me, because sometimes that frightening floaty place is really the truest of all. Kierkegaard says, …'We are at our most honest when we are lost.' Enter that lostness with me. Live in the place I am, where the view is murky, where the connecting bridges and orienting maps have been…stripped away. …Together we will journey. We are disoriented, and all we ever really want is a hand to hold. …I am so happy you are holding me in your hands. I am sitting far away from you, but when you turn the pages, I feel a flutter in me, and wings rise up. (ibid, p. 163)

Slater's metaphor—that readers hold her in our hands—is evocative in that we both physically hold her book and—she hopes—choose to hold her act of primary witnessing in our hands, to witness her narrative secondarily.

Although some may contest that *Lying* discourages secondary witnessing (how can we engage what we cannot believe or understand?), the reverse is also true. *Lying*'s mutability actually encourages readerly response: the more aporias written into a text, the more liminal spaces blurred, the more easily a reader can enter a textual conversation. Slater impels this process by placing herself and her reader on the same page, so that we journey together in the same direction. In the passage above, Slater acknowledges: "we are"—not I am—"disoriented" (ibid, p. 163). She confuses us, so that we may enter into, and witness secondarily, her narrator's confusion. By telling her story unreliably, Slater thrusts her readers into an ictal space, enabling us to occupy more than one position at once: that of truth and falsehood, of writer and reader, and of primary and secondary witness. Through entering into Lauren's consciousness, readers situate themselves at a liminal core of multiple, assumed opposites, a shifting, seizing space that offers the opportunity, first, to experience what it feels like to be Lauren and, second, to dual-witness, i.e., to enter into—and witness out of—the psychic space of another, without becoming other.

However many metaphors Slater offers to elucidate her history, she poses an equal number of questions. "Clutch at what?", she queries. "You tell me" (ibid, p. 216). Earlier she queries: "Is metaphor in memoir, in *life*, an alternate form of honesty or simply an evasion?" (ibid, p. 192). By asking and not answering questions, by refusing to delineate what her trauma is, by acknowledging that she herself does not know the answers to the questions she poses, Slater opens her trauma to her readers. Her metaphors signify that which is unknowable in Lauren's life and prompt readers to

examine the unknowable in all of our lives. We fill in her blanks with our own memories (without becoming Slater ourselves). In this way, as Diane Freedman and Olivia Frey write of life-writing in general, *Lying* "hold[s] our attention in ways that more objective, distanced pieces will not" (Freedman and Frey 2004, p. 5). When Slater's primary witnessing is joined by readers' secondary witnessing, the memoir encourages dual-witnessing, whereas texts which more clearly divorce the writer-narrator from the reader-respondent may not.

Slater pushes readers toward dual identification through the use of the second person in the description of her first seizure. "You grit your teeth", she writes. "You clench, a spastic look crawls across your face, your legs thrash like a funky machine, you hit hard and spew, you grind your teeth with such a force that you might wake up with a mouth full of molar dust, tooth ash, the residue of words you've never spoken, but should have" (Slater 2000, p. 19). By writing "you" instead of "I", Slater distances herself from her speaker, depicting a split identity. The dissociation is also inclusive, welcoming the reader into her liminal space.

Lying's trauma, Slater suggests, is not something Lauren must face alone, but something that individual and collective readers—both included in the singular and plural "you"—can and should witness with her. Slater continues her description by shifting between first and second person narration: "You bite your mouth—I do at least—chew it to pieces from the inside out" (ibid, p. 19), as if to suggest that this experience is shared by her readers. Though Slater writes from the particulars of her own experiences, her memoir's content and form both prompt readers to recognize inter-relationality. If one comes away from *Lying* with even a vague sense that *something* has happened during the reading process, the text may witness the *it* Slater writes to work through.

Slater's determination to witness primarily misses its mark when readers refuse to witness her text secondarily. Although the memoir opens the possibility of dual-witnessing, this process can also be hard to effect. Trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, asserts that "the difficulty" of "responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story", is a "problem for therapists and literary critics alike" (Caruth 1995, p. vii). A paradox of *Lying* is that what makes Slater's primary witnessing possible (the use of metaphor to witness truth) can also preclude the reader's ability to witness secondarily. Indeed, Lauren's fabrications so often alienate readers, that her memoir's potential to witness is diminished. Rather than entering into Lauren's psyche, readers sometimes distance themselves from her account, too annoyed that Slater has lied to them to examine why she has lied. This response is natural. Many believe that the only acceptable type of memoir is one that is always "truthful." Autobiographical theorist, Andrea Dworkin, contends that writing is a "sacred trust. It means telling the truth. …It means…never lying" (Bleich 2004, p. 42). Readers who agree denounce Slater for her falsehoods. In doing so, they may anti-witness her testimony.

Consider, for example, the reviews *Lying* has received on amazon.com.[4] While many praise Slater's text, just as many censure it for its dishonesty. P. Seaton writes: "I couldn't trust the narrator…[which] meant also that I was…unable to feel close to [her] and really understand her motivations" (amazon.com 2008). Seaton (2008) recognizes that witnessing secondarily—"feel[ing] close to the narrator" and "understand[ing] her motivations"—is an "important role" of memoirs. The reviewer, however, overlooks that Slater includes falsehoods in her text to portray her reality more (not less) accurately and to invite readers into her psyche, not to alienate them from it.

Tori Albert also dismisses *Lying* on amazon.com because she feels Slater manipulates readers instead of reaching out to them. "As a reader" Albert writes, I felt like a pawn in her self-serving game ('Am I lying to you?'), disappointed and jarred" (Albert 2010). Albert is not alone in this critique. The depiction of Slater as puppeteer is echoed in a *New York Times*' review, in which Janet Malin queries: "If this memoir is merely a feat of gamesmanship, what would induce the reader to play along?" (Malin 2000). Malin's rhetorical question implies that entering Slater's world is a waste

[4] Amazon.com is not a scholarly or an authoritative source, but its reviews can reflect how general (i.e., non-academic) readers interpret texts.

of readers' time. If reader-reviewers, however, refuse to "play along" with Slater, they also cannot witness her account secondarily, and *Lying*'s witnessing potential lies dormant.

Slater recognizes this danger and returns repeatedly to the question of who is reading her story, and how. In an interview Lauren submits to her college newspaper (in which she interviews herself), Lauren asks herself: "Is writing one way you have of reaching out to others?" (Slater 2000, p. 173). "Absolutely," she replies (ibid, p. 173). If Slater's writing is rejected by others, if her "reaching out" is refused, her trauma remains un-witnessed. Even when readers assume they know her, Slater is skeptical. She asserts, for instance, that those who "know nothing about my slipperiness," who read her memoir not metaphorically but "quite literally" (ibid, p. 162) fail to witness her secondarily. And when readers refuse to witness secondarily, she cannot witness primarily through *Lying*. "If you read [my memoir] that way," she writes, "I will feel I have failed" (ibid, p. 162). Slater is consumed with being read in the "right" way, with witnessing primarily and being witnessed secondarily. Only then can she write to work through inexpressible trauma.

Slater's fear that she will be misread (or not read at all) is reasonable: *Lying*'s testimony is not often met, and both writer and narrator seem to feel more isolated and rejected (anti-witnessed) than seen, heard, and supported (dual-witnessed). "Lying is lonely," Slater writes. "No one knows you," and "when people are interested in you, you understand it's for false reasons, and you get depressed" (ibid, p. 133). Lauren's writing tutor, Christopher Marin, for example, seduces her by pretending to witness her secondarily, while only using her to satisfy his sex addiction. When teenaged Lauren first meets the adult Marin, she believes she "love[s] him", simply "because I thought he might love me" in return (ibid, p. 125). After sleeping with her teacher, however, Lauren discovers that Marin never actually attempted to witness her secondarily and that "if he ever…knew how…my whole damn being could turn into froth and spasm, I think he would have hated me" (ibid, p. 128). Rather than entering into Lauren's reality, Marin's interaction with his pupil reads more as an example of victimization or anti-witnessing than of mutual connection or dual-witnessing. Legally, sex between a minor (Lauren) and an adult (Marin) constitutes sexual assault. The way Marin treats Lauren reinforces the predatory nature of their supposedly consensual "relationship". The distinction Slater draws between a consensual relationship and an assaultive one parallels the disparity I identify between dual-witnessing and anti-witnessing. Dual-witnessing is a form of intercourse, a "social communication between individuals" (OED 2017b, sense 2a), that, like sex (ibid, sense 2), represents an avenue of intimacy. Those who abuse the intimacy established during dual-witnessing contribute to—versus combat—the trauma of the primary witness's experience.

Indeed, after her experience with Marin, Lauren begins to link perceived acts of anti-witnessing (especially by male authority figures) to sexual assault. When, for example, she tells her counselor at Brandeis that she has epilepsy, that she has undergone operations to be "cured", and that she still finds herself seizing, the counselor dismisses her: "There is no such part of the brain…as the 'temporal amygdalan area.' There is no such thing as…'eliopathic epilepsy.' …There is no Dr. Neu anywhere in the world who would perform a corpus callostomy on a patient with TLE" (Slater 2000, pp. 175–76). At first Lauren protests, but when her counselor demands to see her scar as "proof" of her testimony, she accuses him of attempting to violate her. "I understood", Slater writes. "He was a pervert. He wanted to touch me. I jerked away" (ibid, p. 177). What seems assaultive to Lauren is not only that a man tried to touch her without consent but that he reached out to her without connecting to her—that, like Marin, he anti-witnessed her when he could have witnessed her secondarily. A dark irony exists in reading "therapist" as "the rapist". Refusal to witness, Slater implies, marks a kind of assault. Believing that her counselor peered into her scarred self without attempting to engage her reality, Lauren reports him to the Brandeis Counseling Center. Slater holds him up as a counter-example to her readers, as if to warn us to engage *Lying* only if we are willing to witness its content secondarily.

The memoir's most evocative example of anti-witnessing is illustrated, not by those who actively mistreat Lauren, but by those who come close to dual-witnessing, only to renounce the connection. Lauren's friends in Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, encourage her to witness primarily, coaxing: "Admitting the truth is the bravest, most healing thing" (ibid, p. 204). When she divulges that "I have

never been able to admit or even know the truth. …It's part of my disease" (ibid, p. 204), Lauren feels as if she may witness for the first time. "I felt the story take shape", she extols, "and it really was true, it flew from me" (ibid, p. 205). She thanks the group for having "given me a way to tell my tale" (ibid, p. 207).

When Lauren tries to share a deeper truth, that she is not an alcoholic but has suffered an unspeakable trauma as the result of a "disease of (ibid, p. 206), her listeners silence her: "Shhh", Brad says (ibid, p. 212). Amy adds: "Too much truth can overwhelm a person" (ibid, p. 212). Rather than dual-witnessing, Lauren's audience anti-witnesses her. To come close to forming a connection only to have the moment taken away unsettles Lauren. "My facts blew away", she recalls, "and I found myself back in the world I knew best, the strange warped world of so many stories—I am an alcoholic I am not an alcoholic; I am an epileptic I am not an epileptic" (ibid, p. 213). Unable to witness primarily, she finds herself isolated in a group, alienated by the loneliness of a trauma that she must—yet cannot—witness. Notably, Lauren attempts in this scene to witness orally. Slater, conversely, witnesses by writing Lauren's testimony down. Trauma and autobiographical critics may argue that Slater is successful where Lauren is not, because Lauren *speaks* her testimony to listeners who are not receptive, versus Slater, who *writes* her narrative for readers who (ideally) receive her text more willingly. While the group at Alcoholics Anonymous shuts down Lauren's attempt to witness, Slater's readers still have the opportunity to contribute to her narrative through witnessing it secondarily.

The succeeding question is "how?". If theorists insist that survivors write through their experiences, in order to heal, what is the ensuing responsibility of the reader to the writer of traumatic testimony? How can we avoid anti-witnessing a work in order to witness its contents secondarily? Slater does not answer these questions directly in *Lying*. She does, however, model dual-witnessing when Lauren listens to another person's testimony at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. "The woman took the microphone and lowered her lips to it", Lauren recalls. "Her mouth began to tremble and tears came out, silvering her sad, sad face" (ibid, p. 179). As the other woman speaks, Lauren finds that "then I, too, wanted to cry, because the idea of her unhappiness brings me always to a dark and difficult place" (ibid, p. 179). Lauren has never met this woman before, but when the stranger begins to witness, she connects to her. This scene directly follows Lauren's escape from her counselor's office, from the threat of his anti-witnessing, and Slater is able in this moment to convey what dual-witnessing is: the convergence with another's testimony while still maintaining one's own alterity.

Still, the witnessing Slater evokes is so demanding that even Lauren cannot withstand it. When the speaker who moved Lauren to tears asks her to hear her fifth step—the "admitting to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs" (itself a kind of dual-witnessing)—Lauren "grow[s] bored" and disengages (ibid, p. 194). Such scenes underscore dual-witnessing's difficulty, even as *Lying* underscores its necessity. Witnessing, Slater suggests, is nearly impossible both to begin and to sustain—for writer-narrators and reader-respondents alike.

Readers are called to dual-witness nevertheless. Freedman and Frey emphasize that "we cannot stand outside these discussions, dispassionate, untouched, neither as readers nor as writers" (Freedman and Frey 2004, p. 5). Instead of anti-witnessing traumatic truths, we must challenge ourselves to engage traumatic testimony as secondary witnesses. Slater acknowledges that what readers do with *Lying*, what we take from its substance, is up to us: The choice, she reminds us, is ultimately "in [our] hands" (Slater 2000, p. 139). Slater writes *Lying* to witness enigmatic traumas. Whether or not her project is successful depends largely on readers' parallel (in)ability to dual-witness. Despite *Lying*'s orchestrated moments of confusion and confabulation, then, its overarching message is in fact quite clear: readers should not disavow Slater's narrative because it is difficult to believe or to understand. We are incited instead to enter into *Lying* actively and to witness its "factions" secondarily, so that, together, we can let seizing truths lie.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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