



2014

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Coltrin, Kellianne (2014) "Rejecting the Mother Tongue," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol7/iss1/8>

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Rejecting the Mother Tongue

Family Secrets and the Self in Mary Karr's The Liars' Club

Kellianne Coltrin

Perhaps permanently reeling from Kathryn Harrison's memoir, *The Kiss*—which had been reviewed by some critics as “slimy, repellent, meretricious, cynical”—readers and critics alike seem to have developed an expectation from of a sometimes sordid tell-all, prompting review titles like “No Incest, and Only a Little Drink” for O’Faolain’s *Are You Somebody?* A similar expectation of secrets revealed and taboos hung out on the laundry line colors the complaints detailed in Carolyn Heilbrun’s “Contemporary Memoirs: Or, Who Cares Who Did What to Whom?” She describes readers—particularly male readers—who are sick of “disgustingly” personal exposures saturating the memoir genre. What is the value, she hears many asking, of this kind of exposure?

With the prevalence of secret-telling in memoirs, that is a question worth asking. The purpose of the secret’s exposure must be proportionally meaningful with the pressure to remain secretive, particularly when the secret being exposed is not the author’s alone, but a town or a culture’s secret (as in *Are You Somebody?* or *Angela’s Ashes*) or a family’s secret (as in *The Liars’*

Club, Omaha Blues, and Prozac Diary). The psychology behind secret-keeping and secret-revealing is extensive, and could offer a plentitude of explanations for memoirists' secret-revealing. I believe one explanation, however, may lie in memoir's requirement that the author narrate the self.

The ability to narrate the self is learned, and as such, each individual's self-narration is at least in part a product of their parent's self-narrating style. Women—who interestingly have received the majority of criticism for baring too much in the memoir—are especially likely to inherit their mother's self-narrating style, or what might be termed a “mother tongue.” In the case of the modern female memoirist, many of these women are inheriting mother tongues designed or evolved to conceal a cultural or family secret. Thus, as memoirists like Mary Karr seek to affirm their own identity separate from their mothers, this can manifest itself in a rejection of the mother tongue; that is, through revealing the secret. This self-affirming rejection, fraught with the anxiety of simultaneous mother love, is visible both in the narrative action and in linguistic signals within the text. Using Karr's *The Liar's Club* as a subject for this lens, Karr can be seen to reveal two great secrets—her mother's night of terrible insanity and her mother's two disappeared children—as a way to reject her mother tongue and affirm her own identity through an independent self-narrating style.

To understand the significance of mother tongue rejection, we must first understand the role of narrative in identity-creation. Here Paul Ricoeur's writings on this subject are helpful, because he both provides a definition (of sorts) for the self and explains this self's reliance on narrative if it is to be understood. Ricoeur defines the self in two ways: *idem* and *ipse*. *Idem* is the self as defined by its “spatio-temporal” continuity over time, i.e. my self is that which continues from moment to moment and space to space. *Idem* is demonstrated, for example, by the part of my third grade self that has continued to exist in my twenty-three year old self. *Iipse* is the self as defined by its unique will and “ability to initiate something new and imputable to a self, be it oneself or another, as agent” (Dauenhauer). Thus *ipse* is evident when I hold my mother's hand and she smiles, when I decide to be in a grumpy mood, or when I knock over a bowl of pistachios. In each case, I am self because I have a will which I can exercise and thereby affect myself and others. Ricoeur argues that both *ipse* and *idem* are necessary for selfhood, and thus the necessity of narrative becomes quickly evident. To provide the temporal sameness of *idem* and the

action/consequence evidence of *ipse*, the answer to the question, ‘Who am I?’ can only be narrative. Dieter Teichert, writing on Ricoeur, explains it this way:

What kind of unity constitutes the identity of the person if there is no single feature of identity neither on the level of physical properties nor on the level of psychic properties? According to Ricoeur, this unity is constituted by a narrative: ‘To answer the question “Who?” [...] is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the “who”. And the identity of this “who” therefore itself must be a narrative identity.’ (178)

Thus while Ricoeur denies self-narrative’s ability to perfect self-knowledge, he defends self-narrative as the only reasonable way—and in fact, the only intuitive way—to approach self-knowledge. Teichert further emphasizes the relationship between self-knowledge via narrative in that “stories about oneself” allow the individual to both recognize the self and evaluate the self. He writes, “I want to know whether I am the person I want to be. The way I as a person confront the life I am living, the attitude I take to my life and the life of others defines my personal identity” (185). Notice that narrative frees the individual to distinguish between what he has done and who he is: this gap is formed by the acts of narrative creation, identification, and evaluation, which enables the individual to reform their identity (and their perception of others’ identities) through revisiting those actions.

That said, a person does not approach narrative creation or its subsequent actions in a vacuum. Cultural and familial—particularly parental—influences shape how a person tells those “stories about oneself.” Narvaez elaborates on this idea, stating that “Caregivers co-construct an individual’s personal biosocial grammar and resulting personal narrative through the repetition of social interactions” (83). This co-construction is evidenced in a study by Sylvan Tomkins, in which a baby’s communicative action (cooing, babbling, crying, screaming and even throwing or gesturing) brings a response or nonresponse from their caregiver (Narvaez 84). This parental action helps to shape the child’s narrative and thus how the child perceives their identity which rises out of the narrative.

Beyond early parental responses to children’s communication, parents influence their children’s self-narratives through their own narrative style. For children as young as two, studies demonstrate children adopting their parents’ narrative style, including whether they were “topic extending” or “topic switching,” whether they were “highly elaborative” or “low elaborative,” and

even what, from a narrative standpoint, typically moved the plot (Wenner). If a parent frequently neglected the “where” or the “why,” for example, children followed suit. As one author states, “Two decades of research have now confirmed that there are profound and enduring individual differences in how mothers reminisce . . . and that these differences are clearly related to children’s developing autobiographical memory skills” (Fivush 566). Parental narrative style therefore not only influences how children narrate in general, but notably how they narrate “autobiographical[ly]”—that is, how they narrate themselves within their own story.

While correlation has been observed between any type of parent-child dyad, the connection is especially strong between mothers and daughters—a characteristic of special importance when examining female secret exposure, as in the case of *Liar’s Club*. In a study examining how different family members recalled a traumatic event, aspects of the narrative style were isolated into five categories, including length, context, coherence (causality relationships between events), elaboration, and cohesion (sentences relate to one another). The study then analyzed the relationship between family members’ narrative styles, looking particularly at parent-child dyad similarities and differences (Peterson 555). Unlike mother-son, father-son, or father-daughter dyads, mothers and daughters showed high similarities in narrative style on all five indicators (558). For girls, then, the mother tongue reigns.

The reason for mothers’ stylistic dominance in their daughters’ narratives might lie in the special psychological closeness between mothers and daughter, providing both a possible reason for daughters’ narrative similarities and why daughters ultimately feel a need to reject their mother tongue. According to social cognitive theory, children are likely to choose subjects for emulation whom they can most successfully emulate, which is typically the subject most similar to them (Peterson 551). For this reason, girls will most frequently look to their mothers for emulation, as opposed to their fathers. Delving even deeper into the mother-daughter dyad, Nancy Chodorow argues that with the mother as the primary caregiver in a child’s youngest years, daughters’ experience of identity formation differs from sons because of daughters’ shared gender status with their mothers. Daughters, unlike sons, do not have to reassert their identity outside the realm of femininity when they assert themselves separately from their mother’s identity, encouraging daughters to define themselves more closely than sons with their mothers. When mothers act as a dominant caregiver,

girls create an identity kinship with their mothers that expresses itself in the adoption of the mother tongue.

Of course, this also means that if and when daughters seek to differentiate themselves from their mothers, their task is particularly hard, having a shared gender and a shared narrative style through which they have constructed their identity. Looking specifically at deviation in narrative content, adolescent girls are more likely than boys to show stress and feel a strain in their relationship with their mothers when they choose to hide content that is typically shared (secret-keeping) or unveil content that is typically not shared (secret-sharing) (Meeus 293). This narrative divide is connected with daughters seeking autonomy from their mothers in adolescence but also as adult women, particularly adult women seeking conflict recognition and resolution. In a separate study examining adult daughters and their mothers, secret-keeping was found to be one of the central themes grouping how the dyads described their relationships (Bojczyk 464). In yet another study, daughters of recently immigrated mothers asserted themselves over their mothers in conflicts by “code-switching” from their mothers’ native tongue to English—a move identified by linguistic analysts as a differentiating and empowering speech act (Williams 320). We can conclude from these studies that for daughters, abandoning their mother tongue is most likely to be a conscious decision, made to distinguish the self as empowered beyond or at the least separate from the mother.

We have now developed a lens for examining *Liar’s Club* in which we can reasonably argue that narrating the self, as in a memoir, is significant as an act of identity creation; the narrative style used to form that identity is influenced by parents; for daughters, mothers’ narrative style is especially influential, giving rise to a mother tongue which is adopted by the daughter; and finally, one method for daughters to claim autonomy and individuality is to reject their mother tongue—a move which is especially important if self-narration is the means by which we come to know ourselves. I will now move my attention specifically onto Karr’s mode of mother tongue rejection, both in its central differentiating characteristic and how linguistic cues within the text can alert readers to Karr’s rejection.

Before Karr even begins her story, she introduces her memoir with quote from R.D. Laing, who writes, “We have our secrets and our need to confess. We may remember how, in childhood . . . what an accomplishment it was when we, in our fear and trembling, could tell our first lie, and make, for ourselves, the discovery that we are irredeemably alone in some aspects” (xviii). The

quote identifies two ideas: (1) secrets (in this case, a particular brand of secret designed to deceive, which we know as “lies”) isolate the secret-keeper at her most fundamental level; and (2) this isolated identity is undesirable and motivates confession. Just a few pages later, Karr extends this idea of the isolated secret-keeper to the isolation of the person excluded from the secret—in this case, herself. Secrets, she writes, are like “ghosts,” calling “undue attention” to themselves by their “very vagueness” and frightening those they haunt by their blankness (9). Indeed, referring back to Ricoeur, it is clear how the identity of the excluded person is frustrated by such ghosts. A “hole” or a “missing story” hampers narrative continuity for *idem* and the causality required for *ipse*, leaving the excluded person grasping for a cohesive narrative to find themselves within (9-10). It’s a small wonder that Karr labels herself and her world as a child as “Not Right,” and that secrets make for lonely people: aside from being isolated outside of a secret, how can one be in company if one is nothing at all, but only half composed, inchoate, or worse, because of an equally half formed self-narrative? I say half formed because Karr, with these secretive holes, cannot say with any confidence “I was this” (because she does not know what happened between her and her mother) or “I caused this” (because she does not know why whatever happened, happened).

Her discontent is manifested again in the final pages of *Liars’ Club*, when Karr describes her (understandable) response to finding a “line-up of wedding rings” in an attic and is rebuffed by her mother when she asks about them. Karr pummels her readers with a series of questions lifted from a notebook reserved for Karr and her therapist. She asks, “*Whose wedding rings were those? Who were the two kids Grandma Moore showed me a picture of? After she died, why did you go nuts? What were you doing with the knife that night? Why did you tell Dr. Boudreaux that you killed us? What happened to you in the hospital?*” (312). Karr begins with the immediate question of the wedding rings ownership and escalates into questions that are decades-old, linked to one another but giving an obvious air of frustration to a family narrative with some rather obvious holes. The events behind the holes are significant, but Karr emphasizes the narrative style of secrecy accepted in her family: “[My therapist] pointed out that they weren’t *cruel* questions. In my family lingo, though, they were. More than mean, they might prove lethal” (312). For Karr, the defining feature of her mother tongue is *what is not said*. To say what, in the mother tongue, is not said—to say what is secret—is to reject the identity that the mother tongue has defined for Karr. And this is exactly what she does.

In order to thoroughly identify and analyze this rejection, we must have a clear concept of what distinguishes Karr's original mother tongue. While Karr quotes from her mother throughout *Liars' Club*, these quotes come filtered through Karr and through a long passage of time. Rather than making tenuous extrapolations from these quotes, I believe analysis of mother tongue rejection will be better founded on its key characteristic of secrecy, focusing on (1) obvious decisions to expose subject matter kept secret by Karr's mother, Charlie, and (2) occurrences of linguistic signals tied to secret-keeping and secret-telling. Because secrecy and deceit function very similarly in the linguistic sense, I will look for linguistic "cues" that signal either kind of speech act in *Liars' Club* as evidence for Karr's decision to apply or reject her mother tongue (Toma). These cues include: distancing of responsibility, use of present tense, negating words (such as *no*, *never*, or *not*), semantically negative words (such as *bad*, *fear* or *evil*), fewer self-references, fewer words in general, and overall vagueness. Distinct from secretive or deceitful linguistic cues, a key language marker for anxiety—which could rise with secret-telling—is emotional avoidance (Borelli 514). By examining how these kinds of linguistic cues occur within *Liars' Club*, patterns of mother-tongue adoption and rejection can yield insight into how Karr views herself, her secrets, and ultimately, what new identity Karr forms by creating her own narrative style. In the following paragraphs, I acknowledge that my linguistic analysis is only semi-scientific, and that further analysis and literary application are in order, but I hope my own limitations are viewed as an invitation for further scholarship.

I stated earlier that the analysis for these cues would be concentrated on two major sections of *Liars' Club*—the section recounting her mother's night of madness, in which she burns the family possessions and hallucinates stabbing her daughters to death, and the section in which Charlie finally reveals to Karr her past marriages and the loss of her two previous children, on pages 145–157 and 312–318 respectively. I choose these moments intentionally—the latter is the only revealed secret that immediately indicates "absolution" for her and her mother. The former is the secret which, yet unrevealed, launches Karr into her memoir, "a single instant surrounded by dark" (1). It is also the only secret which Karr immediately recognizes as causing a change in her own identity during her childhood—an effect I will explore later. Finally, it is the only secret which Karr connects to her mother's secret of losing her children. Karr makes this connection immediately after being informed of her mother's secret past, writing, "And the night she'd stood in our bedroom door with a knife?" (318).

These two connected secrets are how the memoir begins, the literal center of the book, and how the memoir concludes, making Karr's linguistic treatment in these passages of "secret-telling" the most significant for my analysis.

In the first section, the most obvious departure from her mother tongue is Karr's extremely detailed narrative style, even when revealing a secret. She describes a "big rectangular mirror that had been scribbled up with lipstick of an orangey-red color," "sit[ting] down hard on the wet St. Augustine grass" with "blades as hard as plastic," and even playing "finger tag" with Lecia under the blanket, moving from squares of "black gabardine to charcoal flannel to gray pinstripe" (147, 150, 154). Karr holds nothing back. While she admits occasional moments from that night are beyond her recollection, what she does include is full-fledged and fleshed out.

Karr further rejects a secretive narrative style through her use of self-references. Karr repeatedly emphasizes her own self in the secret, as in the scene where her mother burns her old rocking horse. Karr describes her own self "zero[ing] in on my old red wooden rocking horse," her instinct to "jump and catch her [mother's] arm" from dousing it in gas and lighting the match, and, when Karr herself is held back by Lecia, she relays to the reader her own emotional interplay, ranging from embarrassment at wanting to keep the toy "for bouncing," to a wistful goodbye: "*Bye-bye, old Paint, I think to myself, I'm a-leaving Cheyenne*" (150). While these self-references are rather obvious, taking form in actual pronouns, Karr also allows herself to be present in the text through permitting her imaginative self to color the narrative through simile, metaphor and even visions, so that the intense detail is simultaneously self-referential. The cracks in the punched mirror are like "a cyclone," her mother heaves the "box spring" over her head "like Samson," and "the glint of light" on the tip of the knife is a "star" from a nursery rhyme (147, 149, 155). More powerful than simile and metaphor is Karr's willingness to interweave her own imagined visions with her memories of actual facts. She writes, "I can very well picture" her neighbors ignoring the scene, and even of her own father "turning the volume down" on their plight to instead enjoy a catfish dinner (153-154). Even during the occasional lull of pronoun self-references, Karr's presence dominates the narrative style.

While the cues above are relatively consistent throughout the passage, other cues for anxiety and secrecy are not. Rather, there is a decline in emotionality, a rise in passivity, and a rise in negative grammatical and semantic words as the passage progresses. Karr describes feeling "a weird calm" and later a "pool

of quiet” filling her head when she holds back a scream, after which there is no further acknowledgement of feeling real emotion on Karr’s part (152, 155). Interestingly, this emotional distancing—a strong cue for intense anxiety—coincides with a rise in secrecy cues via passivity, or responsibility distancing. She writes, “We are in the grip of some big machine grinding us along,” and “Daddy is gripped,” too, as if she, along with her family, have found *ipse* to be nonexistent after all (152–3).

Then there is Karr’s rising negative and negating language. While Karr occasionally employs two types of negative language earlier in the passage (forms of “blood” and “fear”), her mother is the major source of negative or negating language, as in her expletive-laden self-references, “NO!” and “I just *killed* them both . . . I’ve stabbed them to *death*” (emphasis added, 156–7). At the conclusion of this passage, however, Karr begins to adopt the narrative style through negating terms: “I *don’t* know what to wish for . . . I wish *not* to scream . . . a scream is definitely *not* what I want to happen to me right now,” or later, after mentally altering her mother into a cartoon form, “That stick woman . . . is *no more* my mother than some monster on the Saturday cartoons. She just *isn’t*” (emphasis added, 154–5). This increase of negative and negating language further demonstrate Karr’s style evolving towards a mother-tongue narrative

Some basic conclusions about this passage may be helpful before turning to the next moment of secret-revealing. There is a strong rejection of the mother tongue at the beginning of the passage via detail and self-references, but the rise in mother-tongue usage at the passage’s conclusion suggests that perhaps this is Karr recording the birth of a secret, although the memoir itself is disclosing it. Karr, out of fear of her mother, makes her mother a secret—a secret from herself—by dehumanizing her into a “monster” with “pointy teeth” and “pin-dot eyes” (154). This move not only isolates Karr from her mother, but also from her own emotions and thereby herself, causing her to “harden into a person I hardly notice” (155). The secret splits, isolates, and confuses the young Mary Karr, which Karr, the memoirist, records with rising anxiety. With these conclusions in mind, I will turn to the next major instance of secret-revealing.

From the first paragraph, Karr’s narrative style is noticeably different from the former passage. Her mother tongue is thick on the page, dodgy of details, unusually sparse, and drifting off with vagueness reminiscent of her mother’s claimed forgetfulness. Karr writes, “[Mother] first married at fifteen. No, she hadn’t been pregnant at the time. Grandma Moore just wanted her out of the house. The first baby came a few years after that, a boy. Let’s call

him Tex for the sake of simplicity”—an astonishingly bare-boned account of a marriage that dismisses names, motivations, or emotional responses, and additionally, distances responsibility for the marriage or the child (312). Also relatively absent from this account are the self-references that dominated the prior passage. Pronoun self-references appear infrequently and only outside the events of the secret, when Karr describes herself sitting in the bar while her mother relates the story.

Finally, the passage begins with a high amount of emotional distancing, almost as if Karr is holding her breath. The two paragraphs announcing the disappearance of Charlie’s husband and children are utterly devoid of emotional reactions, as are the paragraphs following. There are indications of emotion, such as Charlie admitting to getting “pie-eyed” after her family’s disappearance, or, her pulling out all the cords from the phone-operating switchboard after learning that her father had died. But Karr herself consistently avoids naming any particular feeling behind these emotion-laden actions, when the actions are present at all.

Yet, like the previous passage, the role of the mother tongue and the presence of anxiety linguistic cues are not constant. Instead, as the secret unfolds, the mother-tongue usage declines, along with Karr’s anxiety. Karr’s initial vagueness, for example, slowly gives way to increasing detail, gradually including dialogue in place of the short, summarizing sentences. As Charlie describes finding the home of her vanished, now remarried husband, the particulars of the new wife’s living room also begin to filter in; Karr describes the “black alligator purse” containing the court order, the “saddleback chair” into which Charlie collapses, the “silk curtains” behind the constable, and the little girl “idly stacking blocks on the immaculately vacuumed Oriental rug” (316–17). Compared to the secretive, sparse style used earlier, Karr’s narrative here takes on camera-like detail.

Other hallmarks of the mother tongue—distancing of responsibility and low numbers of self-references—also begin to disappear. In addition to her mother’s brutal self-reprimand (“I hadn’t *thought*, just hadn’t *thought* about any of that”), Karr also places herself in the narrative, allowing herself to take responsibility for the narrative through the questions she chooses to pose. This inclusion, along with Karr’s increasing inclusion of her own reactions to her mother’s secret, also obviously necessitates a rise in self-references.

As the mother-tongue usage declines, so does Karr’s emotional distancing. Emotion recognition seeps into the narrative gradually, beginning with

her recognition of the emotions of peripheral characters (the “relief” of the constable and the “smug[ness]” of the mother-in-law) and then building to her mother’s emotions, which form the heart of the story (317). At the very end of the secret revealing, Karr names these emotions: “despair,” which Karr offers as her own observation, and “miser[y],” which Karr places in the mouth of her mother (319). This emotional closeness is painful, but it also demonstrates a narrative that is more relaxed and less anxious.

This second passage, then, demonstrates the predicted pattern for Karr’s mother-tongue rejection. Her narrative style is initially highly secretive (according to linguistic cues) but evolves to become less secretive; additionally, the narrative is marked by cues for anxiety that would be naturally linked to secret-telling. As the secret-telling nears completion, her style relaxes and loses these linguistic markers of tension. In short, Karr take her mother’s secret, and reinterprets it as “non-secret,” both by exposing it and by relating it in a new, non-secretive style. Karr’s narrative style, as opposed to her mother tongue, is marked by detail, imagination, ownership, empathy, and frankness. Perhaps the beauty of this stylistic move could be underestimated—a mistake I hope now to prevent. For Karr to take her mother’s darkest secret and reconstruct it in this non-secretive, even intimate, style is to deny her mother a reason to hide, to feel guilt, and ultimately to fear. Karr’s refusal to continue in her mother tongue is as much a move for compassion as it is a move for her own freedom.

When the conclusions of the previous section are considered in connection with this second passage, a new narrative—the one of Karr the memoirist, who is telling us her secrets—begins to take form. Karr recognizes that, as a child, her terror drove her to hide her mother from herself, essentially making Charlie and the associated fear a secret. She demonstrates this decision by abandoning her own narrative style and adopting the mother tongue, which is well suited for hiding things like monster mothers and deep-rooted fears. As a result of this secret formation, Karr’s self becomes schismatic and isolated, a decision that arouses anxiety within Karr. The fact that Karr does tell the secret, however, is significant; it opens the door for the secret to be dissected and ultimately dissolved. In this case, it is Karr’s mother and her “monster” self that must be understood and reinterpreted, which is precisely what the second passage accomplishes. The root of Charlie’s terrifying behavior is the secret of the lost children, which, once redefined as non-secret, redefines Charlie as both human and forgiven—no longer the pointy-toothed, inscrutable non-mother Karr made in her moment of fear. She writes of this evolution, “We should have

glowed, for what Mother told absolved us both, in a way. All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear" (320). This redefinition of the original secret, and thus the redefinition of Charlie herself, allows Karr to release her own secret of the monster-mother, which, in turn, transforms Karr.

And so it is, the key words of fear within the mother tongue are ultimately lies: the blood is not blood after all, the children are not dead, and the mother is no monster worthy of her children's rejection (318). Karr writes, "I never knew despair could lie," but such is the case (320) Through the rejection of secret-keeping, and the mother tongue which enabled it, Karr is "filled" with the "clear light of truth"—a hallmark of her new identity associated with her now-continuous past. The enabled aspects of self—*ipse* and *idem*—mean Karr is also free to see herself as whole and is empowered to act—characteristics she had lost in her former sea of secrets. This new self is strong, honest, forgiven, and forgiving, and having healed her relationship with her mother, Karr is free to love without fear.

If *this* is the power of female secret-telling—of daughters casting off their secretive mother tongues—then secret exposure in memoirs needs to be reconsidered. At best, secret-telling currently is regarded with rather superficial purposes, whether it is to confess, to demonstrate frankness or honesty, or to illuminate a poorly understood social ill. At worst, secret-telling is perceived as vulgar, attention-seeking, or, to refer back to Carolyn Heilbrun's article, just poor writing in vogue with women—a bad feminine fad. As I have demonstrated, the exploration and exposition of secrets is not only helpful for self-knowledge, but is, at times, essential. I believe further exploration can and should be done to explore mother-tongue rejection in women's memoir, both for the sake of understanding secrets' role in the memoir, but also for the sake of women who, like Karr and countless others, must tell their secrets to demystify them, and thereby heal themselves.

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