

CONTESTING CHILDHOOD



Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory

KATE DOUGLAS

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CREATING CHILDHOOD

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL MEMORY

To contest the past is also, of course, to pose questions about the present, and what the past means in the present. Our understanding of the past has strategic, political and ethical consequences. Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward.

—Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone,
Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory

It's only looking back that I believe the clear light of truth should have filled us, like the legendary grace that carries a broken body past all manner of monsters.

—Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club*

The autobiography of British feminist academic Lorna Sage—*Bad Blood: A Memoir*—was published in 2000, shortly before her death from emphysema at age fifty-seven in 2001. In *Bad Blood*, Sage recounts growing up in Shropshire in the 1940s and 1950s. Despite her adult success as a literary critic and author, in *Bad Blood* Sage writes exclusively about her childhood. The autobiography focuses in particular on Sage's unplanned teenage pregnancy and her struggle to rise above class and gender discrimination to gain a university education. Sage does not remember her childhood as a golden age of happiness, innocence, and prosperity—quite the contrary. She writes of a time when children, particularly girls, were isolated from knowledge, education, and careers.

Sage presents us with a paradigm for thinking about the cultural function of autobiographies of childhood—texts that rehistoricize and politicize childhood—asking readers to witness the difficulties, even traumas, of being a child of a particular historical time and place. In other parts of the literary world

during the same period, autobiographers were penning their autobiographies with a similar focus upon cultural, racial, class, or gender inequalities and their effects on the author's experience of childhood. These autobiographies include Stolen Generations narratives in Australia, narratives of institutional abuse from Ireland, traumatic postcolonial African autobiographies, and the plethora of narratives recounting abuse within the family circulating in the United States and the United Kingdom.

A profitable, influential, and infamous literary trend, autobiographies of childhood inevitably do more than simply represent an author's individual memories. These texts reflect broader moods and preoccupations about childhood. They provide insight into what it is possible to say about childhood in the current era—reflecting and prescribing ways of thinking about and representing the child.

In this chapter I consider the relationship between autobiographies of childhood and cultural memory. Autobiographies of childhood have emerged at a time when memory has entered a range of discourses—from science to philosophy and social science—in an extraordinary way. Michael Lambek and Paul Antze write, “We live in a time when memory has entered public discourse to an unprecedented degree. Memory is invoked to heal, to blame, to legitimate. It has become a major idiom in the construction of identity, both individual and collective and a site of struggle as well as identification” (vii). Kerwin Lee Klein has described memory as an “industry” (127), while Paula Hamilton writes, “Social scientists particularly have been concerned with the process of remembering both individually and collectively and the relationship of memories to place and identity” (10). Autobiographies of childhood are products of, and confrontations with, “cultural memory”—the collective ways in which the past is remembered, constructed, and made intelligible within culture. These autobiographies are memory texts born from individual, group and collective memory. I consider the cultural and memory “work” that autobiographies of childhood attempt to do—how these texts are influenced by, and in turn influence, what can be remembered about childhoods past and how these memories can be articulated within autobiography. How do contemporary contexts and paradigms for thinking about childhood underscore these autobiographical representations?

In reviewing exemplars, I consider the statements these texts make (in their writing and in their reception) about childhood: past and present. In looking at Karr's *Liars' Club* and Sage's *Bad Blood*, alongside two Stolen Generations autobiographies—Rosalie Fraser's *Shadow Child* and Donna Meehan's *It Is No Secret*—I identify a particular paradigm for thinking about childhood

that is illuminated within autobiographies of childhood: the rehistoricized, politicized, female child who, from her position within the text, asks that the reader witness her trauma and reconsider what can be remembered and written about childhoods past and present.

Memory, Autobiography, and Childhood

Memory drives autobiography, and, in turn, autobiographies influence perceptions of the ways in which memory functions. Memory necessarily forms the backbone of autobiographical writing about childhood. Autobiographies are about the past; the adults who write them are removed from their childhood by time and, usually, place. To write about childhood the author must remember and reconstruct something of his or her experiences of childhood into narrative. The difficulties inherent within this process are well documented and have become axioms of life-writing scholarship. As Lambek and Antze argue, although memory is part of our commonsense world, it is fraught with “ambiguities and complexities” (xi). These ambiguities around memory are further complicated by the schools of thought we invest in. For example, the disciplines of psychoanalysis/psychology, history, sociology, and anthropology each make different investments in memory—its neurological and cultural functions. For an adult writing an autobiography of childhood, childhood memories are at best fragile and fragmented and at worst impossible to retrieve. In short, the notion that individual childhood memories exist and are accessible to the autobiographer has been hotly contested within both popular and scholarly responses to these texts.¹

Autobiographies are laden with memory loss, memory gaps, false memory, and a plethora of other memory-related controversies. Autobiography is a genre weighed down by public suspicion, and memory, along with truth, remains a key stake in authorizing autobiographies of childhood. For example, book reviewers and reader comments on Web sites such as Amazon.com consistently ask how autobiographers manage to remember their childhoods from so long ago. Moreover, television talk shows throughout the 1990s and 2000s frequently focused upon psychological memory disorders, and newspaper literary pages were preoccupied with “autobiography hoaxes.”

Autobiographical genres have been affected by numerous high-profile hoaxes during the 1990s and 2000s. *A Rock and a Hard Place: One Boy's Triumphant Story* by Anthony Godby Johnson was released in 1993. The book, which details Godby Johnson's abusive childhood and his subsequent battle with AIDS, is suspected to be a hoax written by his supposed adoptive

mother, Vicki Johnson. Helen Demidenko (also known as Helen Dale and Helen Darville) posed as a Ukrainian immigrant in promoting her supposedly autobiographical novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1993). Binjamin Wilkomirski, in his autobiography of childhood *Fragments* (1995), constructed a false identity as a Holocaust survivor. Norma Khouri wrote *Forbidden Love* (2003), claiming to tell the true story of the honor killing of her friend Dalia in Jordan. Khouri's claims were exposed as false by the Australian journalist Malcolm Knox. In *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), James Frey writes candidly and graphically of his criminal past and of his alcohol and drug addictions. Like Khouri's, the veracity of Frey's story was challenged by investigative journalists. Frey was accused of embellishing the truth—changing facts and making exaggerated claims about his past. White Anglo-American Margaret Seltzer wrote a fraudulent autobiography as Margaret B. Jones, *Love and Consequences: A Memoir of Hope and Survival*, recounting her experiences as a biracial (Native American/white American) girl growing up in Los Angeles amid drug and gang cultures.

The climate for writing autobiographically has shifted greatly because of these controversies. Though still arguably one of the darlings of the publishing industry, autobiography has been branded a “difficult” genre; all highly successful autobiographies are now held up to intense scrutiny. Witness the recent controversy of Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007). Beah's story of his time as a child soldier in the government army during the civil war in Sierra Leone was challenged by the *Australian* newspaper, which disputed the veracity of some of the dates he presented. In doing so, it raised more general questions about the credibility of Beah's autobiography.

Such scrutiny of autobiography is highly problematic on many levels. It fails to recognize the long-held belief (within autobiographical genres) of the constructedness of *all* autobiographical writing. There is no such thing as pure autobiography—autobiography that holds a mirror up to a person's childhood and reflects back the events as they happened. There is an obvious difference between organic memory loss and/or traumatic memory loss and the deliberate and strategic imposture of an author like Seltzer. Criticizing an autobiography such as Beah's also fails to consider the impact that trauma might have had upon his memory and his ability to tell his story faithfully.

This problematization of memory leads to a range of questions about the cultural and social spaces that are available for remembering and writing about childhood. Though much media attention has been given to the apparent sensationalism of contemporary autobiographies of childhood, less focus has been given to these writings as cultural memory practices—as narratives

that are propelled by particular political and cultural conditions that extend beyond their recent autobiographical intertexts.

Cultural memory becomes a useful concept here, for considering how autobiographies of childhood function as acts of memory.² Cultural memory reflects the ways in which people collectively remember the past and imagine the future. Cultural memory explains the relationship between memory and the individual who is bound within a culture or cultures. According to Marita Sturken, it “represents the many shifting histories and shared memories that exist between a sanctioned narrative of history and personal memory” (119). Individuals are socialized—for example, by history books, festivals, and popular culture—to accept certain views of the past and to incorporate these views into their own lives via collective memory. However, cultural memory is in a state of constant flux; as interpretations of the past change, so does cultural memory. Societies are obsessed by remembering, and individuals and cultural groups are constantly offering counter-memories and histories that challenge existing cultural memory and may, in turn, become part of cultural memory.

Exploring the tenets of cultural memory reveals my preoccupation with the myriad ways in which memories of childhood are mediated or shaped through social institutions and cultural practices, rather than psychological explanations of how childhood memories might be accessed and articulated within autobiography. Individuals cannot simply draw memories of childhood from their conscience and write about them within autobiography. Memory is mediated by the various cultural texts and discourses that invite us to remember our childhoods on a daily basis: family photographs; newspaper articles on missing children; nostalgic advertisements for children’s products refashioned for contemporary audiences; enduring childhood songs, games, and fairy tales; and collectables such as classic toys. There is a range of culturally available templates for remembering and/or documenting our own childhoods or the childhoods of our children. We are intrinsically aware of what we are supposed to remember and document, of which stories and events are culturally valuable, of what is speakable and unspeakable (at any given time) about our childhoods. We document firsts—first word, first step, first tooth, first day of school. We celebrate occasions that shape our self-fashioned and socially constructed identities: birthdays, graduations, marriages, anniversaries.

For those who were born during the era of the instant camera, photographs provide a direct means for accessing particular people and events from our childhood—for reviving childhood memories. Those who do not have access to childhood photographs and mementos may have difficulty accessing their

childhood selves. In more recent times, technology has expanded the opportunities for documenting childhoods: from “baby blogs” through to online photo albums and universal family newsletters. The reliance on photography as a means of accessing childhood memories often results in an overinvestment in happy childhood memories, as these are the ones most commonly recorded in childhood photography—a point I return to in chapter 2. Children are increasingly taking responsibility for documenting their own lives, particularly as they become old enough to access the templates needed for documentation. Through diaries (traditionally in hard copy but increasingly now in online spaces), photography, instant messaging, and creative and social networking sites, children tell stories about themselves using the available memory tools.

What stories do we tell about childhoods within autobiography, and why? Like Lambek and Antze, I see memory as a “practice, not as the pre-given object of our gaze but as the act of gazing and the objects it generates. Memories are produced out of experience and, in turn, reshape it” (xii). In the section that follows, I want to look at the ways in which autobiographies of childhoods reveal particular preoccupations relating to childhoods present.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman:

Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club* and Lorna Sage’s *Bad Blood*

Commended and reviled for being one of the catalysts of the mid-1990s “memoir craze”—a period of unprecedented interest in so-called true-to-life autobiography, award-winning U.S. author Mary Karr has written two autobiographies alongside collections of poetry and numerous academic and review articles. Karr is part of an unprecedented wave in late twentieth-century women’s autobiography committed to using life-writing forms to write about events from the private sphere—recounting details of everyday family life. Karr’s best-known work is *The Liars’ Club*. This autobiography, which spent over a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list, is a harrowing yet often affectionate and humorous recounting of her turbulent Texan childhood. The majority of Karr’s narrative takes place between 1961 and 1963, when Karr was between seven and nine years old.

Karr recalls the trepidation with which she approached the release of *The Liars’ Club*:

When I set out on a book tour to promote the memoir about my less than perfect Texas clan, I did so with soul-sucking dread. Surely we’d be

held up as grotesques, my beloveds and I, real moral circus freaks. Instead I shoved into bookstores where sometimes hundreds of people stood claiming to identify with my story, which fact stunned me. Maybe these people's family lives differed in terms of surface pyrotechnics—houses set fire to and fortunes squandered. But the feelings didn't. After eight weeks of travel, I ginned up this working definition for a dysfunctional family: any family with more than one person in it. ("The Family Sideshow")

Karr's assumptions about the relevance of her autobiography seem modest. However, *The Liars' Club* was published in 1995 and, as I have suggested, is credited with being one of the pioneering texts of the memoir boom. Unlike her adherents, Karr could not have anticipated the appetite for texts like *The Liars' Club*—an autobiography that opened up literary spaces and language for the narration of working-class childhoods amid alcoholism, mental illness, poverty and sexual abuse. As Karr concedes, "Maybe coming-of-age memoirs are being bought and read by the boatload precisely because they offer some window into other people's whacked-out families, with which nearly everyone born in the fractured baby-boom era can identify" ("The Family Sideshow").

Karr writes affectionately of living in a "Dangerous," "Not Right" family—a result of the volatile relationship between her "Liar" father and "Nervous" feminist mother (who always refers to God as female and who "didn't date, she married") (10). They live in (the fictional) Leechfield, "one of the ten ugliest towns on the planet" (34). In *The Liars' Club* Karr describes a colorful community of characters including an unlovable, rotting grandmother, a suicidal schoolteacher, and murderous neighbors. Karr's young narrator, like most children, longs to be in a different family. After a terrible argument between her parents, during which the seven-year-old Karr's birthday dinner (a lasagna) was smashed on the kitchen floor, Karr recalls blowing out birthday candles on her cake: "I squinted my eyes as hard as I could and wished silently to go and live some other where forever, with a brand new family like on *Leave It to Beaver*. Then I sucked up as much air as I could get and blew the whole house dark" (137). However, despite these longings, and in spite of the many failings of her mother and father, Karr writes with deep devotion, loyalty, and love when speaking about them.

Writing in the first person, Karr employs a naïve child narrator, complete with childish local idiom ("The world smelled not unlike a wicked fart in a close room") (34). This approach allows Karr to extend beyond the conventions and limitations of retrospective adult narrators writing about childhoods long past. For example, Karr's narrator remains nonjudgmental about what

goes on around her—in particular, reserving judgment on her flawed parents as only a child would do. The narrator’s unapologetically (and realistically) fragmented memory imposes limits upon what the reader can know about events of the past. For Karr, “when the truth would be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out. But some ghost of an event may stay in your head” (9). For instance, Karr writes of her mother’s failed attempt to kill herself, her father, her, and her sister by running their car off a bridge. The event sticks in her mind because it occurred on her birthday, following the lasagna-smashing argument between her parents:

I don’t remember our family driving across the Orange Bridge to get to the Bridge City café that evening. Nor do I remember eating the barbecued crabs, which is a shame, since I love those crabs for their sweet grease and liquid-smoke taste. I don’t remember how much Mother drank in that bayou café, where you could walk to the end of the dock after dinner and toss your leftover hush puppies to hungry alligators.

My memory comes back into focus when we’re drawing close to the Orange Bridge on the way home. (137)

Karr vividly recounts the events that follow: as the car lurches closer to the edge of the bridge, as her sister attempts to cover her in the backseat, and as their parents fight over the steering wheel, a fight that culminates in Karr’s father knocking her mother out cold. There is little commentary on this event other than this. The family returns to “normal,” to quote Karr, shortly after.

In a similar vein, Karr is sexually assaulted twice in her childhood (once by a neighborhood boy, once by a babysitter) but chooses not to make these events a focal point in the narrative. The potency of these events lies in Karr’s lack of judgment; she chooses instead to focus on her childhood responses to these events. Karr explains this approach in an interview: “Can I tell about the boy who raped me without investigating who may have raped him as a child (data that would certainly spin the moral compass a few degrees at least)?” (“How My Old Friends”) Late in the text, when Karr describes being sexually assaulted by a babysitter, she initially does so in a matter-of-fact fashion:

More signs scrolled past, and days so gray and grainy that not one stands unblurred from any other, till I get sick one day and the grown man who allegedly comes to care for me winds up putting his dick in my eight-

year-old mouth. In fact, the whole blank winter sort of gathers around that incident like a storm cloud getting dense and heavy. (239)

However, this seemingly unemotional description functions as a prelude to a portrait of a frightened and traumatized child. Through this incident, Karr reflects upon her childhood vulnerability and powerlessness—for instance, how she saw herself as complicit in her sexual assault: “Maybe grown-ups know I know words like Hard-on from looking at me” (242). Here Karr relies on the reader to provide a moral compass—to disagree with the child’s view that she was in any way responsible for the sexual assaults inflicted upon her. The second assault brings back traumatic memories of the previous assault:

His hand fishes into that zipper and farther, into the shadow of his shorts. The seriousness of that reaching keeps me even from breathing regular. I’m also afraid to make him mad somehow, and even more afraid that any move I make or any word I speak will seem like welcome. So I sit still and pretend not to be home inside myself. I worry worry worry though about what’s about to happen.

I think of that old neighbor boy laying me down on the cement sack in the Carters’ garage, him on top of me bucking. Probably I don’t even have a cherry from that. I didn’t hear it pop inside me, because I was so busy thinking for him to hurry before I got in trouble. Whether I have a cherry or not, though, I can feel how marked I am inside for being hurt that way. (243)

Karr uses autobiography to defend the child and to speak on her behalf—both to address her individual pain and to offer broader (feminist) commentary on the misconceptions surrounding girlhood sexual abuse.

The sequel to *The Liars’ Club*, *Cherry*, is a narrative of youthful introspection in the late 1960s and early 1970s, depicting Karr’s adolescence in Leechfield, Texas, up to her eventual move to Los Angeles, which concludes this autobiography.³ *Cherry* focuses on the central character, constructed as Karr’s adolescent self, rather than on her family, who play a much smaller part than they did in *The Liars’ Club*. *Cherry* uses first-person and second-person narrators to construct this self. In doing so, Karr uses her skills in poetic experimentation to search for a fitting autobiographical voice. Karr’s second autobiography is more light and humorous than its predecessor, though its subject matter embraces nostalgic references to lost time, comic

representations of characters and places, and contemptuous evocations of a narrow-minded society.

In taking this approach *Cherry* gives rebellious girlhood, and more particularly girlhood sexuality, a voice and language to articulate its experiences. *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry* depict the development of young girls, experiences of abuse and neglect, alcoholism, mental illness, and familial eccentricities. These autobiographies assert the contradictory but necessary forces of blame and forgiveness that coexist in much autobiographical writing about childhood. *Cherry* explores girlhood “firsts” and friendships, as well as the protagonist’s drug use, disaffection, suicide attempt, juvenile crime, and need to escape from adolescent spaces and traumas. The exploration of her development and escape via books makes *Cherry* read like a portrait of the artist as a young woman. Karr’s adolescent narrator is a girl from a working-class background who desires something more. In her self-representation of adolescence, Karr presents her multiple identities—from surfing hippie to poet—thus asserting the many possibilities for female adolescents. Her autobiographies are concerned with the (external and internal) restrictions placed upon young women, particularly those growing up in small towns.

Male writers have traditionally dominated coming-of-age autobiography, and the experiences of girlhood, such as those depicted by Karr, were not archetypes in women’s autobiography prior to the last two decades. Thus, Karr’s texts are part of the broader project of women’s autobiography that seeks to open up cultural spaces for the representation of adverse childhoods and adolescence. Karr’s autobiographies are not bound by conventions of language; *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry* make dexterous use of adolescent and local idioms, particularly sexual vernacular. Her writing merges her working-class influences with her literary perspectives, and the subject matter she deals with is not sanitized.

Through her writing Karr emerges as deeply committed to implementing and celebrating a voice that is unapologetically autobiographical—subjective, personal, and stirring. Her coverage of the movements between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is unsentimental and yet asserts the significance in seemingly insignificant events, objects, and relationships. There is a candor in her writing that works to extend the limits of contemporary women’s autobiography. Indeed, Karr’s brash and fragmented take on childhood paved the way for other autobiographies of childhood by American women recounting personal experience of a difficult childhood and adolescence—such as Koren Zailckas’s *Smashed: Growing Up a Drunk Girl* and Lauren Slater’s experimental, renegade autobiography *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. In Slater’s text, for example, the boundaries

of autobiography—of truth and lying—come under close scrutiny. Slater emphasizes the fragility of memory in exploring the delicate relationship between illness, gender, and autobiographical narration. For Slater, narration is valuable in itself. The stories we tell about our childhood (which inevitably inhabit the large space between truth and fabrication) present a means by which the self can be constructed into history. Since this act of remembering and writing can never be truly reliable, it is the act of telling, the art of telling, that is important. Again, this telling reveals more about contemporary preoccupations with memory, and more particularly the relationship between childhood memories and the adult self, than it does about the actual past as it happened.

Like Karr and others in the United States, late twentieth-century British autobiographers worked within and against dominant histories to insert alternative accounts of childhood into cultural memory. Michael Erben suggests that one of the preoccupations of late twentieth-century British autobiography was the experiences of women from working-class backgrounds, citing autobiographies such as Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Gillian Rose's *Love's Work*, and Ann Oakley's *Man and Wife* (48). This interest in the lives of working-class women is probably a result of movements toward more equitable education initiatives in Britain, for, as Steedman notes, "from the 1950s onwards in Britain, state school children were taught creative writing in line with beliefs about the psychological benefits of writing the self, particularly for working-class children" ("Enforced" 27). Steedman suggests that "creative writing flourished in conjunction with new practices of self-narration outside the school: adult education, the development of the worker-writers' and community publishing movement (and thus an astonishing flowering of working-class autobiography in the 1970s)" (28).

Sage's *Bad Blood*, like Karr's autobiographies, highlights the experiences of a working-class girlhood, explicitly suggesting autobiography can write experiences into history in a way that had previously been impossible. Indeed, Sage's childhood is retrievable because of particular contemporary ideologies of the child. It is these ideologies of childhood, especially mythologies of "lost" contemporary childhoods (as opposed to idealized "golden" childhoods of the past), that encourage the telling of these narratives now.⁴ Autobiography is an accessible medium for feminist public intellectuals (such as Karr and Sage) to explore the ways in which their unconventional girlhoods shaped the woman they each became.

Sage, like Karr, does not present her childhood as an ideal yesteryear alternative to contemporary crises of childhood. She experienced an unhappy

home life that was rife with feuding and secrecy, and her narrator explicitly debunks her family's presentation of "happy families" as an illusion:

They always closed ranks and pretended that everything was solid, normal and natural. Here we have the family of the period: self-made and going places. Only when you look more closely can you see that this housewife is pathologically scared of food, hates home, is really a child dreaming of pretty things and treats; and this businessman will never accumulate capital, he's still a boy soldier, going over the top again and again. Their obsessions had met, fallen in love and married; they completed and sustained each other. (186)

This autobiographical construction functions as a more general reminder that families did break down in the so-called golden age, but these experiences were often silenced. Autobiographies of childhood have become a means for breaking silences (for example, about the family) that may have been enforced upon children during their infancy and youth.

Bad Blood is an academic's memoir, a subgenre of autobiography that has boomed in the past decade. Gillian Whitlock suggests that academic memoir "is frequently shaped in order to naturalize and confirm the professional identity and vocation of the narrating subject and to produce a pedigree of sorts. That is to say, it can work to invent continuities between past and present" (*Disciplining* 340). This is an important consideration when reading Sage, who is very much concerned with understanding how her past shaped her present career. Sage's retrospective all-knowing adult narrator rediscovers rather than relives her childhood, shamefully mocking both her own ignorance and that of the adults who imposed this ignorance upon her. This allows her to employ a sociological (rather than therapeutic) stance in explaining the inequality suffered by working-class rural children in England during the 1940s and 1950s. Sage implicates her own story within broader social changes that enabled social mobility. For example, Sage's narrative explains how working-class children were mocked at school, citing a particular incident involving her teacher:

One day he lined up his class and went down the line saying with gloomy satisfaction 'You'll be a muck-shoveller, you'll be a muck-shoveller . . .' and so on, only missing out the homework trio. As things turned out he was mistaken—by the time my Hanmer generation grew up there were very few jobs on the land, the old mixed labour-intensive farming had

finally collapsed, farmers had gone over to machinery, and the children he'd consigned to near-illiteracy and innumeracy had to re-educate themselves and move on. Which they did, despite all the school had done to inculcate ignorance. Back there and then in our childhoods, though, in the late Forties, Mr Palmer seemed omniscient. (21)

The adult narrator imagines how adults must have perceived her and her schoolmates. The tone of this admission is shame: "I think that we all forget the pain of being a child at school for the first time, the sheer ineptitude, as though you'll never learn to mark out your own space. It's doubly shaming—shaming to *remember* as well, to feel so sorry for your scabby little self back there in small people's purgatory" (23). Though this statement works to debunk the cultural memory of childhood as an Edenic time, to refute this particular cultural memory, this representation renders childhood inferior to adulthood. In this instance, autobiography provides a means for addressing childhood shame, though this is not necessarily productive for the autobiographer.

The shame she suffered as a child renders the adult narrator unable to represent her child self as having any agency. It is only as an adult, with autobiography as a weapon, that Sage can address the wrongs of her childhood, to critique the naïve feelings that were instilled within her because she was young and female. She writes, "Like all the girls back then I knew that being too clever was much worse than being too tall" (219). Though this exploration of child naïveté is often achieved by narrating humorous incidents whereby both adults and children are derided for their lack of awareness—such as the visit by the "lady from Ponds"—the overall effect is that the child self seems wholly disempowered by Sage's representation (202).⁵ Sage does not attempt to recapture the child voice, just its experience. For Sage, adult ownership of childhood shame becomes a means for writing childhoods into cultural space and for asserting particular memories of cultural moments.

In contrast, Karr reinstates a knowing child into her past, and in doing so asserts the intelligence of children. For instance, Karr's narrator recounts the shrewd ways in which her and her sister would manage their mother's drinking:

The big game for me once she'd started drinking was to gauge which way her mood was running that I might steer her away from the related type of trouble. Hiding her car keys would keep her off the roads and, ergo, out of a wreck, for instance. Or I'd tie up the phone by having a running

chat with the busy signal (seven-year-olds don't yet have any phone life to speak of), so she couldn't dial up any teachers or neighbors she was liable to bad-mouth. (127)

This creates the impression of a child with a fast-developing intellect and cunning survival strategies. Karr's child narrator is actively inquisitive, sharply intelligent, yet remains at the mercy of adults. For example, when her mother is institutionalized, the young Mary questions her father's not explaining it to her and her sister: "Maybe our own silence on the subject—Lecia's and mine, for we didn't bring it up either—was meant to protect him somehow, so as not to worry him overmuch. If we failed by not telling him all about it, he sure as shit failed us by not knowing how to ask" (158). Such narrative constructions achieve more than merely suggesting that a child is capable of intelligent comprehension and feeling. It is the child who is right, but remains powerless. The child becomes a moral marker for the reader to emulate.

Both Karr and Sage set out to inscribe an adverse history of childhood into the mythology of the golden age. They are shaped by a personally felt need to "write back" to these myths as accomplished, educated adults and to acknowledge their origins as lower class and rural. These feminist critiques contribute to rights-of-the-(girl)-child debates. For example, these autobiographies assert a girl's right to education. Sage's narrative explores the system of education she experienced as a child in rural Britain in the 1950s. Girls wanting an education were seen as delinquent. The narrator explains that while her primary school "had been designed to produce domestic servants and farm labourers, and functional illiteracy was still part of the expectation, almost part of the curriculum" (19), the high school she attended "was designed to produce solid, disciplined, well-groomed girls who'd marry local traders and solicitors like their fathers" (143–144).

Sage's narrator represents her childhood as on the cusp of significant social change. She describes how "unheard of" it was for children at her school to pass the eleven-plus exams: "The world was changing, education was changing, and the notion that school should reflect your ready-made place in the scheme of things and put you firmly back where you came from was going out of fashion even in Hanmer" (20). This consolidates the impression that many contemporary autobiographies of childhood seek to make: that their childhood was a socially consequential one.

Female adolescent sexuality is an important theme within *Bad Blood*. Sage writes of finding herself pregnant at sixteen without knowing she had actually had sex: "How could I have got it wrong?" (238). This revelation, which some reviewers remain skeptical about, works as an illustration of the dangers of

enforcing children's ignorance. Writing about this experience allows Sage to (ironically) document this event, which was publicly erased at the time:

My parents' plan was that I should go to a Church Home for Unmarried Mothers, where you repented on your knees (scrubbed floors, said prayers), had your baby (which was promptly adopted by proper married people) and returned home humble and hollow-eyed. Everyone would magnanimously pretend that nothing had happened. (237)

This acknowledgment of youthful sexuality asserts a space for the adolescent self as a radical pacesetter, concerned about the rights of women and children. Sage defies expectations and attends university, despite being refused a grant because she was a mother:

You were supposed to choose between boys and books, because for girls sex was entirely preoccupying. . . . On this logic County Education Committees would stop a girl's university grant if she cohabited, married or became pregnant because it was a waste of public money, although it had probably been a waste of public money all along (many people thought) because the girls would marry when they got their degrees, have families and only work part-time, if that, at jobs they were overqualified for. (232–233)

Sage ends her autobiography by looking to the future via her daughter: "She's the real future, she tells the world that we broke the rules and got away with it, for better and for worse, we're part of the shape of things to come" (278). This statement is a call to action whereby the reader is encouraged to see and respond to social change positively.

Collectively the narratives of Sage and Karr force a reexamination of childhoods (in this instance, girlhoods) past in light of present preoccupations relating to gender and class inequality. The examples that follow demonstrate another way in which the autobiography of childhood has been taken up—to reveal racial and cultural inequalities from the past that preoccupy the present.

Stolen Childhoods: Rosalie Fraser's *Shadow Child* and Donna Meehan's *It Is No Secret*

Fraser's *Shadow Child*, a Stolen Generations autobiography, relates her experiences living with a foster family in the 1960s and 1970s after being removed

from her parents' care as a child. Though the narrator recounts the abuse she suffered at the hands of her foster mother, Mrs. Kelly, *Shadow Child* links the direct forms of (physical, sexual, and emotional) abuse that she suffered to the cultural abuse and neglect leveled at her and her siblings by the welfare institutions that were responsible for them. Fraser endures horrific physical and sexual abuse from her foster mother. The narrator uses the term "the Welfare" to describe the various systems that, while claiming to have her interests and protection in mind, offered no protection and seemingly had no interest in her.

Fraser's *Shadow Child* and Donna Meehan's *It Is No Secret* offer a bold challenge to dominant paradigms for representing mid-twentieth-century Australian childhoods. The mid-twentieth century, from the end of World War II to the prosperous 1960s, has been represented and re-represented within Western cultures as a golden age. In Australia, for instance, the dominant cultural memory represented in autobiographies has emerged from white childhoods in a settler culture: postwar suburban prosperity, the portrait of the artist, and innocent children "coming of age."⁶ During this time, cultural memory constructed an era of cultural (and racial) homogeneity, which was unchallenged by alternative histories. Bain Attwood describes the destruction of communal memory that this cultural dominance entailed:

In the postwar era of assimilation, new and old Australians were urged to abandon both their communities and their communal memory—to forget the past and enter into the future—and there were few Australians who wanted to hear their histories. Australian history was a grand narrative of modernity and progress, and had no place for a "dying race" or "a primitive culture." (188)

The cultural memory that surrounds the postwar era is the span of "living memories" for many turn-of-the-millennium consumers of autobiography, for this is the era when they were children. The tendency to view this particular era through "rose-colored glasses"—which produces a penchant to bemoan the loss of family values or the breakdown of the traditional family unit in contemporary Australia—has been a characteristic of late twentieth-century conservative politics. The past is imagined and remembered in ways that influence political agendas in the present, and, in turn, contemporary politics sanction particular representations of the past. An example of this is Geoffrey Blainey's reference to "black armband history," which privileges consensus-based representations of Australian social history (10).⁷

Yet, as Chris Healy argues, memories that are within “the reach of lived experience” are never as solidly entrenched as those, for instance, from the nineteenth century (7).⁸ As a consequence, cultural memory can be refused and replaced. For example, multicultural autobiographies of childhood entered cultural memory as post–World War II child immigrants became adults in the late twentieth century. The publication of autobiographies such as Amirah Inglis’s *Amirah: An Un-Australian Childhood* and Andrew Riemer’s *Inside Outside* and the presentation of television miniseries such as *The Leaving of Liverpool* brought minority histories of childhood into mainstream consciousness.⁹ There have been a number of autobiographies of childhood recounting the experiences of displaced children—Alan Gill’s *Orphans of the Empire* and Geoffrey Sherington’s *Fairbridge: Empire and Child Migration* are two notable examples published during the late 1990s. The publication of these autobiographies collectively reveals a growing preoccupation with childhood history in Australia, and the potential for autobiographical writing to do memory work—to reshape history through individual experiences. These experiences can only now be read, as those who experienced the childhood are old enough to write about it, and the cultural climate is ready to receive these stories. It is the recognizable figure of the child—the child in need of a hearing and requiring protection—that provides the common denominator of these stories.

Indigenous autobiographies of childhood entered the Australian public consciousness through the growing acknowledgement of the Stolen Generations, and these narratives have, in turn, contributed to the broader dissemination of Indigenous life narratives. Indeed, the Stolen Generations brought the traumatic child to public attention in Australia in an unprecedented way. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report (1997) recorded over a thousand testimonies, reaching the conclusion that from 1910 to 1970 between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were removed from their families and communities (Whitlock, “In the Second Person”).¹⁰ These children were raised in institutions or white foster homes. The Australian government’s policy of assimilation led to the cultural genocide of Indigenous Australians. How, then, could Stolen Generations narratives enter mainstream consciousness? A range of discourses had to be engaged in memory work. As Attwood writes, “There is nothing inevitable about this metamorphosis: this is not simply a case of ‘the return of the repressed’ or the oppressed, a necessary surfacing of a hitherto silenced or submerged history; instead it might better be understood as a matter of ‘narrative accrual’ or ‘narrative coalescence’” (183). The HREOC report was, as Whitlock argues, “the culmination of three decades of political struggle by activists to return the control of Aboriginal

children to Aboriginal families. . . . Narratives by and about stolen children are embedded in many of the autobiographies by Aboriginal Australians that circulated since the 1980s” (“In the Second Person” 202). Stolen Generations narratives are significant because of the ways in which they come to constitute a collective memory around Indigenous childhood and identity. The narratives encourage Indigenous Australians to recognize a shared pain and to be empowered to share this trauma via writing and reading autobiographical narratives.¹¹ These narratives have become fundamental to Reconciliation as well as the central site for Indigenous collective memory. They are sanctioned as histories, becoming a privileged mode of political activity.

The autobiography of childhood is effective in this context, mediating between Stolen Generations narratives, traditional forms of autobiography, alternative histories, and sociological interest in the child. In utilizing the autobiographical form for Stolen Generations narratives, autobiographies such as Fraser’s *Shadow Child* and Meehan’s *It Is No Secret* appeal to the collective memory of the Stolen Generations by offering counter-histories to the predominant white histories. These autobiographies also work to dispel socially constructed myths of idealized Australian childhoods. By appealing to both Indigenous and white Australian readerships, these narratives become part of the process of instating a new cultural memory about a particular era of Australian history. Both Fraser and Meehan explicitly locate their experiences within historical time and space, for example, by naming particular Australian institutions and bureaucracies as racist. Writing about the 1960s, the autobiographical narrator of *It Is No Secret* remembers being teased by both teachers and students at school: “I couldn’t claim Aboriginality, but was always stigmatized by it, always treated like a second class citizen” (Meehan 53). The narrator explicitly relates these childhood traumas to government policy: “This was during the government’s ‘Keep Australia White’ campaign. . . . Could anyone blame a child for not wanting to go to school in these circumstances?” (54) Fraser similarly names the social institutions responsible for her being forcibly removed from her culture:

When I look back, I see that my life as a child with my natural family really ended two years and three months after I was born. The date was 13 March 1961, the place was Beverley, in Western Australia. On that day, my brothers and sisters Terry aged eight, Stuart aged six, Karen aged four-and-a-half, Beverley aged eight months, and myself, were all made Wards of the State through action taken by the Child Welfare Department of Western Australia. (9–10)

The narrator later reflects on the ease with which her foster mother, Mrs. Kelly, was able to fool “the Welfare” into believing that she was providing a good foster home for her foster children:

The only time we had a nice room and our own bed was when the Welfare came to see us. So nice, in fact that great lengths were taken to make sure another bed was borrowed for the day, and dolls that belonged to my foster mother’s own daughters were placed on our so-called beds for the grand occasion. How dumb those officers were, not to see through the facade. (27)¹²

Shadow Child seeks to expose the official version of her life, imposed upon her by welfare institutions and her foster mother, as false. The narrator reveals how as a child she was forced to lie about the abuse being perpetrated upon her. *Shadow Child* functions as a silence-breaker: The writing of this autobiography works to replace official histories with personal testimony and to vehemently assert this counter-history as “truth.” This deconstruction of official sources of knowledge, along with the assertion of autobiography as authentic knowledge, suggests that this autobiographical text cannot be any less reliable than these other “official” sources. It is an empowering revelation for the narrator when she and her sister can construct their childhood narrative:

Bev and I decided that no one—not the Welfare, not the hospital, nor our foster parents, nor the others associated with our pain and the crimes done to us—should be allowed to get away with what happened to us as children. As far as we could see, no one had ever cared about us. They just left us to rot. Especially the Welfare, whose so-called caring hands were safely in their pockets. (23)

The narrator uses the autobiography as an opportunity to publicly inscribe the blame for her removal on welfare institutions, not her parents:

The Welfare. I blamed them for a lot. They could have helped get Mum and Dad on their feet; they could have supplied bedding and clothing as they did while we were in foster care; they could have helped Dad out with his bills. . . . No, Dad, I do not blame you, but I left my thoughts in this book, so people could see the struggles I have had in my mind, due to my childhood. (228)

Steedman explains how writing about childhood involves interpreting the past through the agency of social information; this interpretation can only be made when people gain a sense of the social world and their place in it (“Stories” 243). In this instance the presence of an adult narrator allows the narrative to make connections between her childhood and adulthood and to appeal directly to contemporary consciousness of issues such as Reconciliation and the Stolen Generations.¹³

The narrator of *Shadow Child* makes a passionate appeal regarding the authenticity of her narrative in asserting the validity of her memories. For example, though the narrator makes no apology for the lost memories and chronological gaps at the beginning of her narrative, she asserts that

from the time I was three years of age I can remember everything vividly. Maybe it was because I became the big sister from that day on—maybe it was because the oldest got the worst. It just seems as though I woke up one morning with an absolutely clear head, and I can remember our life from that day onwards. (15)

Such statements are a recurrent feature of *Shadow Child*, as is the suggestion that constant, painful trauma is the memory trigger for this narrative: “All I have to do is close my eyes, and through a kind of dizziness my mind just plays the scene, as though I were watching television, and takes me back to what seems like yesterday” (18). The narrator’s assertion that her memories are the result of “a clear head” is later clarified by the reference to other sources of knowledge that helped her construct this autobiography; these sources include her own memories, those of her siblings, and the Welfare records she was able to access, excerpts of which are inserted into *Shadow Child*.

One of the most significant aspects of the narrative structure of this autobiography is the extent to which it seeks (perhaps needs) to qualify its memory claims. This again demonstrates the implicit conflict with contemporary autobiographical practice—postmodern skepticism regarding memory combines with autobiographical market forces demanding authenticity. Yet *Shadow Child* and the declarations it makes about memory also reveal something of the imperatives of Indigenous autobiography. *Shadow Child* affirms the power of collective counter-memory and the political importance of testing the boundaries of non-Indigenous autobiography and memory. As Lambek and Antze argue, memory is “part of our commonsense world” (xi), and it is to the reader’s common sense that autobiographies such as *Shadow Child* often appeal.

Fraser's and Meehan's identification of themselves as "stolen," Meehan's recognition of being a "second class citizen," and Fraser's understanding of her childhood "ending" at age two occur alongside the naming of government institutions and policies. This is powerful because these institutions and historical moments are living memories for many Australians, although for the dominant group their practices have until very recently been understood as benevolent. Attwood argues that such naming can have the effect of creating a historical event, replacing previous namings (189–190).¹⁴ Autobiographies of childhood are juxtaposed with official histories such as government policies and documentation, in these instances, to offer a counter-discourse to them. In the 1990s autobiographical accounts came to be recognized and widely accepted as legitimate alternative histories of the Australian state.

The autobiographies of Fraser and Meehan are exemplary of the role of the autobiography of childhood: as history, as advocate, and as representative narrative. Fraser's *Shadow Child* and Meehan's *It Is No Secret* utilize what has become an established, recognizable cultural form, and the interest this form has generated, to draw attention to the experiences of the Stolen Generations. But Fraser and Meehan adapt the conventions of this form. For example, both of these autobiographies are concerned with a longer period than other autobiographies of childhood in this study. This is a crucial change, because it allows these autobiographers to explain the effects of childhood on their adult lives. It also permits these texts to draw direct reference to their contemporary consciousness (such as Meehan's discussion of how painful "National Sorry Day" was for her).

Another way these Indigenous autobiographies of childhood have affected this autobiographical form is in their language and structure. The narratives are structured as an intimate conversation between narrator and reader that is highly emotive and personal. Meehan and Fraser identify the insecurities they had about being writers of an autobiography.¹⁵ In doing so they position themselves not as writers or autobiographers but as "everyday" people who *had* to write. In the "dedication" section of *Shadow Child* Fraser documents her "need to write" and in the final chapter recommends the act of writing "to anyone who has problems" (270). Such author/reader constructions mark a particular therapeutic space for these Indigenous autobiographies of childhood distinct from that of "high" (or literary) modes of autobiography.

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers are directly addressed within the narratives of *It Is No Secret* and *Shadow Child*. Meehan and Fraser take the position of advocates for Indigenous Australians, using autobiography to

generate a cultural memory of Stolen Generations childhoods. The narrator of *It Is No Secret* overtly offers her text as a regenerative force, and she appeals directly to the reader:

For our people who are still searching for their families I pray that you find the answers your heart needs to know. For the thousands who were institutionalised and unloved in your childhood and ignored and unwanted when you returned home, we weep with you. (Meehan 292)

In *It Is No Secret* Meehan represents herself not as a unique individual but rather as a communal autobiographer. Joy Hooten argues that this is a particularly common feature in Indigenous women's autobiography, when "the individual story, sharp and even unresolved as it may be, is perceived as describing a general experience; it is both unrepeatable autograph and cultural archetype" (*Stories* 315). This is one of the central tensions of autobiographies of childhood—the adult autobiographer speaks for the child, but the autobiography can also be employed to speak for others beyond the self. This is an issue I return to throughout this study. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, "Acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective" (*Reading Autobiography* 21). However, the explicitness with which Meehan's and Fraser's autobiographies adopt "representativeness" is another way in which these Indigenous autobiographies use the autobiographical form with intent.

Communal memory is important to Indigenous life writing; it is "a social, political position understood to be shared" (Hamilton 16). In *It Is No Secret* the naming of places, people, and experiences unique to Meehan might imply the specificity of this narrative. Yet throughout the autobiography Meehan is positioned as one of a community of people who suffered a similar experience. For example, Meehan describes the feelings of other children as if they are her own memories. Similarly, she relays the emotions and opinions of members of her community. *Shadow Child* employs a similar approach of writing a broader history of the Stolen Generations stemming from the personal experiences of the narrator:

Up to the 1960s, many children who were stolen from their parents were either put in government settlements, or missions run by religious institutions, or placed in foster homes. Many of us were abused in these places—and that I cannot understand. Are we to believe that we were ripped from our parents because the government genuinely intended to ensure we would have a better life? No, not in my experience. They had

no right to take us away from our parents and put us in situations that would jeopardise our lives, our education and our very being. (266)

In this example, communal representation is affirmed through Fraser's claim to communal memory. The stolen child, the individual autobiographical subject, becomes metonymic of the Stolen Generations.

It Is No Secret assumes a currency of social myths about Indigeneity among its non-Indigenous readership. For example, the narrator suggests, "people probably think that just because we live in the city and eat the same foods as they do and speak the same language and dress the same way that I have assimilated" (291). The narrative directly rebuts this myth, moving from the events of Meehan's childhood to contemporary Australian racist myths of Aboriginality. Fraser's autobiography adopts a similar approach:

The government, through the Welfare, has always controlled my life in some shape or form. They did so all through my childhood and even now they control my life, because of what they have done to me—and not just to me, but to all the Aboriginal people in Australia. The non-Aboriginal people of Australia may sometimes wonder why Aboriginal people seem so dependent on government handouts. Well, for 200 years, what else did we have? Our independence was taken away, our dignity was destroyed and our country stolen from us, along with the murder of untold thousands of our people. What else was left? (267)

Such direct, powerful statements call upon non-Indigenous readers to witness these experiences and acknowledge white Australia's racist past. The child figure provides a recognizable symbol for this acknowledgment, allowing Meehan's and Fraser's narratives to use the autobiography of childhood to write histories for the Indigenous child.

In this chapter I have looked at some of the ways autobiographical writers are engaged in what Hamilton would describe as the "'recovery' of memory—to facilitate the production of more and more inclusive histories—and to bring into the public domain the many conflicting interpretations of the past" (10). For these autobiographers, writing about discrimination, poverty, or abuse stems from a need to "write back" to mythologies of childhood that have been prevalent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In particular, these autobiographies contest the notion that the mid-twentieth century was a "golden age" for children that existed in stark contrast to contemporary crises of childhood. Autobiographies of childhood at the turn of the millennium have become a location for the

reconstruction of mid-twentieth-century childhoods—offering more diverse and inclusive representations of childhood experience.

The work of autobiography as a cultural memory practice has enabled autobiographies of childhood to “successfully ‘[unsettle] the past,’ leaving . . . questions unanswered about what else has been strategically ‘forgotten’” (Hamilton 14). Autobiographers such as Karr, Sage, Fraser, and Meehan respond to the cultural politicization of the child by “creating new emphases” (Gilmore, *Limits* 16). Whitlock predicts that further changes in autobiographies of childhoods will occur as a consequence of future socio-political shifts: “The more autobiographical writing is used by those who have not been authoritative or dominant, then the more likely it is that childhood narratives will be a record of the incursions of history and conflict rather than a pre-adolescent idyllic phase” (*Autographs* xxvi).

However, it is important to acknowledge that just as these writings about childhood are propelled by past mythologies of childhood, autobiographies of childhood are significantly enabled by contemporary discourses for representing childhood. Thus autobiographies of childhood function as rewriting of past childhoods as much as they reveal modern preoccupations about childhood—and autobiography joins the plethora of mediators on contemporary childhoods.

The following chapters work to consolidate and complicate these issues. I propose that different types of autobiographical writing about childhood, reflecting different memory modes, have emerged within the socio-political contexts outlined in this chapter. For example, at the millennium, and as a consequence of the same cultural flash points identified here, autobiographies remain a site for the consolidation of nostalgic memory, of particular myths of childhood from previous social eras that circulate as cultural memory now. I explore these tensions in cultural memory and their pertinence to autobiographies of childhood throughout this study.