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ANTE-AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE ARCHIVE OF CHILDHOOD

This essay examines the concept of children's autobiography via several autobiographical extracts written by the author as a child. Although only a small proportion of people will compose and publish a full-length autobiography, almost everyone will, inadvertently, produce an archive of the self, made from public records and private documents. Here, such works are seen as providing access to writing both about and by children. The essay explores the ethics and poetics of children's writing via the key debates in life writing; in particular, the dynamic relationship between adults and children, both as distinct stages of life and dual parts of one autobiographical identity. The term "ante-autobiography" is coined to refer to these texts which come before or instead of a full-length narrative. They are not read as less than or inadequate versions of autobiography, but rather as transgressive and challenging to chronological notions of the genre.

Keywords archive; adulthood; autobiography; childhood; memory; power

Strange, that while so many years of schooling merge into long forgotten hours, some lessons latch hold of the memory forever. I remember being told about the constant renewal of cells, rebuilding the body piece by piece, so that over a period of years a whole new person stands in place. The same you but different. The lesson haunts me now as I read myself as a child. The same me but different.

As they prepared to move from their home of twenty-seven years, my parents made a number of visits to my house, bearing dusty boxes containing what I came to think of as the archive of my childhood. Sifting among the preserved objects, favorite toys, first shoes and sports trophies, I was struck by the number of texts which, if collated, would produce a narrative portrait of a childhood. Birth and baptismal certificates, health records and school reports, combined to provide a narrative of my childhood, composed by the adults who observed and cared for me. So far, so typical of many a family attic. But alongside these, I was surprised to find, were numerous autobiographical documents I had evidently written as a child. For all my adult reluctance to engage in the autobiographical act, it appeared I had already long been doing so.¹

The accidental archive

Archives are enticingly flexible. They are at once a location (the place where things are collected), a collection (the things themselves), and a symbolic link between the past

and present (the implied value of the things). The scale of archives ranges from the national to the personal, preserved in various levels of formality. On an individual scale, some lives are catalogued in major reference libraries, others preserved haphazardly in a shoebox under the bed. The quantity of archived lives continues to grow, since in the current period, more so than ever before, lives generate documents both in print and online. The popularity of family history is a clear indicator of this as enthusiasts gather up birth and death records, faded photographs and maps of distant towns to produce an archive of their own. These archives, both formal and informal, share what Philip Larkin famously described as “magical” and “meaningful” components. For Larkin, the “magical value is the older and more universal,” providing the tangible and precious connection to the “paper he wrote on” and the “words as he wrote them” (99). The “meaningful” by comparison, emerges by way of the signifying power of those words. While a published text conveys its purpose to the reader in clean-copy typescript, an archived autobiography also acts as a historical artifact. For Larkin, it is not simply the content but the nature of archives that matters in revealing the presence of the writing life, hinted at in handwriting and errata. Acknowledging the materiality of the archive is particularly relevant in a life-writing context. While the meaning conveyed through language retains primacy, the physical document also provides non-linguistic information. Writing which comes before or instead of the polished and published text contains revelatory mistakes untouched by a proofreader and the idiosyncrasies unseen by an editor. At the same time, the handcrafted object of the daily journal or bundle of letters conveys meaning about those who produced and preserved them. Although only a small proportion of people will ever compose and publish a full-length autobiography, the production of a personal archive is almost as inevitable as it is inadvertent. While official records and institutional documents collate the bare facts of a life, diaries, photograph albums, love letters and social networking sites both conceal and reveal the “magical” and “meaningful” aspects of a life story. On their own, such documents might be seen as mere fragments, inadequately detailed to be validated as life writing, but in combination – as an archive – they have a value and significance greater than the component parts.

The human urge to narrate manifests itself in multiple written formats across times and cultures.² Nevertheless, my argument here, that the haphazard textual outputs of any life can constitute an archive depends on numerous assumptions, not least of all the idea that the subject has lived long enough to accumulate them. This is not simply a matter of quantity. A well-documented life may indicate success through numerous preserved correspondence, press-clippings, and certificates. Alternatively, a traumatic life may be recorded in medical records or prison reports.³ The theme of this paper grew, at least in part, from the happenstance of discovering a box of artifacts from my childhood. Among the usual nostalgic memorabilia, I was surprised to find several documents in which I had, as a child, written about myself. For the most part these were mediated by adults, the product of activities designed to develop literacy, handwriting, and other skills. Nevertheless, they also seemed to form part of a wider project of encouraging the child to construct a developing life narrative. Dates indicate that the documents were written between the ages of four and eight, and the contents range across the factual recording of height and hair color to the more subjective matter of favorite smells and ambitions for the future. While limited and fragmentary when read apart, in combination, they provide very clear examples of Larkin’s “magical” and “meaningful” archival tropes.

One of the most striking documents in this accidental archive is a faded red exercise book bearing the title “My Self.” It is evident that this document was not conceived of as an autobiography per se, but rather a series of tasks to help 8-year-olds understand their senses, preferences and an embodied selfhood (Figure 1). It is in one way an empirical record (I find I was 116 cm tall in March 1989) and at the same time a subjective list of preferred smells and textures (petrol and snow, respectively, it seems). The project has clear cross-curricular aims; I have made bar graphs about the number of children in each family for the class, favorite foods, and types of house. As a preserved document, it comments both on the individual author and more generally on the surrounding sociocultural context. While much of the content is mundane, there are also unexpected elements that force me to consider questions of poetic license and accuracy. Although long forgotten by the adult me, I have documentary evidence here of my childhood preferences. Should the archive take precedence over the memory? I am, for instance, both amused and surprised to find such a cliché of monocultural Britishness lurking between the pages. According to the bar chart here, the class’s favorite food is a Roast Beef dinner, followed closely by Fish and Chips. Had I tried to write of my childhood retrospectively, I could not have remembered this, nor would I have imagined it. Yet it is also equally likely that I would not have chosen to include this information as a child had it not been a task set by the teacher. These texts are always, already, written for adults, as they are assessed and evaluated for handwriting quality and spelling accuracy. More tellingly, they provide adults with a way to read children’s lives. Similarly, reading this text again as an adult creates an uncanny sense of recognition and dislocation, since this text is both written by me and by someone else.

Reading these documents from the perspective of a literary scholar raises important ethical questions since the drawings, language, and handwriting mark the author (me) as a child, with all the attendant temptations to read them as amusing, trivial, or nostalgic.

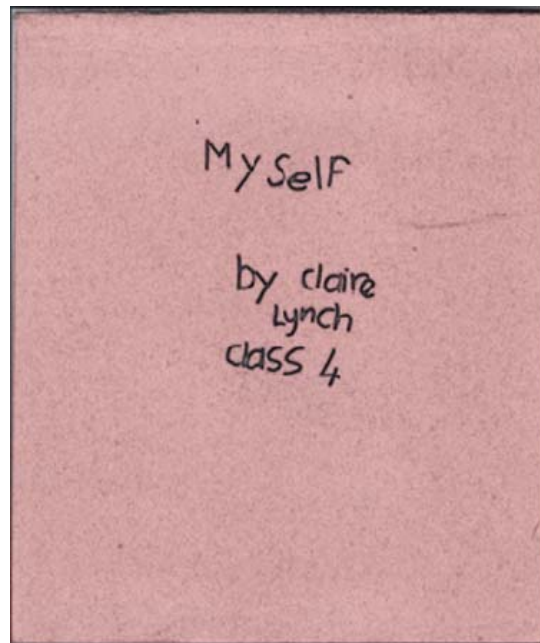


FIGURE 1 “My Self”.

In other words, the apparent “magical” element here might easily overshadow that which is potentially “meaningful.” Carolyn Steedman’s approach is unrivalled in this matter when she reminds us that any archive is “made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there” (68). Simply, the survival of these texts is as much by accident as design. Any interpretation, therefore, must also take into account the possibility that they are neither necessarily representative nor particularly unique. An archive is only evidence of its own survival, and whether that survival matters remains the prerogative of the reader. In the case of these notebooks, self-portraits, and personal descriptions, both the production and rediscovery of the archive are matters of chance. Archives are both constructed and preserved serendipitously, just as those who work on them are fated victims of an archive’s gaps and limitations. The material identified here provides a rare opportunity to act simultaneously as subject, author and researcher. Perhaps uniquely, the documents under consideration are as alien as they are familiar. As accounts of childhood, they preserve forgotten experiences as well as reinforcing well-established ideas of selfhood. While adult life writing depends upon the act of retrospect, divining meaning from what has been, children, by necessity, write about lives in the present and future tense. These are not documents of a remembered past, but rather an imagined future.

Children’s autobiography

Humans are narrative creatures; we grow in understanding by recounting our experiences, both to ourselves and to others. This is particularly the case with the so-called formative experiences of childhood and youth. Early experiences are often awarded symbolic value, forming an established part of the narrative we tell ourselves through memory and others via anecdotes and autobiography. The teenage years commonly emerge as dominant in this sense. Frequently understood as a time of acute self-awareness and identity crisis, generations of teenage diaries and preserved juvenilia have acted as source material for subsequent adult auto/biographies. This article, however, focuses on life narratives produced at an earlier stage, before the author develops the teenage capacity for introspection. Children’s autobiography, as it will be referred to here, represents a different engagement with genre expectations as understood by teenage and adult counterparts. This is not to say that children’s autobiography is free from the expectations of genre. Indeed, such writing is typically produced in an educational environment and, therefore, instigated and monitored by adults. As a result, the work may be shaped and influenced by the teacher’s guidance at the same time as being dependent on the child’s developing skills of self-expression and limited by the time allocated to the task and the author’s patience. Since there is an element of inevitable coercion here, the motivation to narrate oneself is necessarily different from that observed in adult autobiographies, where cathartic release or powerful self-expression may be sought. While there are, self-evidently, differences between autobiographies written by children and adults, they should not be understood as weaknesses. Those who would question children’s capacity to narrate their own experience are at risk of missing the representative power of the text as well as unfairly undermining the author’s agency. In regard to this, Peter Alexander’s landmark work

is key when he theorizes how and why the child writer, particularly the autobiographer, can be understood. Building on the insights of Foucault, who so astutely analyzed the treatment of children as an indicator of a society's wider priorities, Alexander highlights the impact of children's powerlessness, which "renders them peculiarly vulnerable to being observed and silenced" (79).

It is notable that children and childhood are routinely the dominant focus of adult autobiography as authors seek to understand their current sense of self through retrospection. Both popular and literary narratives cluster around the Wordsworthian imperative in which the child protagonist is repeatedly cast as progenitor of the adult author. As such, it seems only mildly provocative to describe autobiography as a form of children's literature. Although the phrase is used predominantly to denote work written exclusively for children to read, I suggest a double application in the sense that we use women's literature or Victorian literature that is written by them. In fact, the study of writing for children offers a number of useful precedents in this matter such as raising the ethical concern as to "whether adults can or should interpret the voices of child readers" (McDowell 245). McDowell's query forces us to reconsider assumptions of difference and power, a matter clearly pertinent to the examples under consideration here, reduced (but not eliminated) by the fact that I attempt only to interpret my own writing. The self-portraits, descriptions, and lists that form this archive of childhood are writing by a child about a child. Again, established frameworks from children's literature are useful since it is typically here, as Mitzi Myers notes, that we may find "work about, for, and as a child" (3). While genres directed to children as readers may, unsurprisingly, tend toward a child-centered narrative, they are nonetheless not by a child.⁴ Many of the most successful adult authors who write for children are adept at imitating or replicating a child's perspective in order to reduce the gap between the writer and the reader. Such an approach should not be read as patronizing, but rather an attempt to reverse an established power imbalance between the producer and the consumer of the text. Knoepfmacher takes this even further so that instead of thinking of adult writers as entirely distinct from those they write for and about, they are seen as "former children" attempting to engage in "an adult reactivation of childhood selves" (xiv). In Knoepfmacher's reading, adult authors must function simultaneously as their past and present selves, simultaneously the child they were and the adult they are. It is a process replicated in autobiography where the adult author must also attempt to reconnect to the child protagonist's perceptions. In this sense then, the genre of autobiography can be said to reclaim the possessive apostrophe in children's literature, allowing it to rationally be described as literature both about and in a sense by children.

The wisdom of ages

Considering both the ethics and poetics of writing about and by children magnifies some of the key debates in life writing. Where questions are raised over the consistency or reliability of the narrator, for example, we are reminded of debates over autobiography's relationship with "truth." Similarly, those who would reject children's autobiography on the basis of perceived lack of sophistication recall discussions of a spectrum of work ranging from what Mary Evans designates as the "'serious' and 'good' auto/biographies" (4) to the implied trivial and poor. There is also, of course,

the matter of timing; have children lived long enough to write about life? Again, this is a recurring question in which young autobiographers are criticized for publishing too early (before experience and hindsight have revealed the lasting significance of events) and older writers condemned for convenient amnesia or self-serving nostalgia. The combination of these misgivings seems to implicate children's writing as the last taboo. As Alexander puts it:

The range of literature in English, at least that routinely studied by academics, has expanded markedly over the past few decades, as disciplines from post-colonial studies to women's studies have widened literary horizons. But it remains striking how little attention is paid to the writing of children. The truth seems to be that child writers have been so effectively silenced that we seldom think of them (77).

Certainly, in autobiography the glut of children is an illusion. When we read children in autobiography we are really reading the adults they have become, not the children they were. Convincing and engaging as the portraits of children in autobiography may be, as Nicola King reminds us, "this can only ever be an effect of the language used by the adult self who is doing the remembering and reconstructing" (97). In other words, praise for the so-called authentic child's voice in autobiography might equally be seen as misplaced admiration for those best able to recreate the voice we expect to hear. As King so helpfully points out, this is, to a large extent, a result of linguistic tricks such as "the present tense, short sentences and simple, direct language" (98).

The distinction here between children as the consumers but not producers of literature, is crucial. This is not simply a case of mislabeling, but also a pernicious power dynamic in which children's literature is designated "to be not by children but only for them—and to be written by almost anyone but children" (Alexander 77). The documents I discuss here are writing by a child, but my ability to understand them is limited by adult preconceptions. Comparisons on the grounds of accuracy and fluency are less than enlightening and the context too is troubling. An indicative example is a "News Book" from the year I was seven. In a popular classroom task, repeated across generations and locations, pupils are asked to recount the activities of the weekend at the start of a new school week. In my rereading, I am aware of an underlying sense that these are narratives of gently coerced disclosure, used by adults to gain insights into the child's experiences, ambitions, and environment. They serve a protective function certainly but also, inevitably, a prurient one. As expected, the "News Book" recounts domestic and local experiences such as birthday parties and family visits. At the same time, background events place the author in a highly specific geographic and temporal location when, for instance, recalling having seen Concorde's "pointy nose" flying overhead.⁵ Although the "News Book" contains writing by a child, the writing remains validated by adults and is ultimately adult-orientated. As adults maintain power over children, couched in the language of protection and nurturing, they also define and teach the terms through which children describe and understand themselves. This withstanding, these are clearly empowering documents at some level. After all, as Rachel Robertson puts it, "Writing your life gives you immense power in one way and almost none in another" (314). The child subject is experimenting with expressions of identity, using the first person to describe a world in which she occupies the central

position. Nevertheless, adulthood is valorized here, both in the events described and the act of narrating experiences to the teacher in writing.

Settling on an analytical approach to this material is not simple. The value of these texts is based on the point that they are unremarkable and widely recognizable. Certainly the well-filled pages of the “News Book” are evidence of a child kept busy assessing her place in the world. Similarly, opening the “My Self” notebook in the middle, I find my class frozen in the act of measuring our surroundings against ourselves: the coat trolley, the blackboard, and the rug, measured out in handspans and footsteps. I am compelled to compare this information with the desk I sit at as I write this. It is also six handspans wide, although I write and measure with different hands. In this text too, it is not only the content but the context which conveys meaning, highlighting the circumstances of the child autobiographer. I read now, printed on the back cover that my exercise book is “manufactured and supplied by the county council” and think of all the other children in towns and villages from the south east edge of London down to the cliffs of Dover, writing out their lives. The object here expresses a significance that the text alone could not. The paper provided by the state, the task too, approved by educationalists shifts this from an act of individual self-expression to a fragment of a far larger archive of children’s autobiography.

Practice makes perfect

As is so often the case in discussions of autobiography, agency and opportunity form the foundations of the argument here. When Eakin considers the “prerequisites in our culture for being a person, for having and telling a life story” (114), referring to debates of social status, gender, class, sexuality, and so on, it remains implicit that the “person” be an adult. One of the most striking revelations about the rediscovery of these texts, therefore, was the sense in which they formed part of an implied social conditioning in how to have and tell a life story. The fact that these documents span several stages of early years education is also indicative of their perceived significance within a specific sociocultural moment. The writing provides evidence of a tradition, or perhaps even an imperative, of training children to compose and rehearse experiences and memories into a narrative of selfhood. It is of course entirely appropriate that this be discussed in relation to writing since “the modern view of childhood was a literary development” (Alexander 80). In the disciplines most closely concerned with child development including the social sciences and educational policy, recent decades have witnessed a boom in the attention given to juvenilia and its capacity to reproduce the voices of children in an historical context. While sociocultural factors frequently prohibit children from acts of self-expression, words committed to paper may allow oppressed voices to be heard in retrospect. As Alexander astutely argues, using language and ideas borrowed from postcolonial theory, children’s right to write has revealed a “rather different view of the child-adult power disparity [...] most clearly in children’s autobiographical writing” (82).

While it is evident that efforts toward considering children’s autobiography more seriously are growing, it remains typical to only legitimize the childhood writing of established adult writers. In other words, it is only once an adult author has established a literary reputation that their juvenilia are awarded retrospective interest.⁶ For genuine equality of opportunity, of the kind postcolonial and life narrative approaches

have lobbied for, the child writer needs to be analyzed and evaluated without deferral to the subsequent work of the adult. It is perhaps only in children's autobiography where such an approach is possible. While in adult autobiography childhood is represented as "a privileged site of experience and memory" (King 97), the child autobiographer, by contrast, does not have the dominant experience of adulthood with which to form a comparison. In adult-authored texts, childhood is frequently seen as significant in shaping the adult autobiographer, yet the child self, purportedly by necessity, is always narrated and mediated through the adult author. In child authored texts, however, "the mythology of Childhood" and the related "real or imagined age of innocence" (Guy 177) are put under pressure since the child is not yet embroiled with the competing narrative of adult retrospect.

The inconstant autobiographer

The complexity of distinct adult/child perspectives is multiplied here in the joint roles of child author and adult reader. Is it ever possible for an adult author to read back to the child self? Can I legitimately claim to have applied the objective eye of a researcher to first person writing signed in my name? At the very least it seems useful to submit these texts to the shared concern of autobiography and children's literature, namely that the "former self-as-child is as alien to the adult writer as it is the adult reader" (Coe 1). The revelation of these childhood documents in a scholarly context is unnerving and I am reminded of Eakin's warning that "we are all of us judged when we tell the stories of our lives" (113). Using them as I have is no doubt perilous, ethically and theoretically, since both the subject and the approach step outside the traditional academic remit. This is in no small part due to the already transgressive nature of autobiography. As Jeremy Popkin explains:

Autobiographies, or so the romantic image of the genre would have it, are flamboyant assertions of individuality and subjectivity, whereas serious scholarly endeavour [...] is often collective, and its results are supposed to be unaffected by researchers' private interests and emotions ('Autobiography' 30).

This project snares me in contradiction. The texts are very clearly "assertions of individuality" and although I do not remember writing them, I know that I did. How then can I balance the presumption of "subjectivity" if I choose to identify myself as an autobiographical author, at the same time as maintaining the "serious scholarly endeavor" as I seek to analyze them? The real contradiction, as it emerges, is not between the autobiographer and the scholar, but the adult and the child. This then is the real site of potential revelation, while not every adult will have access to preserved copies of their childhood autobiographies, immeasurable numbers of people across a range of educational traditions and timeframes will have likely written something like this. Texts such as these, I contend, whether reread or lost forever form part of the internal autobiography of us all. They are texts that come before, or frequently instead of, autobiography as we traditionally understand it.

Ante-autobiography

In his memoir of childhood, *The Gatekeeper*, Terry Eagleton describes “anti-autobiography” as writing an autobiography “in such a way as to outwit the prurience and immodesty of the genre by frustrating your own desire for self-display and the reader’s desire to enter your inner life” (57). This reticence to comply with the expectation for “self-display,” both for oneself and the imagined reader is examined here, not as “anti-autobiography” but rather ante-autobiography. While the former is written in self-conscious rejection of the genre, the latter comes before an awareness of any such rules. Eagleton’s “anti-autobiography” is rebellious and hyper-aware; ante-autobiography has no knowledge of the rules it disrupts. Although written out of different standpoints, both approaches are successful in highlighting the norm by diverting from it. Indeed, as Alexander argues, children’s engagement in autobiography can be read as “a resistance to the power of the adult world to observe and silence” (82). Ante-autobiography then is not less than or inadequate to mainstream autobiography, but rather, transgressive and challenging to our notions, not just of what autobiography is, but what it is for.

Since these texts are understood as coming before autobiography, the term is equally applicable to an unfinished or fragmented autobiography. In other words, the material that has the potential to become an autobiography, the personal archive, might also usefully be understood as ante-autobiographical. Sifting through the documents left by her late father, Carolyn Kraus observes that the papers offered “traces of a life, frozen realities” (252), not yet an autobiography, but the capacity to be if only a narrative structure is applied. Yet as Kraus goes on to note, it is not the content of these documents which matters so much as the material objects themselves as she observes that their “visual ‘truth’ spoke louder at times than the words on the page” (252). Reading through my own found documents, I am struck by the same sense. The document pictured here, entitled “A Description of Me” is still stapled to the faded backing paper which attached it to the classroom wall; this is an autobiographical sketch made public, literally put on display (Figure 2): I am struck by the privileging of gender

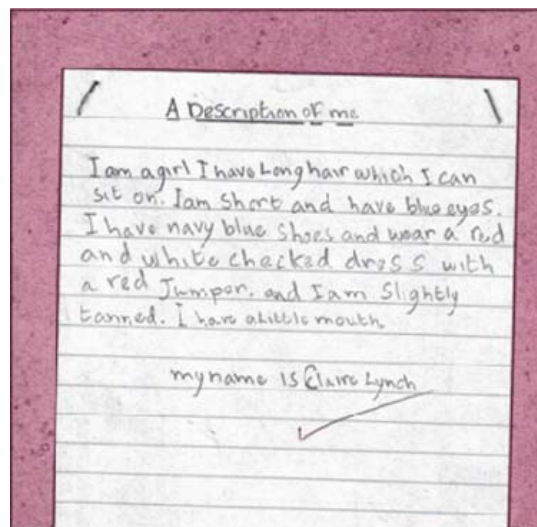


FIGURE 2 “A Description of Me”.

(I am a girl first and foremost) my name is last, set apart and corrected by the teacher who has capitalised it in red pen. As with all archival documents, meaning is found in what is left unsaid. As I have written here, to distinguish myself from others: “I have navy blue shoes and wear a red and white checked dress with a red jumper.” But what I wear here is what I must wear every day. This is not a description of my individuality, but in the most banal sense, my uniformity as well as my school uniform.

Since “A Description of Me” is ostensibly a list of physical characteristics, it both connects and divides the me now from the me then. Although I still have the same color eyes, I can no longer sit on my hair; we are different people both in what we choose to write and how we write it. Yet it is precisely in this difference that “juvenile autobiography parallels the writing of other marginalized groups writing back to the Centre” (Alexander 86). These texts are disruptive of adult standards and expectations, therefore, the adult me is necessarily alienated from their priorities. As I read the description, I resist the urge to correct or rewrite, keeping in mind Meg Jensen’s concern over the “damaging distance between practice and theory in the field” (299). One way or another, this is my autobiographical practice; but can it really be said to contribute to an understanding of the theory?

Children’s lives in public view

In cultures where childhood is now relentlessly documented, the first portrait obtained *in utero*, followed by diligent parents writing, photographing, filming, and uploading, young lives are recorded in greater detail than ever before. From the private archives of family photograph albums to the official collation of medical records and census returns, children’s lives are perpetually narrated by adults. While we are familiar in the age of new media with older children and teenagers engaging in self-narration through Facebook, Twitter, PostSecret, and so on, younger children’s autobiographical impulses are, perhaps understandably, often overlooked. Since it is only from the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century that childhood has been viewed as “a qualitatively different period of life than adulthood” (McDowell 241), it may be unsurprising that nostalgic, traumatic, or unreconstructed versions of childhood have dominated in autobiographical writing. Furthermore, while childhood is now widely understood to differ from adulthood, adult autobiographical accounts of childhood are often weakened by presenting the period as homogenous. Basil Guy draws attention to this disparity by asking whether “all Childhoods [are] equally valid? Do not some stand out more than others? And why?” (179). It is all too evident that all childhoods are not considered “equally valid” by those responsible for the provision of healthcare, education, and pragmatic support on a global scale. Quite clearly, the very materials under scrutiny in this article indicate a privileged childhood in which an informal archive has been constructed by adult carers. A parallel article in which no documents exist, either through wilful neglect or indifference would offer a valuable counterpoint to the case made here. Again, the parallel with postcolonial and life narrative theory might be drawn; the undocumented life remains invisible.

In adult autobiography, both traumatic and nostalgic childhoods gain legitimacy in a shift from private to public formats. What value then can be attributed to these texts that remain within familial readerships? The concern is a common one, echoed by

Popkin who has enquired of his own family archive, why anyone else “should take any interest in these materials?” (“Life Writing” 179). Certainly, I make no claims for the originality or significance of these texts beyond the fact that they have been preserved and are, therefore, available for analysis. By its very nature, the material lacks the elements that would usually qualify it for such attention. These texts stand outside of the standard genre framework because, until now, they have remained private. Since an essential element of autobiography involves bringing the inner self into public view, this development is essential. Questions of power are central here, since children do not have the same means to distribute their stories through traditional channels of publication. Access to the public sphere is either through adults or later through themselves as adults. So while I know I wrote these narratives, I cannot claim any superior ability to infer meaning from them. If I could remember anything that might explain them, my adult self would no doubt rationalize or reduce the significance with which such ideas were held at that time. The me of then cannot adequately communicate to the me of now; we do not know each other, much less understand one another. How then might these texts be read without simply sidelining the child author as a rough draft of the finished adult identity?

Narratives of convenience

Examining the letters which remain as records of her father’s life, Kraus notes that they were:

Composed, for the most part, without documentary intent – un-filed, unmediated by strangers – ‘private documents’ speak with the special authority of overheard confessions. Their ‘truth’ is unrehearsed, direct. Coming upon each one was like lifting the corner of a dusty curtain (258).

As with Kraus’ example, it is precisely the accidental nature of these childhood documents and the haphazard way they have been collated and preserved which awards them meaning. They are in the purest sense ante-autobiographical since they reveal things they did not know they were hiding. As Kraus notes, the “un-filed” and “unmediated” are revelatory in themselves but also as a result of the gaps they accentuate; the missing letters are always the most important in an incomplete correspondence. The significance of inconsistency and incompleteness is all the more evident for child writers, supporting Eakin’s concept of autobiography as not just a “literary genre” but “an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation” (2001: 114). While the framework outlined here has allowed me to read my childhood texts in combination as ante-autobiographical, it cannot adequately extend to the texts that are absent.

At the age of 10, I was given a diary with a padlock which I kept in a secret hiding place. I wrote and sometimes drew about events in my life, but I was never happy with the result. It seemed to me at that point that I was so different day-by-day that yesterday’s entry was already too juvenile, a misrepresentation of today’s me by the treacherous me of the day before. So I would tear out the pages and start again. I maintained this pattern of self-destructive diarist throughout my late childhood and teenage years, starting a diary, then, looking back over and tearing out pages, an impatient and vain

autobiographer. Before this age, if the archive is to be believed, I was able to write unselfconsciously about myself in the public setting of the classroom. Not, as has already been argued, from an innate impulse, but rather, because the education system in this particular time and place prioritized children thinking and writing autobiographically. Yet, as Popkin warns, documents can acquire “new relationships to each other that their creators could not have imagined” (2010: 174). In this case, there is an uncomfortable sense that the real autobiography has been destroyed in the missing pages of the diary. What caused the discomfort and self-consciousness that led me to destroy that narrative even as I wrote it? Was there perhaps an awareness of the rebellion implied in reflecting on one’s own life outside of the teacher’s remit? Two years before I had started the diary I had completed another task in school, this time thinking of myself in a future context by listing the things I wanted to do once I had “grown up” (Figure 3).

There is nothing particularly remarkable about the list. All of the sought after activities are notably out of the child’s reach either because they are seen as too dangerous (“making a cup of tea” or “cutting the grass”) or because they confer authority and agency (“going to work,” “staying up late”). Some of these I must surely have already done, (“going shopping,” “taking a train”), but clearly the aspiration here is to do these things independently. The one seeming anomaly in the list is the desire to “read a hard book.” Certainly my 8-year-old self could not have imagined a future life as an academic, at least not if the adjacent wish to “have lots of money” is any indication. Yet the inclusion of this ambition provokes the temptation to construct narratives of convenience, to “imply inevitability, the assumption that the past was bound to lead to the future which is our present” (King 97). Reading this list, for instance, it is tempting to focus on my childhood ambition to “read a hard book” at the exclusion of the other points mentioned in order to construct a narrative around my subsequent career.

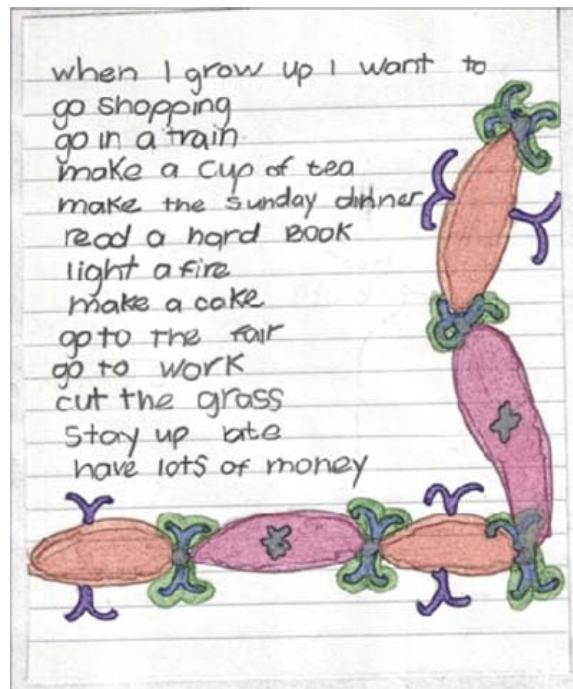


FIGURE 3 “When I Grow up I Want to”.

Had I become a chef, no doubt the plan to “make the Sunday dinner” would seem equally significant in retrospect.

The list itself makes manifest the adult compulsion to ask children what they want to be. In this way, ante-autobiographical documents draw out power dynamics in which adulthood is represented as yearned for. As Alexander explains, there is in children’s autobiography:

[A]n assumption, the more powerful for being generally unspoken, that the child perceives the adult world as superior, and adulthood as a desirable state to be aspired to, a state towards which the child writer is willingly shaped by forces of socialization which show themselves in the writing (81).

This interpretation of the dynamic in which children long to be adults is frequently reversed in traditional autobiographies where authors are inclined to recall even difficult childhoods with some element of nostalgia. Simply put, while the canon of adult autobiography abounds with portraits of children, it seems children are more inclined to write autobiographies about adults. My contention here runs contrary to the standard argument that adults stand in a position of uncontested power over children. As Christensen has argued, children are frequently written about and imagined “as archetypal victims,” creating the paradox in which the image of an unhappy child is upsetting, but also welcome, due to the feelings of protection and compassion it arouses in adult readers, ultimately confirming the notion of “adult power” (42). Writing about themselves as vulnerable children, autobiographers frequently recall the “adult power” of those who dominated them but also express the same power over their child selves, whom they now seek to protect in the text. It is only where children are able to write autobiographically themselves that the imbalance may be disrupted.

The former-child and pre-adult

As the discussion above suggests, the perceived distinction between the adult and child self might be most usefully seen as a biographical not autobiographical relationship. While the child self is necessarily separated from the adult self by the chronology of life, the adult is equally distanced from the child by the vagaries of memory and the distraction of subsequent experience. What the ante-autobiographical provides then is an opportunity to examine writing before and after the impact of scholarly presumptions. As Rocío Davis so helpfully puts it:

We comprehend that academics function not only as ‘scholars,’ committed to objective reality, but as ‘authors’ who somehow project themselves in their texts which, in important ways, may become negotiations of their personalities and intellectual positions (2).

Returning to the writing produced before an adult understanding of genre or theory was gained raises the question of when “intellectual positions” can be said to begin. Such re-readings highlight the inevitable contradictions between the respective ambitions and priorities of childhood and adulthood. More than this, they create a

space for bringing together past and present selves. Reflecting on life after the publication of her acclaimed autobiography *Chernobyl Strawberries*, Vesna Goldsworthy maintains a distance in language as she separates her past self from her present. Listening to an actor reading her work in translation, she observes the image of her younger self on the cover of the book, remarking: “I remember her well enough to suspect that she prefers Julia [the actor] to me” (2). This sense of separation between the past self (the author and subject of the autobiography) and the present self (observer and reader) seems particularly informative; they are the same but different. While Goldsworthy’s comparison is based on the recollection of the preferences of the past self, it is also vital to acknowledge the nuances from the past which are inevitably forgotten. When Rachel Robertson, for example, reads back over the forgotten words of an ex-lover, she is surprised to find them “personal, generous and not at all pretentious. I hadn’t remembered that he had sent me ‘love and gratitude’” (314). So often, reliance on memory, or the absence of evidence, can disrupt both past and present understanding. As Robertson’s encounter so neatly captures, what one forgets is, very obviously, as significant as what one remembers.

While adult retrospect necessarily corrupts the representation of a child’s lived experience, just as a child’s still-developing vocabulary determines the limits of his or her self-expression, the ante-autobiographical remains flexible, encompassing fluid representations of children and childhood across life writing forms. The concept maps onto core questions in the field, not least notions of memory, fiction, and representation. Childhood remains key in either case since, as King points out: “Writers of autobiography have to make choices about chronology, and these are choices partly informed by the importance they place upon childhood as formative of later identity” (97). These “choices,” however, are so often presumed to be reliant on the author’s memory. As childhoods are increasingly narrated, recorded, and preserved, the resultant archives and the ante-autobiographical material they provide have the potential to introduce another dimension to the way children and childhoods are written. Alexander’s crucial point that “One of the clearest markers of powerlessness is enforced silence” (77) stands as a reminder that we must not only encourage children to write autobiographically, but also accord them enough value that they are read.

Notes

1. The primary texts around which this article is shaped are, by their nature, unpublished. A small sample has been reproduced here in facsimile form to allow the reader to consider the materiality of the object as well as the textual content. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the same author has produced the primary texts (as a child) and the analysis of them (as an adult). Throughout, great care was taken to remain attuned to the ethics of writing about oneself, paying particular attention to the fragile intimacies and insecurities of relating to oneself as a child.
2. Indeed, the absence of official life documents can be a source of extreme hardship and exclusion. Those who are considered “sans papiers,” such as illegal immigrants, are all too aware of the perceived illegitimacy of the undocumented life.
3. Material circumstances are patently relevant here. Poverty and displacement are among the factors likely to preclude the production and preservation of childhood documents.

At the same time, recent developments in technology have enhanced governmental capacity to preserve public records on an international scale.

4. There are, as ever, exceptions. In fiction, Christopher Paolini wrote his popular *Eragon* books, at the age of 15. The most lauded child writer of the last century was Anne Frank whose wartime diary established a precedent for the power and lasting significance of such narratives long after her death.
5. Concorde was an iconic supersonic jet, the result of collaboration between the British and French aviation industries. Since only 20 were built in its limited lifetime of 1976–2003, spotting its distinctive shape in the air may well have seemed newsworthy in 1988.
6. The major text on this topic supports this contention even in its very title (Alexander and Juliet).

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