

**Representations of Childhood and Youth in
Postcolonial Life-writing**

Sarah Louise O'Mahony

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis addresses representations of childhood and youth in postcolonial life-writing. Comparing twentieth-century life-narratives focused on childhood from West Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, the thesis examines how autobiographical subjectivity and form are inflected by postcolonial experience. Textual readings are structured by a theoretical framework which draws on the two fields of postcolonial and autobiography studies.

The introductory chapter outlines the study's theoretical and conceptual contexts, addressing the Eurocentrism of dominant critical perspectives on childhood in life-writing, and the functions of the child figure in colonial and postcolonial discourses.

The first chapter explores the relationship between memory and history, focusing on texts in which subjectivity and narrative form are fractured in the aftermath of postcolonial histories of conflict. Offering alternative historiographies, these life-narratives challenge conventional distinctions between a 'private' domain of autobiographical memory and the 'public' historical record.

The second chapter considers embodiment. With the dominance of the Cartesian model of a subjectivity autonomous of the body, this area has traditionally been neglected in autobiography criticism. As colonised subjects are negatively defined by association with the body, this model is especially problematic for postcolonial life-writing. The argument develops through a comparison of texts in which constructions of autobiographical selfhood are contingent on negotiation of embodiment.

The third chapter investigates issues of space, discussing texts in which postcolonial autobiographical identities are mapped through child subjects' trajectories of mobility across colonised and indigenous locations.

The fourth chapter examines individual and collective representation. Questioning claims that the autobiography of childhood necessarily focuses on a subjectivity abstracted from wider society, the argument also critiques an

exclusionary focus on collectivity in the nascent field of postcolonial life-writing criticism, analysing relationships between constructions of selfhood and collective identity in three contemporaneous texts from different postcolonial regions.

The conclusion summarises the project's contribution to knowledge in demonstrating the value of a dialogue between the fields of autobiography and postcolonial studies, and providing a starting point for the analysis of representations of childhood in postcolonial life-writing, an area neglected in previous criticism.

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Introduction

In the concluding paragraph of *My Childhood in New Guinea*, Paulias Matane reflects on the cultural and political implications of his personal experiences of childhood and youth:

My thoughts go back over the days when I was a baby, a young unruly boy at home and at schools, then a teacher; and now I have become the first member of my race to serve as Permanent Secretary in a government department. My thoughts go back too, over the life of my people and I feel that we, in the forty years of my lifetime, have lived through a period that began with the stone age and has entered the space age.¹

Matane summarises a life-narrative which moves from the child's immersion within the indigenous culture of the province of New Britain, through an ambivalent experience of colonial education interrupted by the incursion of the Second World War, to the youth's modification of Western teaching methods in the service of 'doing something for my people', and finally his embarkation on a political career.² As Evelyn Ellerman comments, Matane's narrative is presented as a model 'for the experience of decolonization' in Papua New Guinea.³ In this way, *My Childhood in New Guinea* exemplifies the 'national autobiography' which forms a major focus of discussion in the nascent field of postcolonial life-writing criticism – a type of autobiography which, Philip Holden argues, has two major functions, as the narrative of a representative life both dramatises to an international audience 'the nation's entry into modernity', and serves within the postcolonial nation as a template for subject-formation.⁴ In beginning with the example of Matane, however, what I am specifically interested in is an area which has received very little consideration within either postcolonial or

¹ Paulias Matane, *My Childhood in New Guinea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 112.

² Matane, p. 102.

³ Evelyn Ellerman, 'Two Autobiographical Responses to Decolonization in Papua New Guinea', *New Literatures Review*, 27 (1994), 57-69 (p. 57).

⁴ Philip Holden, 'Modernity's body: Kwame Nkrumah's *Ghana*', *Postcolonial Studies*, 7, 3 (2004), 313-332 (pp. 313-314).

autobiography criticism: the particular functions, in postcolonial life-writing, of representations of childhood and youth. As the maturation of the young subject becomes an analogue for the nation's progress towards modernity, Matane's conclusion raises the problematic issue of a dominant discourse of 'development' which simultaneously produces the figures of the child and the colonial Other. Ashis Nandy's assertion that '[m]uch of the pull of the ideology of colonialism and much of the power of the idea of modernity can be traced to the evolutionary implications of the concept of the child in the Western worldview', if somewhat sweepingly put, draws attention to what is at stake in this conjunction of postcolonialism, autobiography, and childhood.⁵ The trajectory of progression from a 'stone age' infancy to a 'space age' adulthood gestures towards the equation of the child and the 'primitive' on one hand, and the adult and the modern Western subject on the other, which represents a key trope of colonial discourse. However, Matane's incorporation of indigenous myth and verse forms within his autobiographical text indicates that his natal culture has not simply been jettisoned as a superseded developmental stage, complicating the assumption of movement towards a necessarily Westernised modernity, and suggesting the potential of childhood as a figure for postcolonial transitions as well as colonial experience. Introducing a 1997 issue of *New Literatures Review* whose theme is 'The Child in Postcolonial Literature and Theory', Paul Washington and Alex Segal observe that 'while the child has not been the subject of wide investigation in postcolonial theory, it has been an important enabling figure in a number of staple works of postcolonial literature, and a way of connecting postcolonial futures to their colonial pasts'.⁶ The gap in research they identify persists, and is particularly acute in relation to the genre of life-writing despite the existence of a wide range of postcolonial life-narratives placing emphasis on childhood and youth.

The present study is conceived as a contribution towards redressing this neglect. Since childhood in postcolonial life-writing has not yet been the subject of any sustained investigation, my work does not engage with a neatly bound body of criticism, but is situated as part of an emerging dialogue between the

⁵ Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 57.

⁶ Paul Washington and Alex Segal, 'Introduction: The Child in Postcolonial Literature and Theory', *New Literatures Review*, 33 (1997), 1-9 (p. 3).

fields of postcolonial and autobiography studies. In its focus on the figure of the child in colonial and postcolonial discourses, the thesis is also located in relation to a body of interdisciplinary research on cultural constructions of childhood. My investigation responds to a series of deficiencies in relevant areas of research. Firstly, postcolonial texts have received inadequate attention within the field of autobiography studies. Secondly, the genre of life-writing has been similarly neglected within postcolonial studies. As Bart Moore-Gilbert notes, while some critics have recently begun to link these areas of inquiry in productive ways, 'conjunctions between the two sub-fields have thus far been fairly fitful', and much work remains to be done.⁷ Thirdly, discussions of childhood in life-writing are not only scarce, but constrained by their tendency to rely on Richard N. Coe's 1984 study *When the Grass Was Taller*. While Coe's classic text is admirable in its sheer breadth, taking in some six hundred autobiographies of childhood written in six European languages, the promise of cross-cultural analysis is undermined by a generalising Eurocentrism which makes his model especially problematic for the discussion of postcolonial life-writing. His study, however, remains the standard reference point for analyses of autobiographical representations of childhood, and has been uncritically accepted by the majority of commentators who so far, in a handful of isolated works, address the area of childhood in postcolonial life-writing.

Shaped as a response to these significant gaps in existing research, my thesis has at its core the following questions: in what ways does life-writing function as a mode for the formation of postcolonial identities? In order to account for these functions, what modifications need to be made to existing models of autobiography criticism? How do the cultural associations of the child figure, in colonial and postcolonial discourses, inflect representations of childhood in postcolonial life-writing?

This introductory chapter will now proceed by providing a more detailed outline of the project's critical and theoretical contexts. Initially, I address issues in the field of autobiography studies, contextualising recent approaches to postcolonial life-writing in relation to a history of criticism which has marginalised postcolonial texts in its normative focus on a Western, masculine

⁷ Bart Moore-Gilbert, 'Western Autobiography and Colonial Discourse: An Overview', *Wasafiri*, 21, 2 (2006), 9-16 (p. 9).

canon. I move on to discuss constructions of childhood in colonial and postcolonial discourses. Having outlined issues at stake around the figure of the postcolonial child, I discuss implications for the analysis of childhood in postcolonial life-writing, drawing attention to the shortcomings of existing critical perspectives. The introduction concludes by outlining the thesis structure, introducing the thematic focus of each chapter and the corpus of primary texts selected for analysis.

Autobiography studies and postcolonialism

At the turn of the twentieth century, Smith and Watson observe, research into the history of autobiography by Wilhelm Dilthey and his student Georg Misch ‘inaugurated the first wave of modern criticism of the field’.⁸ In this phase of criticism, autobiographical writing was seen to shed valuable light on the progress of civilisation through the portrayal of exemplary individual lives. Dilthey and Misch are each interested in constructing a lineage of ‘great men’ whose narratives illuminate the historical moments they represent; describing the genre as ‘the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us’, Dilthey identifies Augustine, Rousseau and Goethe as producers of ‘the typical forms in the history of autobiography’.⁹ The assumption of a Western, masculine subject’s representativeness is reflected in the development of the autobiographical canon.

From the mid-twentieth century subjectivity, rather than history, becomes the main focus of autobiography studies, in a ‘second wave’ whose key texts include James Olney’s *Metaphors of Self*, Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, and Karl Weintraub’s *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*. In his introduction to the landmark collection *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Olney hails the Belgian critic

⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 113.

⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Meaning in History: Wilhelm Dilthey’s Thoughts on History and Society*, trans., ed. and introd. by H.P. Rickman (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 85, p. 87.

Georges Gusdorf as the progenitor of this critical moment.¹⁰ Arguing that the emergence of this ‘second wave’ marks a ‘highly significant, and politically suspect, turning point in western intellectual history’, Dwight F. Reynolds points out that while Misch acknowledges varieties of autobiographical writing across times and cultures, critics such as Gusdorf and Pascal redefine the genre as a ‘discursive marker’ of modern, Western identity:

in the mid-twentieth century, autobiography was dramatically reconstructed in western literary criticism as a cultural product unique to modern western civilization. This new formulation appeared abruptly, fuelled perhaps by the impending collapse of the colonial encounter and perhaps also by the “threat” of cultural relativism.¹¹

Originally published in French in 1956 and translated by Olney for inclusion in his 1980 volume, Gusdorf’s ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’ is the classic statement of this critical mode. As Laura Marcus observes, for Gusdorf ‘historical consciousness and individualism are essential preconditions’ for autobiography.¹² He argues that given these preconditions, the genre is ‘not at all universal’, and ‘asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world’:

this is a late phenomenon in Western culture [...] Moreover, it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own.

In this contentious argument, autobiography is enlisted as an instrument of colonial control. According to Gusdorf, postcolonial life-writing is an act of

¹⁰ ‘In the beginning, then, was Georges Gusdorf’. James Olney, ‘Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 3-27 (p. 8).

¹¹ Dwight F. Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 17-19.

¹² Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses: Criticism, theory, practice* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 155.

cultural imitation which can only confirm the West's supremacy; Gandhi's life-narrative, for example, uses 'Western means to defend the East'.¹³ As Reynolds states, this model distinguishes 'fully formed, authentic, modern western selves' from 'inauthentic, facsimile selves produced by modern nonwestern cultures in imitation of their superiors'.¹⁴ Autobiography, for Gusdorf, is the product of an 'involution of consciousness', as the genre delves into 'the mysterious essence' and 'individual unity' of the self.¹⁵ This reflexive sovereign subject is formed when the modern West 'enters into history', the 'autonomous adventure' of self-knowledge directly linked to the project of colonial domination as '[h]enceforth, man knows himself a responsible agent: gatherer of men, of lands, of power, maker of kingdoms or of empires'.¹⁶

In contrast to the historical precondition set by Gusdorf, Olney's perspective is synchronic, as he argues that 'though it treats often of specific places and times and individuals, [...] autobiography is more universal than it is local, more timeless than historic', an expression of 'the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create'.¹⁷ If this framework might appear democratic in its potential extension across diverse times and places, Linda Anderson notes that Olney's thesis conceals its own 'ideological underpinnings', promoting as 'universal' the same dominant, Western conception of subjectivity which operates in the work of Gusdorf, Pascal and Weintraub.¹⁸ In this understanding of selfhood, subjects are ontologically identical yet individually unique, each 'I' defined by a singular essence which is imagined as a bounded reservoir of interior identity: 'every individual moves in the world surrounded and isolated by his own unique consciousness'. Emphasising 'the "teleological unity" of the self, a stable entity secured at both ends and throughout', Olney, echoing Gusdorf, argues that autobiography's value lies in granting an insight into 'the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience'.¹⁹ In her essay 'Women's

¹³ Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', trans. by James Olney, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, pp. 28-48 (p. 29).

¹⁴ Reynolds, p. 19.

¹⁵ Gusdorf, p. 32, p. 38.

¹⁶ Gusdorf, p. 31.

¹⁷ James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The meaning of autobiography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. viii, p. 3.

¹⁸ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

¹⁹ Olney, *Metaphors*, pp. 20-21.

Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice', Susan Stanford Friedman contends that the '[i]solate individualism' presupposed by these critics 'is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power'.²⁰

In 'second wave' criticism, an emphasis on introspective reflection as the basis of autobiography 'proper' reinforces generic distinctions within the broader field of life-writing. Smith and Watson point out that the criterion of 'involution' is likely to exclude the life-writing of the colonised subject, whose 'narratives do not necessarily fall into a privatized itinerary' as they may entail 'a charting of the conditions that have historically placed her identity under erasure'.²¹ Pascal alludes to this possibility in his observation that in the twentieth century, 'dislocations caused by revolutions and civil wars, by ideological wars and dictatorship, have brought a great crop of autobiographies of exiles and refugees, who remember and try to understand their past'. If this trend might appear to undermine the idea of a private autobiographical self, Pascal is quick to assert that in such cases 'autobiography may easily become memoir'.²² Implicit, here, is a long-established hierarchy summarised by Marcus:

the autobiography/memoirs distinction – ostensibly formal and generic – is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not. This opposition is still current, often correlated with class and cultural capital.²³

Issues of 'cultural capital' are certainly raised by the way in which a dominant conception of autobiography as a voyage into the interior of the private self has served to place much postcolonial life-writing beyond the parameters of the genre.

From the 1980s, however, this 'second wave' paradigm comes under increasing critical scrutiny. Writing in 1995, Julia Swindells surveys a shift from

²⁰ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice', in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Shari Benstock (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 34-62 (p. 39).

²¹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'De/Colonization and the Politics of Discourse in Women's Autobiographical Practices', in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. xiii-xxxii (p. xx).

²² Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1960), p. 57.

²³ Marcus, p. 21.

the notion that 'the autobiographical act stands alone as a testimony to individuals, removed from their relationship to the social world', towards an emphasis on life-writing's 'potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual'.²⁴ A critique of the assumptions underpinning the work of theorists such as Gusdorf and Olney is initiated by a range of feminist studies including Shari Benstock's (ed) *The Private Self: Theory and Practice in Women's Autobiographical Writings*, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk's (eds) *Life Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, and Estelle Jelinek's (ed) *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Works such as Swindells's (ed) *The Uses of Autobiography* and Smith and Watson's (eds) *De/Colonizing the Subject* are more broadly concerned with 'minority' or 'marginal' life-writing, addressing issues of race and class as well as gender, and thus beginning to provide insights which pave the way for the analysis of postcolonial texts.

In recent years, as Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe observe, 'both the genre of autobiography and the criticism of autobiography have received an unprecedented attention'.²⁵ Within the diverse field of contemporary autobiography criticism, postmodernist perspectives are particularly influential, yet they are of limited use as reference points for postcolonial texts. In *Reading Autobiography*, published in 2001, Smith and Watson's overview of the field concludes with the claim that 'a third wave of theorizing life-narrative has coalesced. It engages the challenges posed by postmodernism's deconstruction of any solid ground of selfhood and truth outside of discourse'.²⁶ In his review, Richard Freadman finds problematic the way in which *Reading Autobiography* 'so insistently identifies contemporary "autobiography" studies with the anti-humanist postmodern paradigm'.²⁷ While praising Smith and Watson's 'succinct and persuasive historiography of autobiography criticism', Philip Holden also

²⁴ Julia Swindells, 'Introduction', in *The Uses of Autobiography*, ed. by Julia Swindells (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), pp. 1-12 (p. 1, p. 7).

²⁵ Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe, Preface, *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*, ed. by Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 1-5 (p. 1).

²⁶ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 142.

²⁷ Richard Freadman, Review of *Reading Autobiography*, *Biography*, 26, 2 (2003), 298-306 (p. 305).

questions its teleological culmination in an avowedly postmodernist model.²⁸ He argues that this emphasis may constrain the interpretation of postcolonial life-narratives, commenting on the authors' assertion that:

Around the globe, contesting versions of selfhood are posed, above all, in diverse kinds of life-narratives that introduce collective, provisional, and mobile subjects. And they are explored in a third wave's engagement with the poetics and politics of the autobiographical [...]²⁹

This elision of contemporary 'global' life-writing and postmodernist critical principles, Holden points out, carries the risk of misreading, or altogether neglecting, many kinds of postcolonial text. He suggests that in reading global life-narratives 'as always already postmodern', their schema cannot account for the influence of models of 'other, alternative, or non-Western modernity'.³⁰ Despite invoking 'the globe', Smith and Watson concede the cultural limitations of their own analysis, as, while predicting that 'autobiography studies will become increasingly comparative and multicultural', they state that 'we have limited our focus to written life narrative as it has developed in the West'.³¹

In Hornung and Ruhe's (eds) *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*, one of the first full-length works to focus specifically on an area of postcolonial life-writing, a reliance on postmodernist assumptions leads to some prescriptive generalisations.³² Arguing that the Caribbean is a 'paradigmatic' site for 'the evolution of a postmodern form of autobiography as an appropriate medium for emancipation and decolonization', the editors make the unsubstantiated claim that '[p]ostmodern practices [...] seem to be prominent in the combination of postcolonialism and autobiography'.³³ Another early study in the field, Françoise Lionnet's *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, is notable for its incorporation of a non-Western theoretical model, as the author draws on the 'culturally specific' notion of *métissage*, as theorised by the Martinican writer

²⁸ Philip Holden, *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity, and the Nation-State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 39.

²⁹ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 135.

³⁰ Philip Holden, 'Other Modernities: National Autobiography and Globalization', *Biography*, 28, 1 (2005), 89-103 (pp. 92-93).

³¹ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 84.

³² The essays collected in this volume address autobiographical fiction from the Caribbean.

³³ Hornung and Ruhe, pp. 1-2.

Edouard Glissant, in order to develop a critical framework which can account for the hybridity of postcolonial life-narratives.³⁴ The focus of Lionnet's argument, however, becomes somewhat blurred as she moves from an analysis of postcolonial women's texts to re-read canonical autobiographies such as Augustine's and Nietzsche's through the theory of *métissage*, collapsing possible distinctions between Western and postcolonial life-writing. In *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, Gillian Whitlock addresses both colonial and postcolonial women's life-narratives, highlighting 'the contiguities and the rogue connections that proliferate through autobiography'.³⁵ Whitlock's flexible comparative methodology, as she analyses life-writing emerging from different regions, is often productive, yet her emphasis on links between colonial and postcolonial life-writing threatens to obfuscate differences between these two very different fields, neither of which has yet been satisfactorily explored in its own right. Both Whitlock and Lionnet focus exclusively on women's postcolonial life-narratives, continuing a trend which runs through minority life-writing criticism more generally.

A 2006 special issue of *Wasafiri*, 'Focus on Life Writing', signals the attention currently being paid to autobiography within postcolonial studies, as a field of postcolonial life-writing criticism begins to take shape.³⁶ In a series of essays and the recently published *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity and the Nation-State*, Holden offers a nuanced consideration of the relationships between individual and 'national self-fashioning' in the autobiographies of postcolonial nationalist leaders, concentrating on issues of masculinity.³⁷ This particular area has also been productively discussed in a chapter by Elleke Boehmer.³⁸ While recent essays by Moore-Gilbert address the relationship between Western, canonical autobiography and colonial discourse, his forthcoming monograph *Postcolonial*

³⁴ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 13.

³⁵ Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), p. 4.

³⁶ *Wasafiri*, 21, 2 (2006).

³⁷ Philip Holden, 'A Man and an Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*', *Biography*, 24, 2 (2001), 401-424 (p. 402).

³⁸ Elleke Boehmer, 'The hero's story: the male leader's autobiography and the syntax of postcolonial nationalism', in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 66-87.

Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation promises to provide ‘the first detailed investigation of postcolonial life-writing as a distinctive mode of auto/biographical literature’.³⁹ Focusing on representations of childhood specifically, my thesis is located within this developing field. I refer to ‘postcolonial life-writing’ with an awareness that the label is inevitably problematic in the sheer diversity of literary forms and cultural experience it encompasses, finding that at this early stage in the critical investigation of such narratives, the term serves a useful purpose in demarcating the area of analysis.

Postcolonialism and the Idea of Childhood

Before considering critical perspectives on autobiographical representations of childhood, it is necessary to set out some of the main issues concerning the idea of childhood as a component of identity, and as a trope in colonial and postcolonial discourses. While comprehensive discussion of these complex topics is beyond the scope of the present study, I will summarise the major points of relevance.

Inaugurating the study of childhood’s cultural history, Philippe Ariès’s influential *Centuries of Childhood* makes the claim that childhood was not ‘discovered’ until the advent of post-medieval Western culture.⁴⁰ Hugh Cunningham discusses how subsequent analyses of the history of childhood divide into two distinct strands, the dominant approach essentialising childhood as a universal human identity awaiting the appropriate recognition and privilege it was finally accorded in the modern West, while a second, more productive avenue of inquiry treats ‘the child’ as a variable cultural construction.⁴¹ The former discourse, Cunningham observes, bears roots in a ‘major and irreversible change in the representation of childhood’ beginning in the late seventeenth century, in which, through philanthropic and educationalist discourses and the

³⁹ Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation* (Routledge: forthcoming, 2009).

⁴⁰ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. by Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); originally published as *L’Enfant et la famille sous l’ancien régime* (Paris: Plon, 1960).

⁴¹ Hugh Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 1-2.

Romantic conception of childhood as the essence of the individual self, 'the child' came to be understood as a discrete identity, consistent across time and culture, with concomitant 'rights'.⁴² In an essay examining imagery of childhood in modern nationalist discourse, Sharon Stephens refers to Benedict Anderson's statement that each subject is presumed to "have" a nationality, as he or she "has" a gender'.⁴³ In the same way, Stephens points out, each subject is presumed to 'have' a childhood, yet:

the tendency to naturalize identity is still strong in relation to childhood, even if this tendency is increasingly criticized in relation to ethnicity, race, gender and nation. It is as though the child represented the last stable, grounded point in the constantly shifting field of relations and ephemeral identities that characterizes postmodernity.⁴⁴

Carolyn Steedman also highlights the persistence of this dominant conception of the child, as she argues that childhood poses 'a particular problem for the historian':

The problem is to do with the place that childhood occupies in our culture: the way in which our dealings with children are seen as an objective measure of our civilisation and our humanity. It is for this reason that the kind of history that records a steady march to an enlightened present, lingers persistently in the history of childhood.⁴⁵

This specific model of history to which the idea of childhood is so closely linked is one which has served to underwrite colonialism. In his critique of Ariès, Adrian Wilson points to a 'present-mindedness' whose 'methodological corollary' is the search, in pre-modern sources, for 'modern attitudes to the

⁴² Cunningham, p. 7.

⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Sharon Stephens, 'Editorial Introduction: Children and Nationalism', *Childhood*, 4, 1 (1997), 5-17 (pp. 5-8).

⁴⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on writing, autobiography and history* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), p. 201.

child'.⁴⁶ While Ariès refers to the 'idea of childhood', his treatment of 'the child' as a variable cultural construction is frequently undermined by statements which project a specific modern, Western notion of childhood across history. With the observation that tenth-century artists 'were *unable* to depict a child except as a man on a smaller scale', for example, the child is represented as a universal category only latterly recognised.⁴⁷ Ariès also comments that while in modern Europe, age is viewed as a crucial component of an individual's identity, '[i]n the African bush, age is still quite an obscure notion, something which is not so important that one can not forget it'.⁴⁸ Exemplifying the colonialist trope Johannes Fabian has termed 'temporal distancing', in which 'the Now' of other societies is belittlingly equated with 'the Then' of the West, this unsubstantiated statement neglects the possibility of alternative, non-Western frameworks for the comprehension of childhood and maturation.⁴⁹ In respect not only of Ariès's thesis, but of the broader discursive history demarcating childhood as a special province of human identity 'discovered' by an enlightened or developed West, the charge of Eurocentrism may be added to that of 'present-mindedness'. It is notable that Gusdorf's and Ariès's texts, parallel commentaries which inaugurate the fields of contemporary autobiography criticism and childhood studies respectively, are published within four years of one another. I referred to Reynolds's suggestion that the refusal of cultural relativism in Gusdorf's conception of selfhood represents a manifestation of European anxiety over 'the impending collapse of the colonial encounter'.⁵⁰ The argument that childhood, neglected across other cultures and historical periods, is an index of the modern West's progressive superiority, significantly resurfaces during this same cultural moment.

Linked to an evolutionary model of history, this dominant idea of childhood rests on the notion of development, whose continuum links the child and the adult subject in a narrative of progress while simultaneously underlining their difference. Chris Jenks asserts that as 'the primary metaphor through which

⁴⁶ Adrian Wilson, 'The Infancy of the History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès', *History and Theory*, 19, 2 (1980), 132-153 (p. 139).

⁴⁷ Ariès, p. 8. My emphases.

⁴⁸ Ariès, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 63.

⁵⁰ Reynolds, p. 17.

childhood is made intelligible', development 'has certain resonances within the culture of modernity that enable the idea to be conflated with other axial contemporary social metaphors like "growth" and "progress"'.⁵¹ If, as Steedman argues, the idea of childhood 'came to be commonly used to express the depths of historicity within individuals', it was also used to evoke a collective past; writing in 1909, G. Stanley Hall states that 'infancy, childhood and youth are three bunches of keys to unlock the past history of the race'.⁵² In her study *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*, Claudia Castañeda examines how, in nineteenth-century scientific discourse, the child was imagined as 'a bodily theater where human history could be observed to unfold in the compressed time-span of individual development'.⁵³ She refers to Robert Dunn's 1864 claim that:

The Negro exhibits permanently the imperfect brain, projecting lower jaw, and slender bent limbs of a Caucasian child some considerable time before the period of its birth. The aboriginal American represents the same child nearer birth. The Mongolian is an arrested infant newly born.⁵⁴

Dunn's argument exemplifies the theory of recapitulation, in which the individual child's development is seen to retrace the evolutionary stages of mankind. In his study *The Cult of Childhood*, George Boas notes that the idea of recapitulation persisted even into the twentieth century: in Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, published in 1911, it is stated that with 'the establishment of the law of recapitulation', '[t]he "childhood of the race", originally a metaphor, has become an almost technical term'.⁵⁵ Consolidated in the high age of empire, the theory of recapitulation serves to naturalise the cultural and racial hierarchies which underpin colonialism. In *The Control of The Tropics*, published in 1898, Benjamin Kidd asserts that:

⁵¹ Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 36-37.

⁵² Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority 1780-1930* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 12; G. Stanley Hall, quoted in Susanna Egan, *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 68.

⁵³ Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 13.

⁵⁴ Castañeda, p. 40.

⁵⁵ George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* (London: Warburg Institute, 1966), p. 65.

in dealing with the *natural* inhabitants of the tropics we are dealing with peoples who represent the same stage in the history of the development of the race that the child does in the history of the development of the individual. The tropics will not, therefore, be developed by the natives themselves.⁵⁶

Referring to Kidd's claim, Cunningham argues that in the nineteenth century, the 'constant reiteration of the similarity between children and the subjects of Empire had a mutually reinforcing effect on their images'.⁵⁷ He observes that '[a]nalogies between children and savages do not exist in a social or political vacuum': indeed, such analogies represent a defining trope of colonial discourse.⁵⁸ In *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday's obedient affection is that 'of a Child to his father'.⁵⁹ Hegel, in *The Philosophy of History*, dismisses Africa as 'the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night'.⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon comments on this infantilisation of the colonial Other in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Oh, certainly, I will be told, now and then when we are worn out by our lives in big buildings, we will turn to you as we do to our children – to the innocent, the ingenuous, the spontaneous. We will turn to you as to the childhood of the world. You are so real in your life – so funny, that is. Let us run away for a little while from our ritualized, polite civilization and let us relax, bend to those heads, those adorably expressive faces. In a way, you reconcile us with ourselves.⁶¹

In his essay 'Primitive and Wingless: the Colonial Subject as Child', Bill Ashcroft argues that the idea of childhood provides concrete underpinnings for a system of colonial subject-formation, as the 'strategies of surveillance, correction, and instruction which constitute the child's education transfer into the disciplinary enterprise of empire'. He also suggests that in its inherent

⁵⁶ Benjamin Kidd, *The Control of The Tropics* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1898), p. 52. Original emphasis.

⁵⁷ Cunningham, p. 128.

⁵⁸ Cunningham, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 209.

⁶⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 91.

⁶¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 132.

contradictions, as the child, in relation to the adult subject, is 'at once both Other and same', childhood represents a discursive framework 'for managing the profound ambivalence of imperialism'. Justifying the civilising mission of the paternalistic West and legitimising demands for the colony's filial obedience, while simultaneously preserving the sense of an ontological difference between coloniser and colonised, the idea of childhood, Ashcroft argues, was one which 'absorbed and suppressed the contradictions of imperial discourse itself'.⁶² He also proposes that in this very quality of ambiguity, as 'the site of an unstable and unpredictable potentiality', the figure of the child becomes available for postcolonial reinvention as a symbol of 'difference and anti-colonial possibility'.⁶³

Ashcroft's argument draws heavily on Jo-Ann Wallace's earlier essay 'De-Scribing *The Water Babies*: 'The child' in post-colonial theory', which considers the functions of the child figure in colonial and postcolonial discourses through an analysis of Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* and Jamaica Kincaid's story 'Primitive and Wingless', whose child protagonist reads and re-writes Kingsley's colonial master-text in her Caribbean classroom. Identifying childhood as a concept which plays a pivotal role in the structures of both 'nineteenth-century English colonialist imperialism', and 'twentieth-century forms of resistance', Wallace suggests that:⁶⁴

Jamaica Kincaid, like so many other post-colonial writers, returns to the autobiographical site of 'childhood' because it offers both an explanatory *and* an emancipatory potential. That is, it enables the writer to examine a trope and an apparatus of colonization – the schooling of 'the child' – and to imagine a future condition of empowerment.⁶⁵

Wallace's argument that representations of childhood may anatomise both the mechanics and the discursive underpinnings of colonialism, while constructing

⁶² Bill Ashcroft, 'Primitive and Wingless: the Colonial Subject as Child', in *Dickens and the Children of Empire*, ed. by Wendy S. Jacobson (London: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 184-202 (p. 186, p. 184).

⁶³ Ashcroft, pp. 199-200.

⁶⁴ Jo-Ann Wallace, 'De-Scribing *The Water Babies*: 'The child' in post-colonial theory', in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, ed. by Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 171-184 (p. 171).

⁶⁵ Wallace, p. 183. Original emphasis.

models for postcolonial identity, opens the way for further investigations. Although it is not pursued in the course of her essay, the reference to autobiography raises intriguing questions about the role of childhood in postcolonial life-writing specifically.

The autobiography of childhood

Discussing the 'established literary tradition' of autobiographical representations of childhood, Pascal proposes that texts which focus primarily on the subject's early years, rather than framing them in relation to a broader portrait of the adult, represent 'the purest form of autobiography'. This claim reflects both the assumption that autobiography's 'centre of interest is the self, not the outside world', and the idea of childhood as a natural, universal, politically innocent category.⁶⁶ Gusdorf, like Pascal, argues that the life-narrative focused on childhood embodies autobiographical introspection in its unadulterated form: as 'an infant is not yet an historical figure; the significance of his small existence remains strictly private. The writer who recalls his earliest years is thus exploring an enchanted realm that belongs to him alone'.⁶⁷ In her research on the history of subjectivity, Steedman finds that between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries the 'idea of childhood' became 'representative, or emblematic, of adult interiority', a process in which literary representations, nineteenth-century scientific inquiry, and Freudian psychoanalysis all played their part.⁶⁸ In modern Western discourse, she suggests, '[t]he interiorised self, understood to be the product of a personal history, was most clearly expressed in the idea of "childhood", and the idea of "the child"'.⁶⁹ If autobiography's remit is to voyage into human interiority, as critics such as Gusdorf and Pascal suggest, then childhood is of interest as a key to this 'inner self'. In this way, Tetz Rooke

⁶⁶ Pascal, pp. 84-85, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Gusdorf, p. 37.

⁶⁸ Carolyn Steedman, 'Maps and Polar Regions: a note on the presentation of childhood subjectivity in fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', in *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, ed. by Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 77-92 (p. 77).

⁶⁹ Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, p. 5.

observes, 'childhood material' has often been viewed as 'a generic marker of autobiography in relation to memoirs'.⁷⁰

These are the assumptions which inform Coe's work on the 'autobiography of childhood and adolescence' or, in his abbreviation, 'the Childhood'. In *When the Grass Was Taller* and its attendant essays, Coe focuses on this specific form of life-narrative, one which is exclusively concerned with childhood and youth; his model, however, has been taken up as a framework for interpreting representations of childhood in life-writing more generally.⁷¹ Coe's generic criteria for the Childhood centre on the kind of 'privatized itinerary' which, as Smith and Watson observe, may be a privilege more readily available to the autobiographer who is securely rooted in a dominant cultural identity.⁷² In comparison to the related genre of the bildungsroman, which culminates with the subject's integration into society, the Childhood is seen to be distinguished by its focus on the isolate self, concluding as the young subject reaches a 'total awareness of himself as an individual'.⁷³ For Coe, as for Gusdorf and Pascal, childhood represents the very essence of the private self. As a 'socio-political animal', the adult has become 'stripped of some essential part of this quality of uniqueness'; the child, however, is a 'unique and isolated identity' as yet uncontaminated by the currents of an outside world.⁷⁴ Echoing Gusdorf, Coe claims, in baldly Eurocentric rhetoric, that as a form which expresses the 'uniqueness' of the self, the autobiography of childhood can emerge only in the modern West:

the Childhood is a genre which presupposes a sophisticated culture. It is inconceivable among primitives; even in the contemporary Third World, it emerges only in imitation of culturally more advanced models. It demands a sense of form, and the intellectual ability to adapt the ill-balanced and misshapen material of experience to the harmony of literary expression without overmuch distortion of the original truth. It requires a grasp of the epic dimension, and the severe discipline of a controlled rhythm. It needs the quick-

⁷⁰ Tetz Rooke, *In My Childhood: A Study of Arabic Autobiography* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 1997), p. 32.

⁷¹ Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

⁷² Smith and Watson, 'De/Colonization', p. xx.

⁷³ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, pp. 41-42, p. 239.

wittedness to seize on the significance of the apparently trivial and to intuit the role that the minutest of incidents can play in the formation of a human destiny. It demands self-knowledge; it demands also the most delicately graded sense of values relating the individual to the community.⁷⁵

Following Ariès, Coe argues that if ‘the discovery of childhood [...] came late to Western civilization’, in other cultural areas it has still to dawn: ‘[i]n medieval Europe, as in the larger part of present-day Africa, the complexities of child psychology represented a luxury in which society could scarcely afford to indulge’.⁷⁶ Rather than acknowledging differences in the construction of childhood across time and place, his argument implies the failure of non-Western cultures to meet universal standards of ‘civilisation’.

Unsurprisingly, this results in some questionable interpretations of postcolonial texts. In the contentious remark that Derek Walcott, in *Another Life*, ‘finds no difficulty in reconciling the use of poetry with an episode as humdrum and as trivial as learning history out of an imperialistically oriented English textbook’, Coe presumes a disjunction between poetry’s elevated realm of interior reflection and Walcott’s supposedly mundane subject matter of colonial education.⁷⁷ In his analysis of ‘exotic’ Childhoods including Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* and Wole Soyinka’s *Aké*, he makes the contorted statement that ‘[f]or the European child, the experience of Otherness is haphazard and chancy; for the African child, it is institutionalized’, a comment which reveals a failure of cultural relativism. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* is analysed as a work of ‘cultural schizophrenia’, the vocabulary implying a pathological diversion from the norms of the European Childhood.⁷⁸

These problems are especially significant in view of the study’s cross-cultural premise, as Coe defines his method as a ‘comparative mythology of childhood’. He argues that while ‘from one point of view, the experience of childhood is identical the world over, and in all ages, none the less there are subtle but momentous differences between the *Childhoods* of one culture and

⁷⁵ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 40.

⁷⁶ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 282.

⁷⁸ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, pp. 228-229.

those of another'.⁷⁹ In order to account for these differences, he draws on the Jungian notion of a 'primordial' level of collective identity.⁸⁰ Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark A. Heberle, and Naomi Sokoloff observe that '[f]or Jung, the figure of the child that emerges out of the collective unconscious is a symbol of psychic wholeness'.⁸¹ Following Jung, Coe argues that autobiographies of childhood offer a key not only to the core of an isolate self, but also to the very essence of a unified 'cultural subconscious', as 'each child brings with it into the world instinctive memories of complex patterns that were formed by its ancestors long before it was born'. Narrating 'myths of childhood', the Childhood recovers 'archetypes and symbols' which express these cultural patterns.⁸² The Jungian theory on which Coe draws can be taken to task for its Eurocentrism, as the equation between childhood and a 'primordial' level of collective identity reinscribes the analogy between the child and the primitive. In his own autobiography, Jung relates the experience of carving sculptures which, he subsequently realised, stemmed from memories of a primitive 'ritual' from his childhood. He remarks that '[w]hen I was a child I performed the ritual just as I have seen it done by the natives of Africa; they act first and do not know what they are doing. Only long afterwards do they reflect on what they have done'.⁸³

Contradictions, moreover, emerge in Coe's argument that 'myths of childhood' express a 'profound' level of cultural identity remote from the influences of history or politics.⁸⁴ The critic's task, he contends, is to sift 'significant' themes and symbols in autobiographies of childhood from those which are 'merely contingent'.⁸⁵ Social and political factors are assumed to fall into the latter category, calling to mind Said's observation that dominant Western discourse assumes 'culture' to be 'somehow divorced from, because

⁷⁹ Richard N. Coe, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Australian: Childhood, Literature and Myth', *Southerly*, 41, 2 (1981), 126-162 (pp. 128-129). Original emphasis.

⁸⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected Works: Volume 9, part 1, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, ed. by Sir Herbert Read, trans. by R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 3.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark A. Heberle and Naomi Sokoloff, 'Introduction', in *Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark A. Heberle and Naomi Sokoloff (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 1-15 (p. 6).

⁸² Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 108.

⁸³ Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Fontana, 1995), pp. 38-39.

⁸⁴ Richard N. Coe, 'Childhood in the Shadows: The Myth of the Unhappy Child in Jewish, Irish and French-Canadian Literature', *Comparison*, 12 (1982), 3-67 (p. 3).

⁸⁵ Coe, 'Portrait', p. 128.

transcending, the everyday world'.⁸⁶ It is striking, however, that a significant proportion of the 'myths' Coe identifies are overtly political, a substantial number reflecting specifically postcolonial issues. While the Australian 'myth of childhood' is one of cultural alienation and the difficulty of establishing an authentically Australian identity, the 'myth of the white presence' underlies African, Caribbean and black Childhoods, and the Irish Childhood is dominated by 'oppression' and 'the problem of language'.⁸⁷ While he does acknowledge that such texts emerge from postcolonial regions including India and Ireland, Coe states that 'politicised Childhoods' are 'rare', a claim which is called into question by the evidence of his own study.⁸⁸

While Coe stakes out the Childhood as the special preserve of the West, a counter-intuitive argument might suggest that as the colonial Other has been held to embody 'the childhood of the world', the life-narrative of the colonised subject is by its very definition an autobiography of childhood. This point is raised by Robert Philipson in an essay on childhood in black life-writing, as he cites a poignant passage from Frederick Douglass's 1855 narrative *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

The loving relations between me and Mas' Tommy were broken up. He was no longer dependent on me for protection, but felt himself a *man*, with other and more suitable associates. In childhood, he scarcely considered me inferior to himself – certainly, as good as any other boy with whom he played; but the time had come when his *friend* had become his *slave* [...] To him, a thousand avenues were open. Education had made him acquainted with all the treasures of the world, and liberty had flung open the gates thereunto; but I ... must be confined to a single condition. He could grow, and become a MAN; I could grow, though I could *not* become a man, but must remain all my life, a minor – a mere boy.

Philipson also points to Richard Wright's autobiography of childhood, commenting that '*Black Boy* in its very title is an irony and a defiance [...] Can

⁸⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xiv.

⁸⁷ Coe, 'Portrait', p. 130; *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 280; 'Childhood in the Shadows', p. 46.

⁸⁸ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 234.

any Black man who has grown up in a colonized community respond to the word “boy” as a neutral description of childhood?’⁸⁹

In *Imagined Childhoods: Self and Society in Autobiographical Accounts*, a collection oriented towards social and psychological rather than literary critical perspectives, Marianne Gullestad points to the ‘paradox that childhood reminiscences often loom large in life narratives in terms of amount, intensity, and centrality, at the same time as they have so far received little theoretical attention’. Criticising Coe’s assumption that childhood is ‘identical the world over, and in all ages’, Gullestad asserts that ‘his generalizations hide many important variations. It is not appropriate to speak of *the* experience of childhood in definite form’. She suggests that if the idea of childhood has been a central resource for ‘building the modern self’, contemporary autobiographies of childhood may now be contributing to processes of cultural and political transition, as life-writing’s franchise is extended beyond the Western, masculine subject to ‘new groups and new contexts’.⁹⁰

In a recent essay on francophone postcolonial autobiographies of childhood, Maeve McCusker makes a similar point, as she comments that in a ‘postcolonial age, and reflecting no doubt the rise of ‘memory’ as a literary preoccupation, writers have rediscovered childhood autobiography, identifying in it a powerful vehicle for exploring personal and collective experience’.⁹¹ While her observation is equally applicable to the anglophone context, research in this area remains sparse, and limited by a tendency to rely on Coe’s model. In ‘Reading Asian American Biracial Autobiographies of Childhood: Norman Reyes’ *Child of Two Worlds* and Kien Nguyen’s *The Unwanted*’, for example, Rocío G. Davis initially suggests that ‘transcultural’ autobiographies of childhood may modify and even ‘subvert’ the ‘prescribed model for the Childhood’; her discussion, however, disappointingly fails to question Coe’s

⁸⁹ Robert Philipson, ‘Images of Colonized Childhood: Abrahams, Wright and Laye’, in *Literature of Africa and the African Continuum*, ed. by Jonathan A. Peters, Mildred P. Mortimer and Russell V. Linneman (Washington DC: Three Continents Press and the African Literature Association, 1989), pp. 75-81 (pp. 80-81). Original emphases.

⁹⁰ Coe, ‘Portrait’, p. 128; Marianne Gullestad, ‘Modernity, Self, and Childhood in the Analysis of Life Stories’, in *Imagined Childhoods: Self and Society in Autobiographical Accounts*, ed. by Marianne Gullestad (Oslo, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oxford, Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), pp. 1-39 (p. 34, p. 3, pp. 7-8). Original emphasis.

⁹¹ Maeve McCusker, ‘Small Worlds: Constructions of Childhood in Contemporary Postcolonial Autobiography in French’, *Romance Studies*, 24, 3 (2006), 203-213 (p. 205).

basic framework or its underlying assumptions.⁹² In *Small Worlds: Transcultural Visions of Childhood*, edited by Davis and Rosalía Baena, Isabel Durán's essay on the 'ethnic' autobiography of childhood follows the same pattern.⁹³ Even critics working within the postcolonial field, such as Sandra Pouchet Paquet in her ambitious study *Caribbean Autobiography*, have drawn on Coe's model without addressing its cultural biases.

Ronald Ayling, however, moves beyond Coe's framework in an essay which discusses Sean O'Casey's *I Knock at the Door* and Wole Soyinka's *Aké*. Drawing attention to the allegorical potential of the autobiography of childhood, he states that:

The hero's or protagonist's progress through life and his education, formal and informal alike, mirror somewhat similar patterns discernible in the development of emergent nations too – before, during and after independence – so that the theme, in some writings, may well attain political, social and even ideological dimensions that transcend the individual's life story.

Countering an argument that 'the inevitable limitations to a child's political vision would raise insurmountable difficulties in the way of using childhood autobiography for critical or exploratory purposes', Ayling suggests that in the work of these writers, the re-creation of a child's naïve perspective enables both the mapping, and the subtle subversion, of a colonial order.⁹⁴ In *Telling Lives, Telling History*, Susan Rodgers examines the relationship between 'private' and 'public' history in two Indonesian narratives of boyhood, making observations which may be pertinent to postcolonial autobiographies of childhood more generally. She argues that at the moment of independence, autobiographical texts function as 'building blocks' in the process of 'imagining' national identity. Superficially appearing to be 'simple chronicles of childhood experiences', the narratives she discusses are marked by an 'interpenetration of autobiographical

⁹² Rocío G. Davis, 'Reading Asian American Biracial Autobiographies of Childhood: Norman Reyes' *Child of Two Worlds* and Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted*', *Prose Studies*, 25, 2 (2002), 79-101, p. 79.

⁹³ Isabel Durán, 'Children of the Other: "Autopaedography" and the Ethnic Writer', in *Small Worlds: Transcultural Visions of Childhood*, ed. by Rocío G. Davis and Rosalía Baena (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra S.A., 2001), pp. 93-112.

⁹⁴ Ronald Ayling, 'The "Politics" of Childhood Autobiographies: O'Casey and Soyinka', *Mosaic*, 20, 4 (1987), 37-48 (pp. 38-39).

memory and public history', as messages about collective history and the nation's future are 'embedded' within even the most 'innocuous-looking' reflections on the personal past.⁹⁵ In the concluding chapter of *The Intimate Empire*, Whitlock also begins to consider whether the autobiography of childhood may take on specific functions in the hands of postcolonial writers. While her simultaneous discussion of colonial and postcolonial texts sets up some questionable parallels, Whitlock's chapter raises important points, and opens the way for more detailed research into this area, as she asserts that '[g]eneric and archetypal constructions of childhood are brought into question if we read widely across postcolonial autobiography. There are many childhoods'.⁹⁶

Thesis structure

Seeking to further a dialogue between the fields of autobiography and postcolonial studies, my project examines representations of childhood and youth in postcolonial life-writing. The thesis is conceptually structured, each of the four chapters centring on a theme which raises significant issues for both life-writing and postcolonial criticism: memory and history; embodiment; spatial location; individual and collective representation. Each chapter begins with an overview of issues at stake around its particular theme, proceeding to explore these in detail through close readings of selected primary texts.

The primary texts I discuss are twentieth-century autobiographical narratives, emerging from a variety of postcolonial cultures, which focus exclusively or substantially on childhood and youth, the latter term understood in the dictionary sense of the period succeeding childhood yet preceding maturity. There is an extensive critical literature on the problems of defining 'autobiography' or the 'autobiographical'; describing it as 'the most elusive of literary documents', Olney remarks that '[o]ne never knows where or how to take hold of autobiography: there are simply no general rules available to the

⁹⁵ Susan Rodgers, *Telling Lives, Telling History: Autobiography and Historical Imagination in Modern Indonesia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 3-9.

⁹⁶ Whitlock, p. 181.

critic'.⁹⁷ The most frequently cited definition of the genre is provided by Philippe Lejeune, who proposes that an autobiography is a '[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality'. The text's generic authenticity is underwritten by an 'autobiographical pact', whose guarantee is the 'signature' which confirms the 'identity' of the names of the author, narrator and protagonist.⁹⁸ Lejeune, however, ultimately finds this classification wanting. In current criticism, the terms 'autobiographical' or 'life-writing' are often used in place of 'autobiography', a label which, Smith and Watson assert, 'invoke[s] a particular genealogy, resonant ideology, and discursive imperative' in its association with a narrow, culturally specific mode of narration.⁹⁹ Leigh Gilmore argues that the autobiographical pact may be strategically rejected by postcolonial writers seeking to redefine notions of autobiographical truth and identity.¹⁰⁰ Smith and Watson also suggest that the 'boundary between the autobiographical and novelistic' may become more porous in postcolonial texts.¹⁰¹ In line with such critics, this study's definition of the autobiographical is a broader one, including narratives which do not fulfil the terms of Lejeune's pact, yet while I have worked with an awareness of these classificatory issues they are not a central concern of the project.

The twelve primary texts I address are drawn from a range of postcolonial contexts. The corpus includes classic narratives, such as George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Camara Laye's *The Dark Child*, which have been extensively discussed by postcolonial critics, as well as recent texts which have so far received little attention, including Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* and Pascal Khoo Thwe's *From the Land of Green Ghosts*. In selecting Khoo Thwe's text, as well as Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* and Edward W. Said's *Out of Place*, I draw attention to two contexts, Burma and Palestine, which are often overlooked in postcolonial criticism. Wail Hassan observes that while analyses of colonisation in the Arab world played an instrumental role in

⁹⁷ Olney, 'Cultural Moment', p. 3.

⁹⁸ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 4-5, p. 14.

⁹⁹ Smith and Watson, 'De/Colonization', p. xvii.

¹⁰⁰ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 101.

¹⁰¹ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, pp. 9-10.

the development of postcolonial theory, in the work of Fanon, Memmi and Said, the region has since been comparatively neglected by postcolonial critics.¹⁰² Burma, in turn, receives virtually no consideration within the field; Khoo Thwe himself refers to the 'western assumption that Burma is an enigma too difficult to be understood', which has often precluded sensitive analysis of this postcolonial nation's predicament.¹⁰³

Within the corpus, it will be noted that a larger proportion of the texts are by male authors. This reflects a broader gender imbalance within postcolonial life-narratives focusing on childhood, likely to be rooted in the patriarchal structures which have often, in indigenous as well as colonial societies, restricted women's narrative authority. In response to such constraints, women's life-narratives may take different forms, yet a thorough comparison of representations of childhood across gender is beyond the remit of the present thesis, requiring a study in its own right. While effort has been made to include narratives by women, the study's analysis of several texts by male authors is in one sense fortuitous, as it goes some way towards redressing the disproportionate attention so far accorded to women's life-writing in minority and postcolonial autobiography criticism. Issues of gender are raised within the individual chapters of my thesis.

The first chapter addresses questions of memory and history and their implications for autobiographical subjectivity, focusing on Aminatta Forna's *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima*, and Pascal Khoo Thwe's *From the Land of Green Ghosts*. In these three recently published life-narratives, conflicted postcolonial histories exert an influence on autobiographical form, as the relationship between the adult narrator and the child subject is complicated, in each case, by an experience of geographical and cultural dislocation. The chapter establishes some of the major limitations of existing critical perspectives on the autobiography of childhood, which demarcate the genre's territory as a realm of 'mythical' identity prior to the adult subject's propulsion into history.

¹⁰² Wail Hassan, 'Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arab Literature: Horizons of Application', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 33, 1 (2002) 45-64 (p. 45).

¹⁰³ Pascal Khoo Thwe, 'Hoping against hope', *The Spectator*, 281, 8875 (12 September 1998), 38.

In the second chapter, conventional arguments that the autobiography of childhood seeks to recover an essential, 'inner' identity are further problematised through a discussion of embodiment, a theme which has traditionally been neglected in autobiography criticism. I discuss how, in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Swarthy Boy* and Edward W. Said's *Out of Place*, the bodies of child protagonists become sites for postcolonial contests of power.

In the third chapter, I focus on spatial location in Mulk Raj Anand's *Seven Summers*, Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, and Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood*. Each of these texts foregrounds the process by which a child subject comprehends geographical locations, and examines the formative influence of place on the protagonist's developing identity. While issues of place have rarely been addressed within autobiography studies, they are fundamental to Anand's, Falola's and Soyinka's constructions of postcolonial selfhood.

In counterpoint to traditional autobiography criticism's focus on an 'isolate' individual subject, collective representation is a key area of discussion in the nascent field of postcolonial life-writing criticism. The fourth chapter considers these issues in the light of the complex relationships between individual and collective representation in three mid-century postcolonial texts: Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Camara Laye's *The Dark Child*.

The thesis concludes with a brief summary of the major points raised in the previous four chapters, considering the findings of the project and implications for future investigations of childhood and youth in postcolonial life-writing.

Chapter One: Memory and History

Introduction

Whitlock suggests that as '[t]he work of memory – remembering, commemoration, nostalgia, invention – is at the heart of contemporary postcolonial autobiography', the autobiography of childhood, a genre preoccupied with the relationship between memory and identity, may represent a particularly appropriate vehicle for life-writers seeking to explore these issues in the wake of postcolonial history.¹ In this chapter I discuss problems of memory and history, and their implications for autobiographical identity, in Aminatta Forna's *The Devil that Danced on the Water*,² Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima*,³ and Pascal Khoo Thwe's *From the Land of Green Ghosts*.⁴

Coe argues that the autobiography of childhood necessarily pursues an introspective trajectory, its 'ideal' being 'to tell a total truth about a previous self which, in reality, can never be more than half-remembered'. This 'truth' does not constitute the 'verifiable fact' of a historical record, but a 'symbolic' truth shaped by a private mode of memory:

The adult-self, recalling an event which transformed its awareness at the age of six, may subsequently reconstruct this event wrongly; but it is often in the very wrongness of the unverifiable recollection that its significance lies. Childhood constitutes an alternative dimension, which cannot be conveyed by the utilitarian logic of the responsible adult. Not "accuracy" but "truth" – an inner, symbolic truth – becomes the only acceptable criterion.

¹ Whitlock, p. 180.

² Aminatta Forna, *The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Memoir* (2002; London: Flamingo, 2003). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

³ Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002; London and New York: Verso, 2004). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

⁴ Pascal Khoo Thwe, *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* (2002; London: Flamingo, 2003). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

Differentiating this 'inner', subjective veracity from 'the historian's "accuracy"', Coe argues that in narrating 'myths of childhood', the autobiography of childhood reclaims an essential kernel of identity uncontaminated by the influence of history and politics.⁵

Coe's claims are reiterated by other critics. In his analysis of Australian texts, David McCooley argues that '[c]hildhood experiences narrated in autobiographies are beyond the public historical domain [...] Autobiographies of childhood are significant because they create myths of childhood through which to delineate memories beyond adult historical discourse'.⁶ Yet the assumption that life-writers 'figure their childhoods mythically' rather than historically may well be called into question by postcolonial life-writing. Scrutinising McCooley's claim that 'early memories are more poetical than historical', Whitlock observes that such discourse tends to consider childhood as:

a mythic, autonomous world, apart from history, which implies the knowledge of difference, desire, and danger. And yet as autobiographical writing is used by those who have not been authoritative or dominant, the more likely it is that the narration of childhood will be dystopian and include the incursions of history and conflict rather than a pre-adolescent idyll.

The notion of a 'tension between history and myth', she goes on to suggest, 'tells us less about childhood subjectivity than the use of the idea of childhood in remembrances of things past in autobiography'.⁷ Moreover, I would add, such notions are revealing of the use of the idea of childhood in dominant autobiography criticism. For the analysis of postcolonial life-writing, much is at stake around this point; if neither Forna's, Karmi's, nor Khoo Thwe's texts conform to Coe's criteria for the genre of the Childhood proper, this is due in large part to each narrative's insistence on locating a remembered child subject in historical and political context.

The argument that autobiographies of childhood investigate an ahistorical realm of essential identity depends on a series of binary oppositions: between the child and adult, the self and society, 'private' memory and 'public' history. Coe's model is

⁵ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, pp. 1-4.

⁶ David McCooley, 'Australian Autobiographies of Childhood: Beginning and Myth', *Southerly*, 55, 1 (1995), 132-145 (p. 133).

⁷ Whitlock, pp. 181-182.

premised on distinctions between memory and history which centre on issues of temporality, veracity, and the representation of individual or collective experience. Referring to history as memory's 'obvious alternate term', Erica Carter and Ken Hirschkop allude to the way in which these two concepts have been defined in relation to one another.⁸ If, as Jacques Le Goff remarks, 'chronology has played an essential role as the armature and auxiliary of history', memory's temporality has been seen as more ambiguous and convoluted.⁹ Furthermore, the partiality of memory has been defined against history's comprehensive recall. In counterpoint to history's purportedly objective, collective narrative, memory is traditionally conceptualised as a subjective process operating within the private domain of individual consciousness; David Lowenthal, for example, argues that '[j]ust as memory validates personal identity, history perpetuates collective self-awareness'.¹⁰

These neat distinctions have been undermined, however, by poststructuralist interrogations of the authority of history, and a turn towards notions of cultural or collective memory. Citing Hayden White's observation that 'it is possible to view historical consciousness as a specifically western prejudice', Helen Tiffin notes that postcolonial analyses of how a western, historicist epistemology underwrites imperialism have played a major part in the 'erosion' of history's authority.¹¹ The contemporary 'pursuit, rescue, and celebration of collective memory' is identified as 'a major change in historical vision' by Le Goff, who goes so far as to describe this shift as a wholesale 'conversion' from history to memory.¹² Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone discuss how 'the concept of memory – provisional, subjective, concerned with representation and the present rather than fact and the past', has been embraced as 'a way out of the impasse into which historiography might have been driven by the poststructuralist assault on truth':

⁸ Erica Carter and Ken Hirschkop, 'Editorial', *New Formations*, 30 (1996), v-vii (p. v).

⁹ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. xix.

¹⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 213.

¹¹ Helen Tiffin, 'Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXIII, 1 (1988), 169-181 (p. 1).

¹² Le Goff, p. 95.

The idea of memory as a tool with which to contest 'official' versions of the past [...] shifts from an opposition between the subordinate truth versus the dominant lie, to a concern with the ways in which particular versions of an event may be at various times and for various reasons promoted, reformulated, or silenced.

Such an approach, Hodgkin and Radstone observe, 'reminds us that memory is not only individual but cultural', and that these modes of personal and collective memory are interrelated: while 'individual memories are constructed within culture, and are part of cultural systems of representation', structures of cultural memory are conversely influenced by the accumulation of 'dispersed and fragmented individual memories'.¹³ The idea of reciprocal connections between individual and collective memory will be important for the analysis of postcolonial life-narratives; arguing that life-writing is 'among the most powerful forms which contribute to the social production of memory', Whitlock highlights the 'role of contemporary autobiography in [the] production of social memory about colonialism and colonized spaces'.¹⁴ Equally, in texts such as Forna's, Karmi's and Khoo Thwe's, narratives of collective, cultural memory may influence the form of personal recollections; as Jens Brockmeier states, individuals 'remember and forget according to the memory frames and practices of the groups of which they are members'.¹⁵

Discussing the reciprocal construction of individual and collective memory, Hodgkin and Radstone address the need to avoid 'collapsing [...] personal and public registers', a tendency they identify as 'one of the most prominent features of the turn to memory' in recent criticism. They note that any approach which 'undoes the distinction between the individual and the collective', 'drawing an equivalence from the workings of the mind to the workings of society at large', rests upon a 'metaphorical extension' which is both conceptually and politically problematic.¹⁶ In the context of life-writing, the reverse will also apply: while an individual's autobiography may be linked to a wider

¹³ Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, 'Introduction', in *Contested Pasts*, ed. by Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-21 (p. 2, p. 5).

¹⁴ Whitlock, p. 181.

¹⁵ Jens Brockmeier, 'Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory', *Culture and Psychology*, 8, 1 (2002), 15-43 (p. 23).

¹⁶ Hodgkin and Radstone, pp. 8-9.

formation of cultural memory, it cannot be interpreted as a direct equivalent to the collective narrative. Andreas Huyssen also cautions that in criticism which valorises memory as ‘an alternative to an allegedly objectifying or totalizing history’,

the privileging of memory – however deconstructive its intention may be – is haunted by its post-romantic promise of authenticity, community, lived experience and identity [...]. In its opposition to history, the focus on memory allows us to rethink key aspects of the discipline of historiography in critical and productive ways, but it is always in danger of falling back into the traps of authenticity, identity, and experience.¹⁷

This caveat has bearings on my discussion, as it would be problematic to enshrine memory as an ‘authentic’ corrective to an exclusionary history. Collective memory is not necessarily a subaltern mode, and may be manipulated, as Jay Winter observes, by oppressive regimes seeking to promote ‘legitimizing narratives’ which ‘polish the cultural credentials of their claim to power’.¹⁸

From the Land of Green Ghosts, In Search of Fatima and The Devil That Danced on the Water each address experiences of conflict and dislocation. Forna was born in 1964, three years after Sierra Leone achieved independence, to a Scottish mother and a father, Mohamed Sorie Forna, who was one of the ‘men and women chosen to lead their countries [...] across the post-independence horizon towards a new Africa’ (p. 24). Serving as finance minister in Siaka Stevens’s cabinet, he resigned in protest against corruption, and in 1975, was executed on spurious charges of treason. Forna’s quest to determine the history of her father’s betrayal is bound up with an attempt to clarify her identity as a mixed-race, expatriate ‘daughter of Sierra Leone’ (p. 379). In Karmi’s *In Search of Fatima*, the representation of an autobiographical subjectivity fractured by exile similarly demands the interpretation of a broader postcolonial history, as the author, born in 1939, recalls a Jerusalem childhood ‘overshadowed by the great political events which were happening around us’ (p. 6). This tumultuous period culminated in Britain’s

¹⁷ Andreas Huyssen, ‘Trauma and Memory: A New Imaginary of Temporality’, in *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*, ed. by Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 16-29 (p. 17).

¹⁸ Jay Winter, ‘The Memory Boom in Contemporary Historical Studies’, *Raritan*, XXI, 1 (2001), 52-66 (p. 53).

retreat from Palestine and the 1948 *nakbah*, compelling Karimi's family to flee their homeland.¹⁹ In *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Khoo Thwe, who was born five years after Ne Win's 1962 coup installed the authoritarian regime which continues to rule Burma, addresses the events which led to his exile.²⁰ He records his journey from a childhood immersed in the discrete culture of the Padaung minority to identification with the wider Burmese nation as a student participant in the 1988 uprising, and his deeply ambiguous response to the environment of Cambridge University, where he studied following the intervention of his mentor John Casey, an academic whose avowed 'nostalgia for the imperial past' led to their meeting in Mandalay (p. 283).

In these three life-narratives, constructions of autobiographical identity are contingent on the comprehension of memories of childhood and youth. For each author this process of recollection is deeply problematic, as childhood represents a component of selfhood whose borders are sealed not only by the passage of time, but by the cultural and geographical dislocations wrought by a turbulent postcolonial history.

i) 'Walking back into my dark past': Memory and identity in the wake of exile

Paul John Eakin points to a paradoxical tendency, in a genre conventionally viewed as 'an art of memory', to mask 'the working of memory itself as process', arguing that:

with few exceptions, most autobiographers proceed to tell their stories with only the most perfunctory and conventional acknowledgement of memory problems they inevitably encounter. Life-writers find it reassuring to subscribe to a comparatively simple notion of memory as a storehouse in which the past is preserved intact, conveniently awaiting autobiographical recall in any present.

¹⁹ The term is usually glossed, in English, as 'the catastrophe or disaster'. Ghazi Falah, 'The 1948 Israeli-Palestinian War and its Aftermath: The Transformation and De-Signification of Palestine's Cultural Landscape', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 86, 2 (1996), 256-285 (p. 258).

²⁰ For the purposes of my discussion, I follow Khoo Thwe's use of the name 'Burma', rather than the official 'Myanmar'.

Quoting Michael Sheringham, Eakin identifies this elision of ‘the subject’s active participation in the work of memory’ as a defining ‘myth’ of the canonical, Western autobiographical tradition. Yet life-writers have also challenged the notion of ‘an invariant memory that preserves the past intact’, leading Eakin to propose a distinction between two basic approaches to autobiographical memory, hinging on the question of whether past experience is seen to be ‘repeated’ or ‘*constructed* anew in each memory event or act of recall’.²¹ In her study *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, Nicola King discusses how these two understandings of memory as ‘archaeological excavation’ or continuous ‘retranslation’ emerge in the work of Freud.²² The latter model structures his statement, in *The Introductory Lectures*, that ‘[w]henver someone gives an account of a past event, even if he is a historian, we must take into account what he unintentionally puts back into the past from the present or some intermediary time’.²³ As Jacqueline Rose observes, Freud reached this conclusion in response to the question of ‘how we remember ourselves as a child’.²⁴

Steedman also suggests that the recollection of childhood is a process which problematises the idea of the past as fixed and recoverable, preserved in inert shards which await reassembly by a remembering subject:

History offers the fantasy that *it may be found*: that out of all the bits and pieces left behind, the past may be reconstructed [...] Childhood – the idea of childhood – on the other hand, may tell us that the search is futile (though it can be necessary and is sometimes compulsive); tells us that the lost object is not to be found, for the very search for the past in each of us changes the past as we go along.²⁵

²¹ Paul John Eakin, ‘Autobiography, Identity, and the Fictions of Memory’, in *Memory, Brain, and Belief*, ed. by Daniel L. Schachter and Elaine Scarry (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 290-306 (pp. 291-292). Original emphasis.

²² Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 12-16.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1971), p. 336.

²⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1984), p. 12.

²⁵ Steedman, *Past Tenses*, p. 12. Original emphasis.

Commenting on the reconstruction of childhood in her own life-narrative, *Landscape For a Good Woman*, she asserts that:

Memory simply can't resurrect those years, because it is memory itself that shapes them, long after the historical time has passed [...] We rework past time to give current events meaning, and that reworking provides an understanding that the child at the time can't possess [...]²⁶

The autobiographical representation of childhood raises issues which have major implications for our understandings of memory, history and selfhood, as it lays bare the continuous process by which memory and identity are reciprocally renegotiated.

Far from eliding the work of autobiographical recollection in the way Eakin discusses, *The Devil That Danced on the Water* foregrounds a complex relationship between memory and identity. For a young subject whose life is a 'whirligig' of 'sudden departures and unheralded arrivals in new countries', memory offers a source of stability (p. 153. p. 103). Reunited with Mohamed Forna after one of his absences, Aminatta stares intently, 'committing my father to memory [...] in the same way I memorised my letters and numbers at school' (p. 151). In parallel, the adult narrator appeals to memory as a means of consolidating a ruptured subjectivity and reconstructing a silenced past, as she attempts to illuminate a childhood, and a decisive period of Sierra Leone's postcolonial history, whose events have been 'covered in veils' (p. 112). In his review, Christopher Hope remarks that '[t]he Sierra Leone Aminatta Forna loves, and the father she lost, seem gone beyond recall. But she glues them back together from a few sharp shards of memory'.²⁷ If this implies archaeological retrieval, Forna in fact portrays autobiographical memory as a more complex process of translation, contingent on a fraught encounter between child and adult modes of consciousness. Despite her youth, Aminatta is portrayed as a historical witness who 'saw enough to sense the coming storm' (p. 164). Yet the child's perceptions, accessed through memory, are imagistic and inchoate:

²⁶ Steedman, *Past Tenses*, p. 23.

²⁷ Christopher Hope, Review of *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, *The Independent Online Edition* (25 May 2002) <<http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article189826.ece>> [accessed 4 June 2006] (para. 6 of 7)

The memories are like the discarded differently coloured squares of mosaic – meaningless fragments [...] I saw what was happening. Not enough to make sense of, really. I wouldn't be able to gather the many missing pieces, create the entire picture until much later, until now. Back then, in 1970, I saw the detail, but not the whole. (p. 164)

In constructing a life-narrative which also addresses a wider history, Forna must interpret the raw material of these 'fragments' of memory imprinted by the perceptual framework of a previous self. Her image of her father, she observes, remains shaped by a 'three-foot high perspective', her child's eye-level focusing on his 'slacks' and 'sandals' (p. 48). Moreover, the fabric of childhood memory is seen to differ fundamentally from that of adult comprehension; Forna states that as a child, 'I lived my life in the moment', perceived 'no yesterdays and no tomorrows', and 'didn't question my life: I hadn't learned to' (p. 67, p. 109). Rather than recreating a childhood world whose substance is 'poetical' rather than 'historical', in the way Coe and McCooey suggest, Forna's autobiography seeks to fit these memories determined by a child's atemporal consciousness into the interpretive framework of an investigating adult who is preoccupied with history's chronology and causality.

In this mediation between the foreign substance of childhood memory and the task of constructing a coherent narrative of the past, *The Devil That Danced on the Water* calls to mind Steedman's comment on the retrospective 'reworking' of childhood in order 'to give current events meaning'. Yet even as she foregrounds problems of recollection and the autobiographer's active role in structuring the history she narrates, Forna, unlike Steedman, makes a renewed appeal to the idea of memory as the repository of an original truth. The image of memory's 'storehouse' is invoked by her reference to how 'I hoarded my recollections, guarding them carefully against the lies', a statement which hints that memory may, ultimately, be capable of yielding up 'the lost object' (p. 18). While Coe argues that in autobiographies of childhood, an essential 'truth' of selfhood may lie in the 'very wrongness of the unverifiable recollection', Forna indicates that such a criterion of 'inner, symbolic' truth would be inapplicable to her narrative, in which not only

individual identity, but national history is at stake.²⁸ A model of autobiographical veracity is developed through vignettes such as the account of a lie told by Aminatta, who, wishing to manipulate her father with the false claim that her stepmother had beaten her, eventually ‘persuaded myself of my own truth’ (p. 158). While this anecdote suggests the narrator’s awareness of the risk of inaccurate, subjective conviction diverting her from historical fact, Forna also considers her own shifting interpretation of a childhood memory of the family car driving over a snake:

In my mind’s eye the snake had been enormous, stretching the entire width of the road. As I grew older I thought perhaps I imagined it: no ordinary snake could really be that long. Now, I realise it was almost certainly a twig snake – six foot long, yes, but absolutely harmless. (p. 49)

Significantly, here, the childhood memory imprinted at the time of witnessing is validated, while later suppositions that ‘no ordinary snake could really be that long’ prove false. As the adult’s knowledge of the ‘twig snake’ serves to contextualise the child’s perception, the account of this individual recollection encapsulates the broader model of autobiographical truth which structures Forna’s text.

In *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, the autobiographer’s quest for the facts of her childhood holds out the dual promise of consolidating an individual identity partitioned by exile, and correcting the falsehoods of the official historical record. Yet if private recollection is a primary source of evidence for her reconstruction of the past, Forna also acknowledges memory’s inconsistencies and limitations. The text opens with the scene of Mohamed Forna’s removal from the family home by the government agents to whom Aminatta unwittingly opens the door, an episode recounted in a present tense which underscores both the memory’s persistence in the autobiographer’s consciousness, and its pivotal role in the narrative. Forna returns to this moment mid-way through her text, yet in her second account, she states that ‘[a]ll my life I believed that it was I who went to fetch my father from his room the night Prince Ba and Newlove came to the house. But I was wrong’ (p. 264). The interpretation of the past also requires a dialogue

²⁸ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 2.

between personal memory and the recollections of others, as her older cousin Morlai's testimony exposes Forna's long-held belief as a distortion of fact. The two cousins proceed to debate 'the family mythology' of 'how I took to my bed the morning after Prince Ba and Newlove came to our house', a discussion which highlights the difficulty of establishing truth amidst competing narratives of the past (p. 269). While the reason was a bout of malaria, Forna discovers that this fact has been subordinated, over time, to an 'other version of the story', as relatives remember her illness as a response to her father's disappearance. Acknowledging this 'mythology' as the preferable narrative, she is nevertheless forced to reject it on the basis that it 'wasn't true' (p. 270).

In her effort to interpret the personal and national past, Forna is also brought up against a more pervasive disruption of memory in the wake of trauma and dislocation. As the family move to England during her father's imprisonment, exile is described as a condition of 'life apart, life on hold, life in waiting', in which recollection becomes an empty ritual of 'rehears[ing] certain memories over and over' (p. 234, p. 224). After their father's death, Aminatta and her siblings are 'encouraged to forget, dissuaded from asking', as adults seek to protect them from 'things children shouldn't know'. Forna states that '[a]ll my life I have harboured memories, tried to piece together scraps of truth and make sense of fragmented images' (p. 18). This 'hoarding' of memory is countered by mechanisms of repression. She recalls how, after she was informed that her father had died from stomach ulcers, 'I buried the knowledge as deep as I could and it struggled to emerge'; although her body 'fought the knowledge', a process manifested in nervous tics, the young subject sought to accept the comforting lie (p. 400). Contacted, as a young adult, by a childhood acquaintance, Forna is troubled by a 'sensation of walking back into my dark past, the geography of which was both familiar and confused. A feeling of dread' (p. 112). By this time, she explains,

a silence had descended over our family. We rarely spoke of the past. In our teens and twenties Memuna and Sheka and I used to swap whatever information we had – information gathered from our compulsive rifling and eavesdropping: fragments of the truth. Even then we talked in secret, always in secret. I remember us in a smart wine bar in Covent Garden sometime in the 1980s, muting our voices so no one would hear us, unable to break the conditioning of our childhood. (p. 279)

A chance meeting with a Sierra Leonean lawyer represents the ‘turning point’ at which she breaks the ‘restraints’ of ‘years of self-imposed censorship’ (p. 280). Yet as she travels to Africa to pursue her investigation, Forna is confronted by the silencing of collective memory in a culture of secrecy which pervades a nation emerging from civil war. Interviewing her stepmother Yabome, who, ‘at a time when talk was perilous’, ‘had taught herself to forget’, the narrator observes that ‘[t]here are those times when people hide something, or put some precious object away for safe-keeping or perhaps for discretion’s sake, and then forget where they have hidden it [...] Memory, I discovered, works the same way’ (p. 333). If ‘fragments’ of childhood recollection cannot unproblematically yield a coherent narrative of the past, the autobiographer’s task of constructing the ‘true’ history which will vindicate her father and stabilise her individual identity is further complicated by this disruption of collective memory in the wake of conflict.

Like Forna’s, Karmi’s narrative foregrounds convoluted processes of autobiographical recollection. Malu Halasa identifies *In Search of Fatima* as an important contribution to a recent wave of Palestinian life-narratives which are ‘[b]urdened with memory’ as they ‘argue for the existence of a people before 1948, while demonstrating that forcible expulsion and exile have created a Palestinian experience, significantly different from the Arab world at large’.²⁹ To an even greater extent than Forna, Karmi addresses failures and limitations of memory, issues which are bound up with the ‘Palestinian experience’ of the loss of a territory, history and identity. As the prologue, ‘April 1948’, suggests, the text pivots on a moment which has determined both the trajectory of the individual subject’s life and the fate of her nation. Ahmad H. Sa’di emphasises the extent to which the *nakbah* impacts on formations of Palestinian identity:

Al-Nakbah is the violent moment which also created an unbridgeable break between the past and the present. It represents an end to normality; i.e., this split disturbed the “normal” evolution of history. At the national level, Palestine has not developed in the

²⁹ Malu Halasa, ‘Point of no return’, *The Guardian* (6 October 2002) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/oct/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview3>> [accessed 15 June 2006] (para. 1 of 16)

same direction as other “Third World Countries” have – colonization, struggle, and finally independence. Al-Nakbah is an anticlimax where the promise of independence turned into a nightmare.

Sa’di argues that ‘[i]n addition to the destruction of an entire society, Al-Nakbah represents an unbridgeable break in the time, place, and consciousness of Palestinians’, interrupting identity on ‘both the individual and communal levels’.³⁰ Karmi’s assertion that departure from Jerusalem ‘marked the end of my childhood’ implies a subjectivity irrevocably partitioned by historical circumstance; *In Search of Fatima* is a life-narrative preoccupied with the ramifications of this ‘unbridgeable break’, as the gulf between an adult narrator and child subject, commonly negotiated in autobiographies of childhood, is made absolute by the experience of exile.³¹

Stating that ‘[a]rriving in England had meant a total rupture with the past’, Karmi portrays her childhood and youth in exile not as a process of linear development, but a struggle to navigate through a ‘cultural and political morass’ (p. 229, p. 208). Elias Sanbar comments that on departing from the geographical space of Palestine, the Palestinian people ‘also departed from time’; after 1948 ‘they found themselves trapped in an ephemeral dimension, and for half a century they would live in limbo, achieving a very special relationship with the concept of duration’.³² In this way, Ghada’s Palestinian childhood is both brought to a premature ‘end’ by the *nakbah* and seen, paradoxically, to persist, her family’s existence in London set against the continuous sense of a ‘lost’ world where memories ‘go on existing separately’ (p. 161). Confronted by these ‘incompatible and contradictory sides of my life’ and the ‘impossibility of being two opposing personalities, Arab and English’, the adolescent embarks on a willed process of assimilation (p. 293, pp. 376-377). On the verge of adulthood, she confidently interprets her life as the story of a ‘transition from the Arab child who arrived in 1949, knowing nothing about England, to the miniskirted young woman at home only in England’. Yet her belief that ‘[i]f Palestine still lingered somewhere in my memory, it cast no shadow

³⁰ Ahmad H. Sa’di, ‘Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity’, *Israel Studies*, 7, 1 (2002), 175-198 (p. 186).

³¹ Ghada Karmi, ‘The 1948 Exodus: A Family Story’, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 23, 2 (1994), 31-40 (p. 36).

³² Elias Sanbar, ‘Out of Place, Out of Time’, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 16, 1 (2001), 87-94 (p. 90).

and meant nothing' is shattered by the Six Day War, which prompts the irruption of a buried 'Arab' childhood into her adult identity (p. 349).

Karmi traces a relationship between her individual repression of the past, and a collective 'amnesia' which has shrouded the fall of Palestine. Recalling 1948, she states that '[w]hen I look back, I see how that time in my life is overlaid with areas of silence, impenetrable to memory' (p. 113). The date of the Deir Yassin massacre, which prompted her family's departure, is forgotten not only by Karmi, but by her parents and older sister: 'amazingly, no one in our family could remember the exact date of that momentous day [...] A baffling amnesia has enveloped that time' (p. 115). The last evening spent in their home 'belongs to one of those impenetrable areas of silence' (p. 119). Karmi recalls that from the moment of their arrival in Damascus,

Our parents did not talk about Fatima or Muhammad or the house or even Jerusalem. It was as if only I preserved their memory. They seemed wholly preoccupied with the immediate present, as if we had materialised out of nowhere in my grandparents' house [...] My allegiance to Fatima, to our house and to my childhood became a private affair, my secret to cherish and protect. (pp. 138-139)

The parents' refusal to mourn or even reminisce is understood, retrospectively, as a means of maintaining belief that their situation 'would only be temporary' (p. 161). In common with Forna, Karmi highlights the impact of exile on the temporality of lives, comparing her mother, who attempts to 'make time stand still' by recreating an Arab household in London, to a 'Palestinian Miss Havisham for whom the clock stopped in Jerusalem in April 1948' (p. 210, p. 174). Because accommodation to their English environment would be 'tantamount to accepting the irrevocable loss of Palestine', Karmi's parents differ from 'conventional migrants who try to build bridges to the future', their identity premised on the static image of a homeland frozen at the moment of their departure in 1948 (p. 220-221). The *nakbah* is never discussed; when Ghada asks her parents the meaning of the word, which 'I would hear over and over again throughout my life', it is dismissed as merely 'something that happened in the past' (p. 183). In *Out of Place*, Said discusses a similar phenomenon within his own family, as he remembers that '[t]he subject of Palestine was rarely talked about openly' in the years after 1948:

'[i]t seems inexplicable to me now that having dominated our lives for generations, the problem of Palestine and its tragic loss, which affected virtually everyone we knew, changing our world, should have been so relatively repressed, undiscussed, or even remarked on by my parents'.³³ Karmi observes that in its sense of the Palestinian past as ever-present yet unacknowledged, her personal experience was 'much at variance' with that of compatriots raised in refugee camps in the Middle East, who were schooled in the precise history of their dispossession (p. 209):

Not so in our case. What private memories, reminiscences, griefs our parents entertained, we never knew. Palestine had become a faded dream, a place of the buried past scarcely ever brought to mind.

This played directly into my own loss of memory. In some subtle, insensible way, I found that I had wiped out all remembrance of Jerusalem [...] Those essential memories of my childhood had simply melted away, leaving only shadows and elusive fragments of feeling. Even our early time in Damascus became blurred, as if by extension of the amnesia that shrouded my early life in Palestine, and I lost the memory of that too. This was not a conscious process; I simply put the past away as if it had never been. (p. 210)

With her autobiographical narrative, Karmi aims to counter this repression of both individual and collective Palestinian memory in exile.

The reclamation of the past, however, is complicated by the experience of dislocation. Just as Forna recalls her father's appearance from a 'three-foot high perspective', Karmi's only access to the 'lost world' of pre-1948 Palestine is through the peculiar filters of the child's eye. Remembering her Jerusalem home, she comments that:

Our house was similar to the others, stone-built, on one floor and raised above street level by steps which led up to a large veranda in front. Or at least, so it seemed to me because in my child's memory everything was large in comparison to my own small size. Once, many years later, when I tried to draw a picture of our house, all I could come up with was a huge structure with a tall front door and an immense veranda with high steps leading up to it, as if it were being viewed from a crouching position. (p. 26)

³³ Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999; London: Granta, 2000), pp. 116-117.

Like the sketch, Karmi states, her written account of the house must bear the imprint of 'a puerile sense of perspective'.³⁴ Similarly to Forna, Karmi portrays a process of negotiation, in memory, with the traces of a previous child self who is estranged from the adult narrator not only by developmental shifts in consciousness, but by a more radical rupture; both texts bear out King's observation that in autobiographical memory, experiences such as war or migration 'may make the relationship between the self 'before' and the self 'after' much more problematic'.³⁵ In the account of Karmi's childhood prior to 1948, an interplay, in memory, between a child's perceptions and the adult's consciousness is dramatised by shifts in narrative focalisation. When representing historically significant episodes such as the bombing of the Semiramis Hotel, Karmi recreates the naïve perspective of the child she was at the time, an innocent witness who took the light of the night-time explosion for the sun and played with the stationery she found in the debris (p. 87-88). For Ghada and her brother 'this was an opportunity for play and mischief', yet the adult narrator asserts that 'the images would return to haunt us one day' (p. 88).

The prologue evokes the return of this traumatic memory. Here, Karmi's recollections of leaving Jerusalem are recounted in a third person voice exceptional within the text. References to her younger self as 'the little girl' suggest a split within subjectivity in the wake of the *nakbah* while also, paradoxically, conveying the continuing proximity, in Palestinian consciousness, of April 1948; framing the main text, the prologue's account of departure represents an autobiographical memory whose perpetual rehearsal defies chronological and developmental distance. Mieke Bal identifies both of these effects as characteristic of traumatic memory, a term which, she notes, may be a misnomer, since such recollections interrupt memory's customary narrative structure, 'remain[ing] present for the subject with particular vividness and/or totally resist[ing] integration'.³⁶ Like Forna, Karmi returns mid-way through her narrative to the pivotal scene of departure with which she began, in a second account which is virtually

³⁴ Karmi, 'Exodus', p. 32.

³⁵ King, *Memory*, p. 3.

³⁶ Mieke Bal, 'Introduction', in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), pp. vii-xvii (pp. viii-ix).

identical to the first. The near-verbatim repetition of sentences from the prologue serves to underline the disruptive effects trauma may bring to bear on structures of autobiographical memory and identity.

In his foreword to *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Casey praises the author's 'genius for remembering', a comment indicative of how, in comparison to Forna and Karmi, Khoo Thwe tends to efface the problematic workings of autobiographical memory (p. xv). On one level, this may simply reflect the fact that while the other two authors experienced dislocation as children, Khoo Thwe left his homeland as a young adult, a factor which evidently tempers exile's impact on memory and identity. Yet a brief reference to the genesis of his narrative indicates that the recollection of the past was no less a fraught process in this writer's case. Abruptly removed to Cambridge from the jungles of Burma's Shan State, where he had joined insurgents as a student freedom fighter, Khoo Thwe 'forgot how to enjoy the present', as he was 'seized with the certainty that I was a man in the wrong place' (p. 278, p. 273). When he began to record his memories of childhood and youth as a therapeutic exercise, he found that 'more and more of it came back to me, demanding to be written down' (p. 280). Once more, this suggests the profound impact of a traumatic past on the process of autobiographical narration, which Khoo Thwe portrays as a compulsion almost beyond authorial control.

The decision not to foreground the mechanics of autobiographical memory deserves scrutiny, then, as a narrative choice, which may reflect Khoo Thwe's more tenuous claim to authorship and authority. As the narrative makes clear, his status as a 'tribal' subject recently arrived in the metropolitan centre, from a people stigmatised within Burma as 'primitive' and known in the West for the curiosity of the neck-rings worn by their women, is uniquely precarious. Susan Tridgell discusses how the text's reception was characterised by a 'mixture of praise and patronage' echoing that which was typically meted out to much earlier postcolonial writers.³⁷ Nicholas Lezard, for example, describes Khoo Thwe's story as 'quite a journey' for a subject 'from a hill tribe so marginalised and remote that even he considers himself something of a hick'. While acknowledging that '[w]e should not make too much of the extraordinary leap to

³⁷ Susan Tridgell, 'From the Land of Green Ghosts: Commodifying culture, downplaying politics?', *Biography*, 28, 1 (2005), 77-88 (p. 78).

Cambridge', Lezard remarks that nevertheless, 'it's always at the back of the mind – not least because Khoo Thwe wrote this in perfectly idiomatic, flawless English'.³⁸ As Tridgell observes, this focus on the bare fact of a tribal subject's mastery of a Western language and literary form, rather than the complexities of his individual narrative and its implications, is encouraged by the text's marketing.³⁹ In the foreword, Casey recounts his surprise at meeting a tribal waiter who 'really did seem to understand the humour and irony of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*', referring to Khoo Thwe's text as the remarkable achievement of a 'bronze-age' savant transplanted miraculously to Cambridge, as he cites his colleague's observation that it is 'wonderful that one can even imagine that someone from a tiny hill tribe in Burma, who could have been rotting in a jungle for the past few years, might go on to become an English writer of quality' (pp. xv-xvi). Casey's personal endorsement of Khoo Thwe's 'astonishing, thrilling and true story' is troublingly reminiscent of the extra-textual documents which framed early postcolonial life-narratives, as publications such as Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* included forewords and testimonials in which authoritative, white patrons confirmed a text's authorship and accuracy (p. xv).⁴⁰

This issue of the authorisation of autobiographical recollection may, then, be a factor in Khoo Thwe's decision to articulate his story through a narrative mode which elides memory's gaps and inconsistencies. A focus on such problems might have jeopardised an authority hard won in contention with infantilising stereotypes of the tribesman, of the utmost importance for a writer whose decision to abandon his homeland was contingent on the imperative that he would not only remember, but testify to the international community. In answer to his comrade's prediction that '[y]ou will forget us Padaung, you will forget our language when you are with foreigners. You will forget us altogether', Pascal insists that by emigrating, 'I will be able to let people outside know what is happening to us. If I get an education I will be able to write about it in a way that

³⁸ Nicholas Lezard, 'From Burma to Cambridge', *The Guardian* (10 March 2004) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/apr/12/featuresreviews.guardianreview20>> [accessed 27 November 2008] (paras 4-5 of 7).

³⁹ Tridgell, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and other writings*, ed. and introd. by Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 2003); Mary Seacole, *Wonderful adventures of Mrs Seacole in many lands* (London: X Press, 1999).

will move people' (p. 235). Comparing Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, James Mitchell discusses how marginal life-writers who 'cite memory as an alternate, legitimate source of historical truth' may choose to do so through very different narrative strategies.⁴¹ Where Steedman 'overtly interrogat[es] not only the past but also her continually evolving reconstruction of it', Mitchell argues that McCourt's text establishes a 'reality effect' which 'obscures the actual act or process of remembering', portraying a past that 'appears complete, reconstituted whole from an illusory, unproblematically accessible identity'. The popular success of *Angela's Ashes*, Mitchell suggests, can partially be attributed to this fulfilment of narrative desire.⁴² A version of this 'reality effect' might be seen to operate in *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, as Khoo Thwe's construction of a coherent, compelling narrative arc, uninterrupted by dramatisation of the vagaries of memory, lends persuasiveness to the testimony of an autobiographer seeking to 'move' a broad audience in order to gain 'revenge for my people' (p. 292).

For Khoo Thwe, moreover, memory is problematic not in its recalcitrance, but in its very persistence. The closing chapters portray an experience of exile in which past events 'demand' continual rehearsal. Preparing to travel to England, Khoo Thwe states that 'I felt myself suspended as in a trance between the grim past and a future that had no features I could discern' (p. 257). At Cambridge he is a figure 'lost, definitely lost in the modern world', whose experience of war has given him a 'lopsided maturity' (p. 282, p. 274). Obsessively driven to recount his memories, he is able 'only [to] talk of my past experiences in the jungle', perceiving that fellow students find him 'disturbing, uncanny, in fact, weird': 'I felt like the Ancient Mariner, cursed to tell my story all the time to strangers' (p. 274). The compulsion to remember is expressed in 'depressions and nightmares', and his practice of confining himself to his room as 'a sort of penance for all my luckless friends who were locked up in noxious prisons in Burma' (p. 281). Like Karmi and Forna, Khoo Thwe examines how a traumatic, unresolved past may persist, interrupting the chronology of lives. Exile is experienced as a suspension between co-existent realms of identity, as '[t]he space between being awake and asleep; the gap

⁴¹ James Mitchell, 'Popular Autobiography as Historiography: The Reality Effect of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*', *Biography*, 26, 4 (2003), 607-624 (p. 608).

⁴² Mitchell, pp. 609-612.

between the physical and metaphysical or subliminal worlds, between East and West, were eerily interlocked in my mind' (p. 279). While the prologue details the autobiographer's childhood fantasy of travelling beyond the Salween River, the epilogue records the reverse imaginary journey, as the exiled adult's dreams afford tantalising glimpses of an unreachable homeland 'always blurred by mists' (p. 296). Remembering his crossing of the Salween as he fled into Thailand, Khoo Thwe states that '[w]hat I didn't realise at the time was that the fulfilment of my dream was also the beginning of my nightmares, which would shatter my life and change my personality' (p. 197). In *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, the troubled process of recollecting a conflicted past is manifested not in a fragmentation of autobiographical form, but in the very persistence of an unresolved history, reflecting the plight of both an exiled subject and a wider nation in the grip of 'paralysis' (p. 148).

ii) 'Something of a fool's paradise': History, myth and the memory of the childhood idyll

In each of the texts under discussion, the negotiation of autobiographical memory and identity in relation to a broader narrative of postcolonial history calls into question arguments that autobiographies of childhood retreat from historical concerns as they narrate 'myths of childhood'. The trope of the fall from paradise is identified by Coe and other critics as a defining 'myth' of the genre; Susanna Egan proposes that:

The fictions [...] that men make to describe the process of child development are remarkably similar the whole world over. The nineteenth-century autobiographer, in other words, does not simply use the myth of Eden as a metaphor for childhood because this myth has been enshrined in the conventions of Western literature. Were he an East Indian, a Polynesian, or a Siberian, he might well use the same basic formula.⁴³

⁴³ Egan, pp. 68-69.

Unsupported by concrete reference to non-Western life-narratives, her contentious argument denies the possibility of cultural differences in autobiographical form, conceptions of childhood, or structures of myth. In common with Coe, Egan suggests that through the portrayal of childhood as an Edenic idyll, autobiographers seek to recover an essential identity prior to the conflicts of history, as the image of Eden 'encapsulates a mythic past'.⁴⁴

Citing both of these critics, McCooey also asserts that 'the myth of Eden' is the 'most important trope' across autobiographies of childhood, yet his discussion of Australian narratives moves towards a recognition that the myth of the childhood paradise may be modified in texts which address experiences of colonialism. A colonial mythology of the region's 'savage history' of cannibalism permeates the 'myth of childhood' articulated by Joan Colebrook, who records her early years in the rural Queensland of the 1920s. While he does not question Coe's and Egan's basic assumptions, McCooey nevertheless asserts that in Australian texts, 'the intrusion of history' into the childhood idyll tends to occur at a significantly earlier juncture in the narrative.⁴⁵ Making a similar observation, Whitlock pursues its implications further, proposing that in postcolonial life-writing the 'trope of innocent childhood' and notions of a 'tension between history and myth' may be radically reconfigured, as autobiographers portray 'incursions of history and conflict' into childhood worlds.⁴⁶

Of the three texts under discussion, Khoo Thwe makes the most explicit engagement with the 'paradise lost' trope: Part One, dealing with his childhood, is titled 'Idyll of the Tribe'. If the convention of representing the tribal community as a space of prelapsarian innocence is a 'major structuring device' of *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Tridgell notes that the narrative ultimately works to subvert assumptions about the primitive purity of tribal identity, undermining the notion of a developmental continuum whose poles are the 'remote', 'bronze-age' Padaung community of Khoo Thwe's childhood, and the 'civilised, cultured English' world of Cambridge (p. 269).⁴⁷ Indeed,

⁴⁴ Egan, p. 102.

⁴⁵ McCooey, p. 135, p. 139, p. 145.

⁴⁶ Whitlock, pp. 181-182.

⁴⁷ Tridgell, p. 81.

the very concept of 'paradise' becomes politicised in this text, as Khoo Thwe examines how the image of an idyll may mask inequalities of power and histories of violence.

In the prologue, he recalls his childhood habit of watching the dawn over Phekho township, an idyllic scene in which the rising sun inflamed a 'golden' lake flanked by 'a blue range of mountains'. In this vision of paradise, three separate references to the 'blue mountains' surely allude to the 'blue remembered hills' of A.E. Housman's 'land of lost content' (p. 3).⁴⁸ Yet this reference to a classic model of nostalgic reminiscence, in which an adult glimpses the mythical contours of a childhood landscape which exists beyond history, is immediately undercut by Khoo Thwe's observation that 'beyond the blue mountains' lay a hydro-electric dam which was a site of warfare with various insurgent groups, condemned by the child's schoolteachers as 'destructive elements [...] whose aim was to undermine Burma and the government' (p. 3, p. 68). In *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, the autobiographer's journey 'beyond the blue mountains', away from the apparent idyll of his childhood, is also a movement towards comprehension of a history of which both government propaganda and his community's bounded tribal consciousness have previously kept him ignorant (p. 3).

In infancy, the young subject perceives himself as securely rooted within a 'childhood paradise where suffering did not exist' (p. 71): 'I thought life was about eating, drinking, playing and sleeping in this best of all possible worlds' (p. 22). At this time, Khoo Thwe explains, 'Burma proper, its history and politics, had not yet intruded into my tribal world, where our own legends preoccupied me' (p. 17). Pascal absorbs his grandmother Mu Tha's story of 'how human beings lost paradise and were condemned to be wanderers over the face of the earth': as they 'began to forget the language of the animals who had been their helpers and killed them for food', they 'split into disparate peoples and were scattered throughout the world' (p. 8). Confounding Egan's argument about the essential similarity of paradise myths across cultures, Khoo Thwe's account of 'Genesis According to my Grandmothers' reflects a tribal identity structured by animist traditions and a profound sense of community with the natural environment (p. 7). He describes the Padaung's conception of their 'supernatural origins': '[t]hat we were

⁴⁸ A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 1990), XL. 3.

descended from a *'zawgyi'* – a male creature, half human and half angel – and a beautiful female dragon did not seem odd, merely a source of pride' (p. 9).

The young Pascal's image of 'paradise' is influenced not only by Padaung creation myths, but by a Western, biblical narrative. Tridgell remarks that while the text's marketing 'emphasizes the theme of multiple worlds: a lost and remote world of a tribal childhood, and the modern Western world', what emerges in the narrative itself 'is not a world of "bronze-age" people, but a hybrid world'.⁴⁹ The prologue alone refers to Buddhist, Christian and animist traditions, Burmese nationalism, British colonial influence and diverse tribal cultures, indicating that the Padaung of Phekhon are not pristine noble savages, but participants in a globalised society. Khoo Thwe portrays his tribal culture as fundamentally syncretic in its juxtaposition of traditional animist beliefs with missionary Catholicism, observing that it did not 'seem strange that the myths of creation our grandmothers taught us hardly coincided with the doctrines of the other institution that governed our lives – the Catholic Church' (p. 9). The world of his childhood appears comfortably 'insulated' from the political travails of Burma proper: 'We were Padaung, we were Catholics and we seemed to live in a world of our own, with our own ceremonies and traditions. We had no feeling that anything alien could intrude into this. The sense of security showed me that we lived in paradise' (p. 37).

If cultural syncretism is taken for granted in this 'childhood paradise of living securely in the midst of the tribe', Khoo Thwe's account of his Catholic education is, nevertheless, ambivalent (p. 109). He states that from an early age, he was 'between two worlds – the beginnings of my Western, or at any rate Christian, education by the priests, and the mythical history of the Padaung. So I also felt like an exile, or a traveller lost between two unfamiliar shores' (p. 17). Internalising the civilising narrative of missionary Christianity, the adolescent Pascal joins a seminary in order to 'shed my tribal tradition and transform myself into a civilised person and a saint' (p. 103). Yet his religious ambition is not merely evidence of a colonised subjectivity: Khoo Thwe points out that it also 'merged' with his intention of 'standing up for our own tribe against the dominant Burmans' (p. 103). Historically, the Padaung have identified with Western influences as allies against an oppressive Burman majority, his grandparents recalling the

⁴⁹ Tridgell, p. 81.

period of British rule as a 'paradise lost' (p. 37). A career in the Catholic priesthood promises an identity for the marginalised tribal subject, yet Pascal becomes disenchanted with his life in the seminary's 'self-enclosed Eden', perceiving that he is being taught an unquestioning acceptance of 'authority' in all its forms (p. 104).

When he abandons the seminary to study English literature in Mandalay, the young subject's separation from his 'innocent tribal past' becomes complete. Initially fearing central Burma as an 'alien' and hostile land, he discovers that it is 'possible to be friends with Burmans, to appreciate and respect them' (p. 109). His integration into the wider nation is consolidated by his experience of two traumatic events: the rape and murder, in police custody, of his dissident Burman girlfriend, and his participation in the 'tragic national drama' of the 1988 uprising, defined by Aung San Suu Kyi as the 'second struggle for independence' (p. 169, p. 166). At the time of the uprising, Khoo Thwe recalls, he underwent a 'necessary' ceremony with a *Nat Kadaw*, a Burmese spirit medium, in which the last of his 'tribal prejudices fell away' as 'I [...] reconciled myself to Burmese culture, and the Burman spirit' (p. 167). When the universities are closed in the wake of suppressed demonstrations, Pascal returns to Phekhon, yet the previous sense of his township's idyllic 'security' now appears to have been contingent on ignorance of the broader political situation: 'the warmth of my homecoming seemed to me to have something false about it. I simply could not reconcile this return to my childhood security with what I had seen and what had happened to me in Mandalay' (p. 169). From this point in the narrative onwards, Khoo Thwe's childhood home is described as an 'imperfect paradise' (p. 175, p. 190).

From the Land of Green Ghosts sets out a series of images of 'paradise', each of which is revealed as 'false', 'imperfect' or illusory. Just as the tribal community, the colonial past, and Catholic religion are variously imagined as Edenic idylls, Khoo Thwe examines how the image of a national paradise is promoted by a government whose propaganda attaches 'beguiling words to a sordid reality' (p. 122). In university lectures, a brutalised, impoverished nation is represented as a 'Nirvana' of peace and abundance, through a rhetoric which comprises a 'weird mixture of socialist ideas with traditional Buddhist images of paradise' (p. 123). Rural minorities are excluded from this image of

the Burmese 'Nirvana', denigrated in ways Pascal, as a middle-class, town-dwelling Padaung, has himself unquestioningly accepted:

One of the main reasons for my reluctance to flee into the further jungles [...] shows how influenced I still was, despite all that had happened, by the propaganda of the regime. I was afraid, quite simply, of being branded a 'jungle fugitive' by my fellow countrymen. The word 'jungle' still carried pejorative overtones in the speech of urban Burmese. Anyone taking refuge with the ethnic insurgents was called a 'jungle child', which implied primitiveness, anarchy, violence and disease [...] I had always been painfully sensitive about being regarded as part of a primitive tribe, and much of my ambition in Taunggyi and Mandalay had been to escape into civilisation. (pp. 184-185)

Reviewing the text in *The Irrawaddy*, Edith Mirante comments that this statement 'expresses much about what has gone wrong in Burma, from genocide to disunity to environmental devastation'.⁵⁰ The rule of an oppressive state, Khoo Thwe argues, has been strengthened not only by official propaganda which stigmatises minorities as 'destructive elements' that menaced this idyll', but also by minorities' conceptions of their tribal identities as discrete from the wider nation (p. 37). When Pascal's father begs him to '[l]eave it to the Burmans [...] Keep out of their politics', the son retorts that 'we are all in the same boat – Burmans or Padaung' (p. 171). Travelling through rural areas where he witnesses state-sponsored violence, Pascal arrives at a more inclusive sense of nationhood, recognising 'how absurd it was for a blinkered regime in Rangoon to try to impose uniformity on a country so rich in human differences, and how this absurdity might lead to [...] unforgivable barbarities' (p. 203). In the jungle, he experiences a final 'conversion' in which 'I shed the last tatters of my hopeless wish to remain non-political' (p. 188). In her review of *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Caroline Moore observes that even the title, superficially appearing to promise the mythical, 'the exotic and the childlike', in fact refers to Burma's troubled postcolonial history, invoking a Padaung

⁵⁰ Edith Mirante, 'Pascal Khoo Thwe and the Book of Memory', *The Irrawaddy* (March 2003) <<http://www.irrawaddy.org/database/2003/vol11.2/book.html>> [accessed 13 June 2006] (para. 7 of 13).

term for the spectres of those murdered or prematurely dead (p. 85).⁵¹ 'Myth' and 'history', in Khoo Thwe's narrative, are inextricably linked.

In *In Search of Fatima*, too, the convention of remembering a childhood idyll is inflected by the autobiographer's concern with a broader postcolonial history. In her emotive prologue, Karmi portrays the flight from Jerusalem as an expulsion from paradise, the 'abandoning of everything she knew and loved' an incomprehensible 'fate' the child subject is 'powerless to avert' (pp. 1-2). Referring to Rosemary Sayigh's research among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon who described their sense 'of being expelled from Paradise', Sa'di argues that this structure of feeling is 'widespread among Palestinian communities in Palestine, as well as in the diaspora', the trope of the fall resonating within Palestinian collective memory as an archetypal narrative through which the *nakbah* may be comprehended.⁵²

A major genre within contemporary Palestinian literature, Sa'di observes, is the documentary text which seeks to 'present Palestinian life as it was before al-Nakbah', aiming 'to render the past as it was lived and experienced', and 'to construct a purity for the described experiences and to give them a timeless presence so that they can serve as sites for Palestinian collective memory'.⁵³ Susanne Enderwitz discusses how Palestinian life-writing is also distinguished by its documentary aspect, manifested in a tendency to include photographs, maps, and diary entries – all of which appear in Karmi's text – as sources of supplementary evidence.⁵⁴ In Part One, 'Palestine', Karmi presents a detailed record of everyday life in the years before 1948, taking in domestic mores, the architecture of typical houses, and the leisure activities of her parents' urban middle-class, which included cinema-going, picnics, eating at garden cafes, and visiting the port of Jaffa to swim and 'saunter about' (pp. 38-39). Through her portrait of the maid Fatima, whom Ghada cherishes as a second 'mother', Karmi also reconstructs aspects of the experience of the *fellahin* peasant class. The narrative's evocation of an ordinary, lived

⁵¹ Caroline Moore, 'Passing exams the hardest way', *The Spectator*, 288, 9064 (27 April 2002), 38-39 (p. 38).

⁵² Sa'di, p. 195.

⁵³ Sa'di, p. 180.

⁵⁴ Susanne Enderwitz, 'Palestinian Autobiographies: A Source for Women's History?', in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, ed. by Manuela Marin and Randi Deguilhem (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 49-72 (p. 52).

history prior to 1948's 'unbridgeable break' contributes to collective Palestinian memory in the way Sa'di and Enderwitz suggest.

Karmi's autobiographical text, however, ultimately calls into question the possibility of successfully reclaiming a 'timeless' and 'pure' Palestinian identity prior to the incursion of conflict. Just as Khoo Thwe recognises his childhood home as an 'imperfect paradise', her recollections are tempered by a knowledge that the 'paradise' of her early years was illusory, as '[t]he troubles in Palestine started even before I was born' (p. 6). 'It seems incredible', Karmi remarks, 'that in the Palestine of the 1940s we could have had anything like a normal life [...] We lived in a sort of fool's paradise' (p. 46). In her essay 'The 1948 Exodus: A Family Story', she states that:

It is strange to think that I opened my eyes on a world already in turmoil, yet I had no inkling of it then. For, while I played with my toys and learned to take my first steps, great events were sweeping Palestine that would inexorably lead to the destruction of that world I barely knew.⁵⁵

If the child subject is oblivious to political events, Karmi suggests that for the Palestinian nation more generally, a history of 'betrayal' has also been understood only in retrospect (p. 244). She refers to 'the illusion of tranquillity we lived under during those final years', as the events which determined Palestine's fate were not comprehended at the time of their unfolding, and '[f]or a long time, we did not understand their significance' (p. 58, p. 6). She recalls how the prospect of partition appeared 'unthinkable' even when it was inevitable: '[w]e did not know it, but the idea that the Jews of the world had an unassailable right to Palestine was by then deeply entrenched' (p. 109).

The term 'fool's paradise' recurs across Karmi's description of her Jerusalem childhood, as she reconstructs the 'lost world' of whose impending collapse she, her family and nation bore 'no inkling'. Phrases such as '[w]e did not know it', 'we did not understand', and 'I did not know until much later' are repeated across her narrative (p. 124). Nicola King discusses the significance of an equivalent refrain, '[b]ut we didn't

⁵⁵ Karmi, 'Exodus', p. 32.

know that then', in the testimony of the Auschwitz survivor Leon Greenman. In the wake of the Holocaust, King suggests, Greenman's memory is:

deeply affected by what he didn't know at the time of the event: what he also has to remember is the painful fact of his own ignorance [...] His memory has been forced to assimilate later knowledge which now also belongs to the wider realm of 'history': what he can never recover is the 'innocence' of the time when he 'didn't know'.

King argues that if 'this paradoxical 'knowing' and 'not knowing' is the position of any autobiographical narrator, who, in the present moment of the narration, possesses the knowledge that she did not have 'then', Greenman's account of the past manifests this problem in an acute form. As a traumatic history exerts an overbearing influence on his memory and identity, the narrator compulsively seeks to 'recover the self who existed 'before''.⁵⁶ In parallel, Karmi's reconstruction of a childhood 'paradise' is troubled by the adult's retrospective awareness of the rupture which was to occur. The author herself implies a comparison between Jewish memory after the Holocaust and Palestinian recollection in the wake of the *nakbah*, as she records a conversation with her schoolfriend Leslie in London. When Leslie tells her that her relatives 'were all killed in the war', Ghada sympathises, perceiving the tragedy to be similar to what 'had happened in Jerusalem.' Leslie, however, reassures her that 'I never knew any of them, so it doesn't feel very bad'. The remembered conversation is 'amazing' to the adult narrator, who marvels that she and Leslie could have been ignorant, 'then', of the Holocaust, 'even though it had taken place but a few years before' (p. 198-199). For Karmi, the memory of childhood can never be innocent of retrospective, historical knowledge.

The adolescent's uncomplicated sense of identification with her English and Jewish schoolfriends, part of the assimilatory effort by which she retreats from her painful 'awareness of our bruised and dislocated history and the British indifference and hostility towards it' (p. 208), represents a second 'fool's paradise':

⁵⁶ King, *Memory*, p. 1-2.

during those first few years at school I lived in something of a fool's paradise [...] I had an illusion of friendship and harmony between us girls, Jewish or not, which I innocently cherished. I saw myself as one of them, an ordinary schoolgirl in an ordinary school [...] I knew of course that my family was foreign, but I did not think it any more foreign than the German Jewish families of my school contemporaries. Nor did I see my origins as an impediment to my personal integration into the society of my peers.

This illusion was soon to be shattered, the first stage in a painful process of realisation and discovery which would continue for the rest of my life. (p. 247)

The Suez crisis destabilises the illusory idyll, pitting Ghada against classmates who brand her a 'dirty Arab' and denounce Nasser as an 'outlaw' (p. 289, p. 275). At the time, she is unable to 'make coherent sense' of this 'important and turbulent chapter in my life', her conflicted responses representing 'pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which I could not fit together' (p. 293):

At the age of sixteen I was not ready to abandon the illusions I had worked so hard to build that I might reconcile the incompatible and contradictory sides of my life. It would require another decade and yet another major crisis for my personal edifice to finally crumble [...] (p. 293)

The edifice of Ghada's 'carefully cultivated Englishness' finally collapses with the Six Day War, as does her marriage to John, an Englishman she has 'perceived [...] as no more than an appendage to an idyll' (p. 266, p. 346). The crisis of 1967 exposes the subject's 'English' identity as a folly constructed on the foundations of a buried Arabic past. In *After the Last Sky*, Said observes that while '[a]ll cultures spin out a dialectic of self and other', Palestinians have been made acutely conscious of their identity as perpetual 'others'.⁵⁷ In *In Search of Fatima*, the young subject's movement towards a sense of national identity, and comprehension of her fraught history, demands this recognition that a previous sense of idyllic security was built on illusion, as Karmi, in common with Said, suggests that the true Palestinian identity is, paradoxically, one of alterity.

⁵⁷ Edward W. Said, *After The Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 40.

The Devil That Danced on the Water is also a narrative preoccupied with what the young subject 'didn't know, then' (p. 396). In his review, Caspar Fithen comments that '[a]s the child of a local hero, Aminatta's early years are idyllic'.⁵⁸ As in Khoo Thwe's and Karmi's texts, however, 'history and her bedfellow hindsight' impinge on the narrator's memory of a childhood idyll (p. 97). With her father's involvement in politics, she states,

security and substance vanished from our lives, as though the walls of our house had turned from concrete into paper, likely to fly away at any time if someone outside blew hard enough. And beyond the walls there were indeed those watching and listing, beginning to huff and puff. (p. 97)

In reconstructing the events of her childhood and her father's political career, '[t]he first ten years of my life and the last ten years of his', Forna seeks to comprehend a pivotal moment in both personal and national history (p. 403). Her family's experience is bound up with Sierra Leone's journey from the idyllic promise of independence, to notoriety as a collapsed state infamous for its poverty and a brutal war whose macabre 'emblems' are the child soldier and the amputee (p. 271).

As Ronald Mutebi observes, *The Devil that Danced on the Water* offers a poignantly personal account of the failure of the optimism and ideals of Africa's decolonisation period.⁵⁹ Mohamed Forna's ascent represents the promise of a nation's postcolonial transition to independence and democracy. Born into a poor rural family, he is educated, following a twist of 'fate', at Bo School, a prestigious college through which the British sought to propagate a native elite, becoming 'the first Sierra Leonean from the provinces to be admitted to Aberdeen University' (p. 33). Voicing his fear that with decolonisation 'Africa's poorest were already being cut out of the future', he is challenged by a friend to 'run the country himself', and declares that if necessary, he will (p. 33). Forna states that on his entry into politics her father 'walked out of nowhere, a nobody from the despised provinces with the biggest following in the country' (p. 101).

⁵⁸ Caspar Fithen, 'The dictator, the chief, the doctor and his daughter', *TLS*, 5180 (12 July 2002), 30 (p. 30).

⁵⁹ Ronald Mutebi, 'A Very African Story', *The Spectator*, 290, 9088 (12 October 2002), 71-72 (p. 71).

Mohamed Forna approaches his appointment as Stevens's Minister of Finance with a 'brilliant mind' and 'unshakable self-belief', resolving to end the nation's 'cycle of borrowing and bankruptcy'. Forna comments that as men like her father negotiated the challenges of 'government in the newborn states of Africa', '[w]ithin the struggle there were moments like these when suddenly everything seemed possible' (p. 128). This sense of possibility is frustrated, however, by Stevens' dictatorial ambitions. Assuming the title of 'Pa Sheki', the 'father of the nation', the prime minister pursues exploitative policies for the gain of an elite, basing his government on the principle that 'everyone had a price: so long as a leader shared the spoils everyone was happy' (p. 169). In his resignation letter to Stevens, Mohamed Forna writes 'Let history be my judge', a phrase which frames Forna's examination of her father's legacy (p. 387).

Aminatta's parents' marriage collapses under the pressure of her father's career. With historical hindsight, the adult narrator is forced to acknowledge the gap between a cherished image of their interracial relationship as 'a brave, compelling love, the love of myths', and the 'prosaic truth' of an 'inauspicious union, sadly flawed at its inception' (p. 129). As she reads letters in which Mohamed and Maureen charge one another respectively with 'having a colonial mentality' and 'hating white people', Forna recognises the political conflicts beneath her image of a remembered childhood idyll, comprehending 'for the first time the whispering spectres that crowded in from the edges of my parents' marriage' (pp. 146-147). She recalls a birthday party held for her brother and sister, which she had erroneously remembered 'as my birthday alone and no one else's' (p. 181):

The wonderful day seemed to belong to me, a miracle created with me in mind, still untainted by too much knowledge or by disappointment. But that was just an illusion.

It wasn't my birthday, of course, not even close. And on that day our lives changed for good. Our father had resigned in protest from the government [...] Our father had left the house as Siaka Stevens's most senior minister; by the time he came home he was the government's leading adversary. And by bed time we couldn't even call the house home any more because it didn't belong to us – it belonged to the government. (p. 183)

The reference to a childhood paradise ‘untainted by too much knowledge’ suggests a mythical world prior to the incursion of history, yet for Forna, as for Karmi and Khoo Thwe, this idyll is merely ‘an illusion’, a paradise always already lost.

The trope of a fall from childhood innocence takes on a specific, historical resonance in *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, as the adult returns to ‘a scorched country, where anarchy and a civil war fuelled by diamonds and fought by children had been a way of life for four years’ (p. 271). Susan Shepler observes that Sierra Leone’s war of the 1990s was, in both Western and Sierra Leonean interpretive frameworks, ‘often understood as a crisis of youth’.⁶⁰ As the anthropologist Mariane C. Ferme comments, the prominent role of child combatants in this conflict presented an uncomfortable challenge to ‘benign notions of childhood’, focusing attention on the cultural and political significance of childhood and youth ‘in a continent that is demographically the youngest in the world’.⁶¹ Struggling to reconcile her encounters with former ‘rebel boys’, ostracised by their families and society, with childhood memories of an African culture where ‘respect for elders was profound, the authority of the family entrenched’, Forna compares her young relative, Ola, to a group of boys she has witnessed ‘playing’ on the beach at Freetown (p. 302, p. 351):

I had been charmed by their naked, abandoned play, until I realised what they were doing. They were belly-crawling across the sand, executing perfect military manoeuvres. The barman said they came from the rehabilitation centre for child soldiers a few miles away, what was once a luxury beach hotel. I let my eyes follow Ola as she went to say good morning to the other members of the household; her genteel manners seemed to belong to another age entirely, not a world in which children of her age were turned into blank-eyed killers. (pp. 290-291)

The young Aminatta’s role in a school performance of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* prefigures the incomprehensible experience of a society finding its children ‘gone for

⁶⁰ Susan Shepler, ‘Globalizing Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone’, in *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global*, ed. by Sunaina Maira and Elizabeth Soep (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), pp. 119-133 (p. 120).

⁶¹ Mariane C. Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 227.

good', as Foday Sankoh's RUF forces 'kidnapped children and compelled them to slit the throats of their own parents' in a symbolic 'killing of authority' (p. 149, p. 351). The autobiographer's childhood cannot longer be viewed in isolation from this subsequent, brutal history, as Forna states that '[m]y childhood had borne witness to the trickle that would one day break the dam. This was what my father had foreseen with the first, early manifestations of tyranny: the end of the rule of law and the descent into anarchy' (p. 387). While refuting Sankoh's alleged attempt 'to lay claim to my father's legacy' by asserting kinship with her family, she interprets the conflict waged by his 'merciless ragtag army of bandits and children' as the culmination of a violent history beginning with her childhood experience: '[w]hat happened to my family twenty-five years ago was just the beginning. The forces that set out to destroy us ended up destroying everything' (p. 289, p. 271):

I had spent twenty-five years in ignorance and one year gradually uncovering some of the truth, and yet now I could barely recall what it felt like not to know. It was as though this terrible knowledge: of the lies and the manipulation, the greed and the corruption, the fear and violence had been with me forever. So this is innocence lost, what it feels like. The country had changed, I had changed. Lumley Beach, where I sat with Simon watching a sulphurous sun disappear behind the bank of clouds stretched across the horizon, was no longer the same. As for the past, it was irrevocably altered. (p. 379)

The confrontation of history requires the dismantling of a remembered childhood idyll, as the true 'knowledge' of the past is accompanied by the irrevocable loss of a previous 'innocence' premised on naïve 'ignorance'.

iii) 'Very different from another sort of history in which we were marginalised': Autobiographical memory as alternative history

As their autobiographies contest dominant versions of history, Forná, Karmi and Khoo Thwe explore memory's potential as an 'alternate, legitimate source of historical truth'.⁶² In his essay 'History, memory, identity', Allan Megill points to the narration of postcolonial histories, and twentieth-century trials of 'alleged perpetrators of state-sponsored brutality', as two examples illustrating the limitations of an approach which would altogether substitute memory for history, as a mode seen to demolish 'the oppressive and inauthentic in favor of the authentic and true'. Issues of 'historical truth', and the redefinition of collective identities in the wake of conflict, are at stake here, as Megill argues that 'truth and justice (or whatever stand-ins for truth and justice remain to us) require at least the ghost of History if they are to have any claim on people at all'. If memory throws into relief history's exclusions, he observes, the reverse is equally true: 'if memory is the Other of history it is necessary also to say that history is the Other of memory'.⁶³ This is a salient point for the analysis of Forná's, Karmi's and Khoo Thwe's life-narratives, which each retain an appeal to the possibility of establishing a 'true' historical record. In all three texts, autobiographical memory is bound to history, even as it is deployed as a mode which holds out the promise of redressing official historiography's omissions and distortions.

The Palestinian context is one in which the concept of history cannot be taken for granted or dispensed with, as Karmi's autobiography challenges a dominant Israeli narrative which serves to deny Palestine's identity as a nation possessing a historical claim on the contested geographical territory. Juliane Hammer identifies historical discourse as a crucial weapon in this particular postcolonial conflict, as, '[i]n the dispute regarding national identities and self-perceptions [...], Israelis and Palestinians have referred to their respective historiographies to support their political claims'.⁶⁴ The construction of a Palestinian historiography, Karmi observes, has been problematised

⁶² Mitchell, p. 608.

⁶³ Allan Megill, 'History, memory, identity', *History of the Human Sciences*, 11, 3 (1998), 37-62 (pp. 55-56).

⁶⁴ Juliane Hammer, *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 23.

both by the collective 'amnesia' which followed 1948, and a contemporaneous erasure of Palestine from the international historical record:

no one in England seemed to remember Palestine either. It is remarkable how quickly the word went out of general use [...] The country whose turbulent history had so frustrated Britain's government but five years before, simply vanished from people's consciousness. Instead the talk was of Israel, "the new young plucky state which was making such rapid advances". (p. 210)

By the time of her adolescence, she states, 'I had learned to accept that most English people around me no longer remembered that there had ever been such a place as the country where I was born' (p. 276).

The memory of Palestine is obscured by the imposition of a Zionist historiography which constructs a potent image of Israel as simultaneously a vital, 'new young' state, and 'the ancient land of the Jews' whose history resumes with the return of a people who 'only reclaimed what was rightfully theirs' (p. 364). Nur Masalha discusses how the Israeli nation was imagined into being through the relentless promotion of this narrative, in which an 'empty and untended land' is redeemed by its true custodians. In 1920, Israel Zangwill, author of the Zionist slogan 'a land without a people for a people without a land', claimed that in Palestine 'there is no Arab people living in intimate fusion with the country, utilising its resources and stamping it with a characteristic impress; there is at best an Arab encampment'.⁶⁵ The portrayal of the region's native inhabitants as a scattered, provisional, discontinuous presence, rather than a collectivity anchored to the land, underwrote the obliteration of Palestine from the historical record after 1948; Karmi remembers that this was 'such a pervasive image that I scarcely thought about it, not because I believed it, but because I had got used to it' (p. 364). Commenting that '[i]t is strange to think now of that vacuum in Palestinian history and how we all accepted it', she recalls the process of 'internal censorship which ensured that I never embarrassed anyone by speaking of Palestine, or the Palestinians who had lived in that same land for many centuries' (p. 365).

⁶⁵ Nur Masalha, 'The 1967 Palestinian Exodus', in *The Palestinian Exodus: 1948-1998*, ed. by Ghada Karmi and Eugene Cotran (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1999), pp. 63-109 (pp. 65-67).

Her move from self-censorship to activism is prompted by Golda Meir's 'astonishing pronouncement', in 1969, that the Palestinian people 'did not exist' (p. 383). In the wake of the Six Day War, Ghada's individual political awakening is bound up with a communal shift in which the 'politically inactive' stance of her parents' generation gives way to collective organisation (p. 393). At this historical juncture, she is brought up against a stark recognition that 'my side of the story was unacknowledged and illegitimate', as '[n]o matter what my personal memories and experiences had been, or those of countless other Palestinians, only the Israeli version was valid' (p. 386):

The Palestinian account of how Israel came into being could not be allowed to spoil the idyllic picture of a new young state built by fearless pioneers who had "made the desert bloom". This left me with the bitter realisation that I had not only lost my country, but that I had no right to grieve over it, or resent the fact that it was seized by others. The unvoiced implication was that we, Palestinians, had been no more than squatters on someone else's property [...] (p. 387)

Like the nationalist account of the Burmese 'Nirvana', the 'idyllic picture' of Israel's creation exemplifies a mode of collective memory Richard Werbner terms 'state memorialism', in which the narrative of an 'authentic past' is propagated by a postcolonial regime seeking to establish its legitimacy while fostering national consciousness. In relation to postcolonial Africa, Werbner argues that a 'memory crisis' may emerge when an officially sanctioned narrative of collective memory is challenged by a groundswell of 'popular counter-memory', as, '[s]ubjected to buried memory, people do not so much forget as recognise – and often ever more forcefully – that they have not been allowed to remember'.⁶⁶ Karmi charts just such an emergence of collective Palestinian counter-memory after 1967, coinciding with her personal recognition that she was witnessing 'Arab and Palestinian defeat in action' on not only a physical, but discursive level. In a conflict where 'victim and perpetrator, right and wrong, were turned upside down to the extent that it was now up to the native Palestinians to prove their

⁶⁶ Richard Werbner, 'Introduction: Beyond Oblivion: Confronting Memory Crisis', in *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, ed. by Richard Werbner (London and New York: Zed, 1998), pp. 1-17 (p. 1, pp. 8-9).

history and their title to the land they had lost, not the newcomers who had displaced them', the lack of a coherent national narrative forestalled any contestation of the Israeli 'side of the story' (p. 394).

For a nation whose experience has been one of dispossession and fragmentation, however, the task of constructing a historical narrative with which to 'prove' legitimacy remains problematic. Hammer notes that in the Palestinian context, this undertaking 'has been hindered by the absence of a state with the institutions and instruments to support such a narrative'.⁶⁷ In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discusses how nation-states are collectively imagined as sovereign political communities which 'loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future', arguing that this sense of historicised community is created and sustained by mechanisms such as national education systems and print-cultures in national languages.⁶⁸ In the case of Palestine, not only a conventional state apparatus but a print-based literary tradition has been absent, the region's predominantly oral narrative culture failing to provide a written archive with which to justify a historical claim on the land. In conversation with Salman Rushdie, Said highlights the political implications of this lack of an 'institutionalized' Palestinian narrative, commenting that while Israeli accounts 'have a kind of permanence of institutional existence and you just have to try to work away at them', in the Palestinian case 'there seems to be nothing in the world which sustains the story: unless you go on telling it, it will just drop and disappear'.⁶⁹ Enderwitz observes that since the 1970s, life-writing has represented one medium for this necessary telling and retelling of Palestinian experience, life-stories perpetuating the collective narrative as the genre develops as 'a conscious attempt to contribute to the establishment of a "collective memoire" [...] via individual memories'.⁷⁰ Sa'di also comments on the importance of autobiography in contemporary Palestinian culture, as a narrative mode which promises the mutual consolidation of subjectivity and national identity:

⁶⁷ Hammer, p. 42.

⁶⁸ Anderson, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁹ Salman Rushdie, 'On Palestinian Identity: A Conversation with Edward Said', *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), pp. 166-184 (pp. 178-179).

⁷⁰ Enderwitz, pp. 53-54.

Dispersed and lacking national institutions, archives, and documents, Palestinians have had to resort to different venues of identity reconstruction. Similar to various Third World peoples who have experienced centuries of colonization, the question of identity among Palestinians has become intimately connected to the “restoration of the individual’s subjectivity”; that is, a national narrative has been constructed through life-stories, documents, and viewpoints of individuals.

Observing that ‘random life stories told by individuals’ do not automatically add up to ‘a national narrative with which a whole community can identify’, Sa’di draws on Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* to argue that in mediating between autobiographical and collective memory, the *nakbah* functions as a defining ‘site of memory’ in Palestinian life-writing. For example, in autobiographical accounts of visits to former homes, ‘the sites where Al-Nakbah took place, and with which it will always be connected’, individual experience carries a representative significance, as it is determined by the moment of loss which also shapes a national history.⁷¹

In Search of Fatima concludes with Karmi’s account of return to the house of her childhood, as in order to comprehend her fractured past, she determines ‘to go to the source, the origin, the very place, shunned fearfully for years, where it all began’ (p. 422). In her first, unsuccessful attempt to locate the house, the encounter with an Israeli landscape from which traces of Arab history have been erased reinforces her sense of dispersed and fragmented identity as one of a beleaguered people with ‘[n]o homeland, no reference point’ (p. 445). The epilogue records Karmi’s eventual discovery of the property in the year of Israel’s fiftieth anniversary. While she had hoped to ‘confront the past’ by ‘breaking open the magical seal set in childhood and left undisturbed for forty-three years’, her return is not an experience of celebratory reconnection, but a confirmation of the irrevocable rupture wrought by the *nakbah* (p. 443). Surveying the house, ‘a fraction [of] the size it had been in my child’s memory’, she recognises that ‘it wasn’t ours any more and had not been for fifty years. Our house was dead, like Fatima, like poor Rex, like us’ (p. 447, p. 450):

⁷¹ Sa’di, pp. 176-177.

Windows [...] opened onto rooms no longer ours. The clothes line where Fatima hung out the washing had gone. In the top right-hand corner, the shed where Rex slept reluctantly at night, also gone [...] A child, my earlier self, playing under the mulberry tree, now also gone. (p. 448)

The articulation of a national history premised on loss exposes irreparable fractures within the subject. Yet if Karmi's personal past is 'dead' and gone', she witnesses evidence of the continuation of a collective Palestinian identity, as the call to prayer signifies 'another people and another presence, definable, enduring and continuous':

The story had not ended, after all – not for them, at least, the people who still lived there, though they were now herded into reservations a fraction of what had been Palestine. They would remain and multiply and one day return and maybe overtake. Their exile was material and temporary. But mine was a different exile, undefined by space or time, and from where I was, there would be no return. (p. 451)

Even as she represents the Palestinian nation as a 'definable' historical body, the pronominal distinction between 'their exile' and 'mine' reinforces the narrator's ambiguous relationship to this collectivity, bringing into focus the paradoxes of a national identity defined by loss and alterity.

In *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, autobiographical memory provides the armature for an alternative history which confronts the official records of a corrupt regime which 'tried to erase every trace' of Mohamed Forna's democratic ideals, and the indifference of a former imperial power which garlanded Stevens on his death, holding dictatorship to be '[g]ood enough for Africa, good enough for Africans' (p. 403, p. 332, p. 246). Forna represents her younger self as an uncomprehending yet clear-eyed witness to historical events:

For as long as I can remember my world was one of parallel realities. There were the official truths versus my private memories, the propaganda of history books against untold stories; there were judgements and then there were facts, adult stances and the clarity of the child's vision; their version, my version. (p. 18)

As the trajectory of her individual life has been peculiarly linked to that of her nation, the narrator occupies a position between these 'parallel realities'. Responding to the question: 'what use against the deceit of a state are the memories of a child?', Forna seeks to bridge conventional oppositions between memory and history, 'private' and 'official' modes of truth, child and adult perceptions, which would accord her testimony less validity than the historiography she contests (p. 18).

In her account of return to a country 'both utterly familiar and ineffably alien', a 'home' which 'hadn't felt like home for the longest time', she addresses her own ambiguous relationship to the nation whose history she narrates (pp. 271-272). Revisiting her ancestral village, Magburaka, in the company of an aid agency, 'a new, though different, occupying force' in Sierra Leone, Forna states that 'I saw this country of mine through the eyes of the stranger I had become, glimpsed the exotic Africa the first Portuguese and British traders must have seen' (pp. 345-346). Her successful career as an investigative journalist is attributed to 'the skills I spent my childhood honing', acquired as Aminatta habitually 'eavesdropped on adult conversations, rifled hidden papers, devised lines of questioning and [...] began to build onto my fragments layers of truth' (p. 18). Yet the adult narrator's journalistic quest in Freetown, where she conducts interviews and consults dusty official files stored in the building which was once her school, prompts a radical sense of dissonance between her child and adult identities. In her British life, she remarks, 'I rarely paused to question my identity any more. Out here, caught on a high wire between my past and my present, I had never felt less certain of who I had become' (p. 356). Her brief visit to Magburaka, in which she is forced to breach custom by immediately pressing her uncle for sensitive information about the past, contrasts painfully with her childhood memories of 'languid hours' spent in the family compound: 'I had never felt more alien, more like a foreigner' (p. 355).

Forna's attempt to determine historical truth, moreover, reveals a gulf between expectations instilled by her Western journalistic training, and the reality of gaps and inconsistencies in the records of a postcolonial society emerging from the chaos of civil war. Access to the transcripts of her father's trial requires negotiation of a 'labyrinthine' system of bribery and bureaucracy 'where form existed without function' (p. 287). The law courts themselves are a 'burned-out shell', as RUF forces destroyed them during their

invasion of Freetown in the wanton act of 'sending a nation's history up in smoke'; while the grand colonial facades are 'surprisingly intact', windows open onto the 'great void' of an interior which has been 'reduced to a pile of rubble' (p. 172, pp. 287-288). Forna is beset by 'frustrations with the country and with the task I had set myself', as 'every step of the way I felt I was pushing against some mighty, unspoken resistance' (p. 372). In this 'ruined country', the very concept of veracity appears irrelevant, as she considers 'how peculiarly Western was my search for the truth, as though it were there to be found at all. Would I have that confidence if this had really been my country, where arrests, detentions and beatings had become as common as ant tracks in the dust?' (p. 313).

Eventually, however, a painstaking process of mediation between her personal memories and the information she gathers in Freetown enables Forna to establish a reliable account of the past. Early in her narrative, she gestures towards a modified conception of historical truth, observing that:

In the African oral tradition great events and insignificant moments, the ordinary and the extraordinary, are notches on the same wheel. They exist in relation to each other. The little occurrences are as important as the grand designs: the threads are the texture of truth that separate man-made myth from fact. They are the testimonies; the words of history's eyewitnesses. (p. 18)

The 'African' epistemology Forna invokes is one which moves beyond dichotomising definitions of individual and collective identity, 'private' memory and 'public' history, subjective and objective truths. In this model of collective memory drawn from an indigenous mode of oral history, personal memories imprinted by the perceptions of a child witness are validated as contributions to a tapestry of collective historical truth, a counterweight to official historiography's 'man-made myth'. Despite Forna's assertion that her narrative cannot arrive at 'a neat ending with the strands of the plot all tied up into a bow', *The Devil that Danced on the Water* ultimately conveys a sense of resolution on the levels of both personal and national history (p. 388). Having verified the facts of the past, Forna visits her father's burial site, where she glimpses a vision of 'the little girl who once was me', an African child whose bare feet 'touch the earth' (p. 403). Where Karmi's image of her younger self as a lost child, 'dead' and 'gone', reinforces a sense of

alterity, Forna's encounter symbolises a reconciliation of the disparate components of her own identity.

In *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Khoo Thwe addresses the history of a 'once prosperous country, with a previously high level of education', whose prospects after independence were betrayed by a government of 'mendacious incompetents' whose policies created a pariah state 'shut off from the outside world' (p. 136, 151). Tridgell describes the text as 'a work of political protest, of resistance' which 'comes out of a particular historical moment, and is imbued with those concerns'.⁷² In the foreword, however, Casey makes the contrary claim that while '[t]here is much in the book about the horrors – and absurdities – of modern Burma', *From the Land of Green Ghosts* is 'less a book about politics or history than a spiritual autobiography' (p. xv). Calling up the traditional opposition between an autobiographical realm of 'private' memory and a 'public' historical narrative, his statement is at odds with Khoo Thwe's indication that his aim, indeed obligation, is to articulate a silenced national history. In the jungle, Pascal's awareness that the Burmese government is ruthlessly betraying its 'children' is accompanied by a recognition that 'the outside world might be equally indifferent to what was happening to us, that our story might never be heard'. In the hope of testifying, he hoards memories of the atrocities he witnesses, 'stories that I resolved to keep in my mind [...] "whiles memory holds a seat/In this distracted globe"' (pp. 188-189). As Tridgell remarks, if Khoo Thwe's 'is a spiritual autobiography, as Casey claims, then it is one which can never be divorced from political struggle'.⁷³ While the marketing and reception of *From the Land of Green Ghosts* as an 'individualized success story' neglects this political and historical agenda, Tridgell observes that even more problematically, such readings map the presumed narrative of 'spiritual' development onto one of cultural progression, with most critics interpreting the young subject's movement from Burma to Cambridge as 'a gain in sophistication'.⁷⁴ Andrew Marshall refers to the 'miraculous success story' of Pascal's journey 'out of his jungle nightmare and into the hushed

⁷² Tridgell, pp. 77-78.

⁷³ Tridgell, p. 83.

⁷⁴ Tridgell, p. 86, p. 78.

cloisters of Caius College, Cambridge'.⁷⁵ Alison Burke, similarly, argues that while '[t]he author 'paints a lovely picture of his idyllic youth', the narrative is essentially one of progress, tracing an 'incredible journey from a backwater Burmese hill tribe to [...] the inner sanctum of England's intellectual elite' as the text follows the 'blueprint' of the coming-of-age memoir in which 'poor boy fights odds, grows up, makes it rich (spiritually, materially, etc.)'.⁷⁶ Barbara Crossette also describes *From the Land of Green Ghosts* as 'a book built around one young man's improbable escape to the West from the isolated land of his tribal forebears'.⁷⁷

Such conclusions overlook a profound ambivalence in Khoo Thwe's representation of Cambridge, which works to undermine the notion of a developmental cultural continuum and the assumption of the imperial centre's cultural and intellectual superiority. Recalling the matriculation ceremony in which he progressed through the 'Gate of Humility', he comments that the college's 'venerable Second Founder, John Keys (who Latinised his name to Caius), seemed to have done his best to make people like me feel inadequate' (p. 272). The dichotomy of 'civilisation and barbarism', which Pascal selects as his dissertation topic, is ironically inverted in his response to Cambridge's 'drunk and boisterous' student community (p. 281):

As I sat alone in my room listening to the noise, I was transported back to the jungle. The males would urinate against the walls of the college buildings, as if marking their territory like the wild animals of the jungle. As the voices of the drunken female undergraduates rose, I was reminded of the cries of hyenas and excited monkeys [...] (pp. 274-275)

Khoo Thwe's ambivalent engagement with Burma's colonial history is played out in the account of his first meeting with Casey. Visiting Mandalay on a whim inspired by the

⁷⁵ Andrew Marshall, 'Sentimental Education', *Time Asia* (10 June 2002) <<http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/article/0,9171,501020617-260758,00.html>> [accessed 13 June 2006] (para. 7 of 7).

⁷⁶ Alison Carole Burke, Review of *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, *Pop Matters Books* (10 March 2004) <<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/from-the-land-of-green-ghosts/>> [accessed 08 November 2008] (paras 4, 2, 7 of 8)

⁷⁷ Barbara Crossette, 'The Waiter Who Loved Joyce', *New York Times* (22 December 2002) <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.htm?res=9903EFDE133AF931A15751C1A9649C8B63&se=&spn=pagewanted=all>> [accessed 29 October 2008] (para. 3 of 11)

Kipling poem, Casey visits the restaurant where friends have told him he will find a waiter who admires James Joyce. Taking his interlocutor for 'a priest or some sort of religious, with his Panama hat and white linen suit', Pascal learns with 'astonishment' that this 'James Bond' figure is 'from Cambridge University, a famous and virtually mythical place in my eyes' (pp. 149-150). Taking Casey to see 'the university built by his ancestors', Pascal reflects on the colonial encounter as 'a time when we were part of a larger world':

The main quadrangle of the old part of the campus dated from the British days [...] Of course we had always been taught by the government to despise the colonial past, but the quadrangle was more nobly built than the newer parts of the campus. I found myself pondering on the time when East met West in Burma – whether there might be something good in that, something that might still have value for us. (p. 151)

While unable to 'judge how good or bad the old days were', he perceives the past as a dynamic period of contact contrasting with the present 'time of paralysis, when nothing significant happened, or was allowed to happen, when all paths seemed shut off' (p. 151). Khoo Thwe remarks that the anti-colonial content of his university lectures in fact betrayed the extent to which, 'after nearly thirty years of isolation from the rest of the world', the Burmese populace were 'fascinated by the Western way of life and ignorantly credulous about it', a comment which reflects darkly on his own naïve fascination, as a student in Mandalay, with the 'mythical' Cambridge represented by the white-suited Casey (p. 121).

Towards the end of his narrative, Khoo Thwe defends his mentor against Cambridge students' accusations that the professor's nostalgia for empire makes him a 'reactionary' and a 'racist' (p. 283). Yet if his identification with Casey, the self-acknowledged Raj revivalist, might be taken to illustrate a colonised subjectivity, Khoo Thwe's account of Burmese colonial history evinces unmistakably anti-colonial sentiments. He praises King Mindon, 'whose wisdom had prolonged Burmese independence in the midst of British power', and describes how the British, having seized an 'excuse to intervene' in Burma, disrespectfully converted the throne room of Mandalay palace into 'a club for British officers' (p. 112, p. 34). He also stresses

Burma's relatively short capitulation to imperial rule, and the 'numerous uprisings' and 'nationalist spirit' of resistance which marked the colonial period (pp. 12-13). The ambiguities of Khoo Thwe's attitude towards the colonial past in part reflect his tribal community's 'fond memories' of the British. His grandparents keep relics of the colonial 'golden age', such as 'pictures of our tribesmen taken during the 1900 great exhibition in Mandalay', in storage with the prohibited 'flag of democratic Burma', these documents of colonisation and independence becoming ironically linked as symbols of defiance of the current postcolonial – or neo-colonial – government (pp. 37-38).

Addressing the legacy of the Burmese colonial encounter, Khoo Thwe's alternative history emphasises cultural contact and exchange, at once challenging the isolationist narrative of state-sponsored Burmese historiography, and charging the former imperial power with responsibility towards the postcolony. Highlighting the negative consequences of ill-informed Western policy, Khoo Thwe describes an international scheme for the eradication of opium cultivation. Government officials seized the opportunity to 'enrich themselves' financially, while turning weapons supplied by the West on communities unconnected with the opium trade – which, meanwhile, 'boomed as never before' (p. 57). In his recently published text *The River of Lost Footsteps*, which also links the genres of autobiography and historiography, the Burmese writer Thant Myint-U makes a similar point, noting that 'the legacies of a century of British colonialism' are often overlooked in shrill Western reportage which laments the condition of Burma as 'a poster child for [...] nightmarish twenty-first century ills, a failed or failing state'. In order to fully comprehend the plight of this postcolonial nation, he argues, it is imperative to consider 'what the past might say about the present':⁷⁸

The most striking aspect of the Burma debate today is its absence of nuance and its singularly ahistorical nature. Dictatorship and the prospects for democracy are seen within the prism of the past ten or twenty years, as if three Anglo-Burmese wars, a century of colonial rule, an immensely destructive Japanese invasion and occupation, and

⁷⁸ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. xiii.

five decades of civil war, foreign intervention, and Communist insurgency had never happened.⁷⁹

While Thant Myint-U's perspective on national identity, shaped by his privileged status as part of an expatriate Burman elite, differs significantly from Khoo Thwe's, the two authors concur in their emphasis on history as a key to addressing Burma's current predicament. As Hodgkin and Radstone observe, '[c]ontests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward'.⁸⁰ For Khoo Thwe, examination of the colonial past becomes a means of calling for more productive international engagement with Burma in the present. It is here that my reading differs significantly from Tridgell's, as she assumes that his narrative:

is emphasizing, as Aung San Suu Kyi has done, the ways in which the Burmese dictatorship draws support from foreign factors – foreign trade, foreign investment, foreign aid, and foreign tourism – and it asks us, as a minimum, not to be part of such processes.⁸¹

While Khoo Thwe eulogises Suu Kyi as a figure whose promotion of 'national unity' has persuaded even ethnic separatists to contribute to the collective struggle for 'Burma as a democratic country', his own emphasis on the value of contact and exchange appears to modify her stance on a continuing boycott (pp. 165-166). A closer parallel might be found in the argument of the Burmese commentator Zar Ni, who contends that the effects of 'nearly three decades of self-imposed isolationism', sought by the ruling regime, have only been compounded by an international failure, based on principles of non-engagement, to address Burma's vexed postcolonial inheritance. Britain, Zar Ni asserts, is 'uniquely positioned' to engage with a former colony stagnating under 'a post-colonial

⁷⁹ Thant Myint-U, p. 41.

⁸⁰ Hodgkin and Radstone, p. 1.

⁸¹ Tridgell, p. 77.

leadership long on nationalist polemic and short on intellectual and administrative competence'.⁸²

Khoo Thwe's alternative history is underwritten by an authority drawn as much from a non-Western culture as his Western education. Countering the assumption that the text attributes both the autobiographer's maturation, and his mastery of narrative, to his Cambridge schooling, Mirante describes Khoo Thwe's text as an 'indigenous work of memory'.⁸³ Early in his narrative, Khoo Thwe outlines the Padaung mode of 'mythic' history, embedding an explicit critique of Western historiography in his account of how this oral tradition served to demarcate:

a world in which our own tribe was important [...] It explained and justified our way of life. It was very different to another sort of history in which we were marginalised, eccentric and even an embarrassment – a history which contained plenty of mythology of its own. (p. 9)

Identified in infancy as a 'sort of shaman' by his grandmothers, guardians of the tribe's archive of memory, Khoo Thwe claims special powers of prophecy and interpretation within this tradition (p. 106). In the epilogue, he recounts an experience comprehensible through the Padaung conception of a history in which 'myths do not just remind us of the ancestors', but 'make our lives and those of our ancestors contemporaneous' (p. 17). As part of Casey's scheme for his acclimatisation, Pascal is taken to visit a provincial English art gallery, where he stumbles on a bust of his grandmother Mu Tha, resplendent in her neck-rings (p. 295). Earlier, the reader has learned that Mu Tha's journey to the West prefigured Pascal's own, as she travelled to Europe in the 1930s to be exhibited as a freak in Bertram Mills's circus. As Moore notes, Khoo Thwe's account of his grandmother's voyage mischievously confounds the assumptions of a liberal Western reader who 'prepares to be sympathetically shocked', as Mu Tha would regale her grandson with memories of her enjoyment at reciprocally observing the English, a 'very

⁸² Zar Ni, 'Western pressure on Burma isn't working', *The Independent Online Edition* (4 January 2006) <<http://comment.independent.co.uk/commentators/article336364.ece>> [accessed 15 June 2006] (paras 2, 11 of 11)

⁸³ Mirante, para. 1., para.8.

strange tribe' who unaccountably wished to pay her 'for not working'.⁸⁴ 'If we had had the notion of 'freaks', Khoo Thwe remarks, 'I suppose she would have put the whole English race into that category' (p. 28). In the epilogue, Pascal's encounter with his ancestor's image links these two mobile Padaung subjects in a cyclical formation of 'mythic' history.

At the same time, this conclusion underlines Khoo Thwe's representation of the Padaung as dynamic historical actors in a more conventional sense, active participants in an ongoing history of cultural encounter. Before completing his Cambridge degree, Pascal makes a dispiriting visit to the borders of his homeland, to a refugee camp in Thailand where his tribespeople are 'detained to be displayed for money to tourists' (p. 287). His poignant description of this 'human zoo' echoes Amitav Ghosh's analysis of the phenomenon of the Padaung refugee camp as tourist attraction, in which tribal subjects are detached from their specific, 'tragic histories of oppression, displacement, and misery' in order to be presented as 'counterfeits of timeless rural simplicity', noble savages who epitomise 'an imagined Asian innocence'.⁸⁵ In *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Khoo Thwe's alternative history of colonialism and nationhood overturns this infantilising stereotype of the tribesman as a childlike innocent who exists beyond history.

Conclusion

My comparison of Fornas's, Karmi's and Khoo Thwe's texts has brought into focus some of the limitations of dominant perspectives on the autobiography of childhood. For Coe and other critics, the genre retreats from public, historical concerns to explore a 'mythical', 'poetic' terrain of private memory. This assumption becomes untenable in relation to the three authors under discussion. Their life-narratives are concerned with experiences of nationhood in which 'the promise of independence turned into a nightmare': Burma's notorious military government is the subject of international

⁸⁴ Moore, p. 38.

⁸⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002), p. 94.

sanctions, Sierra Leone occupies the lowest position on the UN's Human Development Index, and Palestine, meanwhile, has been denied conventional statehood. In *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, *In Search of Fatima* and *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, these conflicts of postcolonial history exert a disruptive influence on formations of autobiographical memory and subjectivity. Conversely, Forna's, Karmi's and Khoo Thwe's autobiographies are framed as alternative histories, each critiquing the exclusions of an official historical record. Yet, even as they foreground the partial and contested nature of histories, these texts retain an appeal to the possibility of establishing an authoritative historical truth. Rather than substituting personal testimony for a discredited history, the three narratives perform complex negotiations between forms of personal memory, official historiography, and collective postcolonial counter-memory.

Chapter Two: Embodiment

Introduction

The sociologist Chris Shilling observes that while embodiment ‘has historically been something of an *absent presence*’ in critical theory, reflecting the influence of a Cartesian philosophy of selfhood which establishes a dichotomy between the body and mind, ‘the body has emerged as a fundamental social and academic issue in the contemporary period’. Models of embodiment, however, Shilling notes, have tended to bifurcate in terms of a ‘nature/culture dualism’, precluding analysis of the complex relationships between the body’s materiality and its cultural construction.¹ Arguing that modernity witnesses the emergence of a ‘somatic society’ in which ‘the body, as simultaneously constraint and resistance, is the principal field of cultural and political activity’, Bryan S. Turner calls attention to the need for ‘a conception of the embodied actor which will transcend the all-pervasive Cartesian division of mind-body’. He discusses two prominent anti-Cartesian perspectives, representing either side of the ‘nature/culture’ dichotomy Shilling identifies.² Firstly, phenomenological models of the lived body suggest that subjectivity is fundamentally embodied; Merleau-Ponty refers to an ‘*I* committed to a certain physical and inter-human world’, arguing that ‘perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self, and, as it were, the subject of perception’.³ Secondly, approaches influenced by poststructuralism interpret the body as a discursive product with no prior materiality; in his autobiography Roland Barthes highlights the impossibility of locating a singular, ‘authentic body’, commenting that ‘even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images’.⁴ A

¹ Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 2000), p. 9, p. 3, pp. 12-13. Original emphasis.

² Bryan S. Turner, *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (Routledge: London and New York, 1992), pp. 8-9.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 94, p. 239.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), p. 36.

productive approach to rethinking the relationship between embodiment and subjectivity, Turner proposes, would combine insights from both of these perspectives.

In the context of life-writing criticism, Eakin also calls for recognition that the construction of the body as a cultural artefact does not occur in isolation from a material dimension of lived, corporeal experience. Noting that 'our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity', he argues that conventional theoretical distinctions between 'the body of physiologic process' and 'the body of cultural construction' are 'largely heuristic', as physiological experience is always interpreted through culture. Until recently, Eakin observes, issues of embodiment were neglected within autobiography studies, reflecting 'the absence of the body in traditional autobiography', as critics reproduced the Cartesian dualism encoded within canonical Western life-narratives.⁵ Gusdorf's argument that the genre transcends a worldly dimension of 'exterior space', in its concern with 'the most hidden aspects of individual being',⁶ aligns with Descartes's claim that 'the nature of the intelligence is distinct from that of the body':

I could conceive that I had no body, and that there was no world or place where I might be; but yet that I could not for all that conceive that I was not [...] From that I knew that I was a substance the whole essence and nature of which is to think, and that for its existence there is no need of any place, nor does it depend on any material thing; so that this 'me', that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body, and is even more easy to know than is the latter; and even if body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is.⁷

In the hierarchical separation of body and soul, the Cartesian body represents a 'machine' subordinated to the *res cogitans*; Descartes's 'I' is a radically disembodied subject, independent of any 'world', 'place', or 'material thing'.

⁵ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. xi, pp.34-36.

⁶ Gusdorf, p. 32, p. 34.

⁷ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. by David Weissman, trans. by Donald A. Cress (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 23, pp. 21-22.

In *Subjectivity, Identity and The Body*, Sidonie Smith discusses how this dominant model of an 'unencumbered' and 'unembedded selfhood' which 'escapes all forms of embodiment' is constructed through spatial imagery, as the Enlightenment subject is imagined as a bounded entity demarcated by 'well-defined, stable, impermeable boundaries around a singular, unified, and atomic core, the unequivocal delineation of inside and outside'.⁸ In his study of the 'dissection culture' of Renaissance Europe, Jonathan Sawday probes the history of the relationship between discourses of space and selfhood. He suggests that while a mind/body dualism can be traced back to Plato's philosophy, 'the western sense of interiority – that mark of individuality' was consolidated through discourses of scientific inquiry, centring on anatomy, in the early modern period. Drawing attention to the cultural specificity of the spatial categories of 'outside' and 'inside' which underpin modern Western conceptions of the body and self, he refers to an encounter between a mid-twentieth-century Melanesian subject and an anthropologist:

A Melanesian, asked by Maurice Leenhardt what the west had contributed to the culture of the islands, did not reply by listing technological, scientific, or medical achievements, nor even (ironically) the disastrous disease history which was the product of western encounters with Pacific peoples (though that last category may have been implicit in what he said). Instead his response undermined the very categories which framed the question: 'What you have brought us is the body.'⁹

Sawday argues that the scientific exploration of the body in seventeenth-century Europe was a 'truly colonial' process, 'reproduc[ing] the stages of discovery and exploitation which were, at that moment, taking place within the context of the European encounter with the New World'. Mapped, observed and named for their 'discoverers', bodily features, like the disparate territories of empire, became understood as the constituent parts of an economic system.¹⁰ The exchange between the Melanesian, aware of how

⁸ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and The Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 5-6.

⁹ Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 11.

¹⁰ Sawday, pp. 25-26.

colonialism exports the culturally specific 'body' of the modern West, and his European interlocutor brings into focus the extent to which discourses of subjectivity, embodiment, space and colonialism are interrelated at a level beyond that of mere analogy.

Evidently, this point has major implications for the investigation of embodiment in postcolonial life-writing. Critical discussions of the body have usually assumed a Eurocentric framework; writing in 1998, Leigh Dale and Simon Ryan observe that in the contemporary turn towards the body, postcolonial issues receive strikingly little attention:

This is a curious absence because, in a material way, empire was a significantly corporeal process, constructed and controlled by the travelling of European bodies and the enslavement, infection, or murder of indigenous bodies [...] Indigenous bodies were also sites of resistance to European intervention and sites of cultural practices which Europeans attempted to interpret.¹¹

Since the publication of Dale and Ryan's text, the body has been more widely addressed in postcolonial theory and criticism. In *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, Radhika Mohanram asserts that 'the notion of embodiment is central to postcolonial studies'.¹² Ketu H. Katrak explores the female body as a locus of both colonial oppression, and postcolonial resistance.¹³ Mohanram's and Katrak's studies are representative of a tendency, in this nascent field of inquiry, to focus specifically on postcolonial women's experience. Similarly, within the domain of Autobiography Studies discussions of embodiment tend to centre on women's texts, a point acknowledged in Smith and Watson's observation that '[t]he question of how male embodiment is presented or concealed in life-narratives is a rich prospect for future research'.¹⁴ The gendering of bodies in postcolonial life-writing will be one focus of this chapter, as I read Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*,¹⁵ a narrative which has been extensively discussed in

¹¹ Leigh Dale and Simon Ryan, 'Introduction: The Body in the Library', in *The Body in The Library*, ed. by Leigh Dale and Simon Ryan (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 1-12 (p. 2).

¹² Radhika Mohanram, *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 199.

¹³ Ketu H. Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 40.

¹⁵ Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (1985; London: Vintage, 1997). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

relation to issues of embodiment and gender, alongside two texts by male authors: Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana*¹⁶ and Edward W. Said's *Out of Place: A Memoir*.¹⁷ Mittelholzer's text, which raises complex issues of embodiment and subjectivity in the postcolonial Caribbean, has received scant critical attention since its publication in 1963. While *Out of Place* has been widely addressed, critics have not focused in detail on how issues of Palestinian identity shape the text's theme of the 'body as incredibly fraught and problematic'.

The gendering of existing discussions of embodiment, in the fields of both autobiography and postcolonial studies, in part reflects the important contribution feminist critics have made towards debates on the body. As Smith observes, in modern Western discourse the 'banishment' of the body 'to the margins of the conscious self' is linked to a 'process whereby others whose bodies are identified as culturally "grotesque" become more fully body'.¹⁸ If the Western, masculine subject is defined by the interior essence of his subjectivity, women and non-Western subjects have conversely been aligned with an exterior, material corporeality. Elizabeth Grosz notes that embodiment is both a perilous and a crucial area of inquiry for feminist criticism precisely because '[w]omen have been objectified and alienated as social subjects partly through the denigration and containment of the female body', an observation which might well be transposed to the field of postcolonial studies.¹⁹ Grosz addresses the pitfalls of essentialist appeals to embodiment as a ground of female identity, yet in common with Shilling, Turner and Eakin, concludes that the body cannot 'be regarded as *purely* a social, cultural, and signifying effect lacking its own weighty materiality'.²⁰ Judith Butler also seeks to mediate between discursive and material aspects of embodiment in the movement between her texts *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that gendered corporeal identities, culturally constructed as 'natural',

¹⁶ Edgar Mittelholzer, *A Swarthy Boy: A Childhood in British Guiana* (London: Putnam, 1963). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁷ Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999; London: Granta, 2000). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁸ Smith, pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xiv.

²⁰ Grosz, p. 21.

can in fact be understood as ‘styles of the flesh’, produced and performed.²¹ *Bodies That Matter*, however, begins with the observation that ‘[t]heorizing from the ruins of the Logos invites the following question: “What about the materiality of the body?”’²²

Butler’s question resonates in relation to postcolonial embodiment, a point which can be illustrated through a discussion of Frantz Fanon. Butler herself refers briefly to Fanon in *Gender Trouble*, drawing attention to how *Black Skin, White Masks* concludes ‘through recourse to the body as an instrument of freedom, where freedom is, in Cartesian fashion, equated with a consciousness capable of doubt: “O my body, make of me always a man who asks questions!”’²³ This ‘final prayer’ of Fanon’s text inverts the Cartesian dichotomy in positing the body, rather than mind, as the source of a critical consciousness.²⁴ Fanon does not, however, appeal to the body as a constant ground of identity. As Stuart Hall points out, ‘any notion that the return to the site of the body represents a recovery of some essential ground or foundation that will restore the essential black subject is not only mistaken but has taken a message from Fanon’s work which he explicitly precludes’.²⁵ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon claims that the alienation of the black subject is ‘the outcome of a double process’, as economic marginalisation leads to ‘the internalization – or, better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority’.²⁶ The term ‘epidermalization’, focusing on the exteriority of skin, encapsulates Fanon’s argument, in the pivotal chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, that the black subject is externally embodied by the script of ‘the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories’, thus denied the sense of a centred, interior subjectivity.²⁷ David Macey notes that while drawing on influences such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Fanon ultimately finds their phenomenological models of

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 139.

²² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. ix.

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 152.

²⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 232.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, ‘The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks?*’, in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. by Alan Read (London and Seattle: ICA/Bay Press, 1996), pp. 12-37 (p. 24).

²⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 11.

²⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 111.

embodied subjectivity inadequate for the comprehension of black experience.²⁸ Recounting his quest to ‘construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localise sensations’, Fanon’s narrator refers to Lhermitte’s model of the ‘corporeal schema’, also utilised by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Yet he is brought up against the limits of this model for the objectified black subject, whose bodily identity is inescapably underwritten by ‘a historico-racial schema’. This recognition is prompted by a traumatic encounter with a white child who names him as a ‘Negro’, in which moment ‘the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema’.²⁹ In this scenario, Macey observes, the phenomenological notion of subjectivity as an embodied ‘being-in-the-world’ gives way to a sense of being defined from without, a ‘being-for-others’.³⁰ If, as Barthes states, the autobiographer, writing the body, is ‘condemned to the repertoire of its images’, Fanon demonstrates how, for the postcolonial subject, this process becomes politicised.³¹ For the black man who is ‘dissected’ and ‘fixed’ under the gaze of ‘white eyes, the only real eyes’, ‘[c]onsciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness’.³²

If the black subject is thus ‘overdetermined from without’, Fanon also addresses the limitations of *négritude* as a strategy for reasserting an essential, embodied relationship between the black subject and the world.³³ Taking up this discourse, his narrator seeks to rebuild a sense of identity with ‘the intuitive lianas of my hands’, challenging the Cartesian division through the argument that ‘for us [black subjects] the body is not something opposed to what you call the mind’. Yet this merely reconfirms white society’s belief that ‘genetically, I represented a stage of development’, ‘the childhood of the world’.³⁴

²⁸ David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life* (London: Granta, 2000), pp. 163-167. Where the chapter’s original title, ‘L’Expérience Vécue du Noir’, invokes these phenomenological influences, Markmann’s English text titles the chapter ‘The Fact of Blackness’. Macey comments that this ‘mistranslation obliterates Fanon’s philosophical frame of reference, which is supplied by a phenomenological theory of experience, but it also perverts his whole argument; for Fanon, there is no ‘fact of blackness’’. p. 26.

²⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, pp. 111-112.

³⁰ Macey, p. 166.

³¹ Barthes, p. 36.

³² Fanon, *Black Skin*, p.116, p. 110.

³³ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 116.

³⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 138, pp. 126-7, p. 129.

Despite these tensions, Fanon returns to the body as a site of postcolonial resistance; Michael Dash comments that his 'images of verbal muscularity have a resonance in Caribbean writing in which revolutionary potential is evoked through the resurrected flesh'.³⁵ In *The Wretched of the Earth*, the figure of the 'native intellectual' is constructed in terms of masculine embodiment, as a man who 'takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy [...], who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people'.³⁶ Positing connections between individual and collective anatomies, Fanon's work also highlights a complex relationship between the body's discursive construction and its materiality. In this way, his writings presciently anticipate contemporary debates on the postcolonial body, and, given their autobiographical articulation, on embodiment in postcolonial life-writing more specifically. If, as Alison Donnell hypothesises, 'embodied narratives' might be a characteristic feature of postcolonial life-writing, the example of Fanon highlights the complex issues at stake in the very notion of such narratives.³⁷

In the preface to *Out of Place*, Said identifies two related stimuli for his autobiographical project: the imperative of narrating a 'subjective' testimony of his childhood in Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon which would contribute towards a collective 'record of an essentially lost or forgotten world', and the 'fatal medical diagnosis' which invested this undertaking with a poignant urgency (p. xiii). Comparably to Karmi's, Said's life-narrative illustrates the impact of the Palestinian experience of geographical dislocation and historical rupture on autobiographical identity. In *Out of Place*, these issues are mediated through the body; while the text is framed by the exiled narrator's chronic illness, a central preoccupation is the child subject's increasing sense of 'my body as imperfect and morally flawed', the result of a parental 'contest over my body' which Said relates to his family's 'peculiarly fractured status, as Palestinian-Arab-Christian-American shards disassembled by history' (p. 66, p. 268).

³⁵ Michael Dash, 'In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature', *Kunapipi*, 11, 1 (1989), 17-26 (p. 24).

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 170.

³⁷ Alison Donnell, 'When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*' in *Women's Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography*, ed. by Pauline Polkey (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp.123-136 (p. 129).

In Mittelholzer's and Kincaid's narratives of childhood in early twentieth-century Guyana and mid-century Antigua respectively, relationships between embodiment and subjectivity are no less fraught. In common with the Palestinian experience of geographical dislocation, the Caribbean's history of slavery illustrates the extent to which, as Dale and Ryan state, imperialism is 'a significantly corporeal process'.³⁸ In his essay 'In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature', Dash cites Octavio Paz's assertion that '[w]hatever the word and the particular meaning of *body* and *non-body* within each civilisation, the relationship between these two signs is not, and cannot be, anything but unstable'. The fluid relationship between conceptions of the body and self, Dash argues, is a 'particularly acute' concern within Caribbean literature because the region's experience of colonial repression and alienation has been 'both verbal and carnal', 'corporeal as well as psychic'. Shifting representations of the body provide the ground for explorations of both subjection and subjectivity, as '[c]orporeal imagery in the Caribbean indicates the tensions that underlie the process of self-characterisation'.³⁹ In their markedly different configurations of the relationship between the body and the autobiographical self, *Out of Place* and *Annie John* exemplify the instability to which Dash refers.

Furthermore, a comparison of these two life-narratives bears out Sandra Pouchet Pacquet's observation that '[t]he radical instability of the Caribbean as a cultural domain coincides with the radical instability of autobiography as a genre'.⁴⁰ Thomas Michael Stein comments on the 'absence of straightforward autobiographies' emerging from this region, noting that autobiographical conventions undergo complex manipulations in the work of many Caribbean life-writers.⁴¹ Kincaid, in particular, has provoked debate over both the 'autobiographical' nature of her work and the generic boundaries of life-writing. In an interview, she states that 'everything in my writing is autobiographical, down to the

³⁸ Dale and Ryan, p. 2.

³⁹ Dash, p. 20. Original emphasis.

⁴⁰ Sandra Pouchet Pacquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Identity and Self-Representation* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 8.

⁴¹ Thomas Michael Stein, 'Fictional Autobiography in the Caribbean': George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Wilson Harris's *The Infinite Rehearsal*, in *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*, ed. by Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 247-257 (p. 247).

punctuation', yet also that '[i]t wouldn't hold up in a court of law'.⁴² *Annie John*, a text named for its child protagonist, refuses the terms of Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact', in which a life-narrative's authenticity is confirmed by the 'signature' which asserts the identity between the names of the author, narrator and subject.⁴³ Kincaid's act of changing her own birth name, which she has chosen to publicise, troubles the suggestion that autobiographical 'authenticity' is necessarily underwritten by this 'signature'; in *The Autobiography of My Mother* her narrator, Xuela, remarks that in the context of the postcolonial Caribbean 'your own name, whatever it might be, eventually was not the gateway to who you really were'.⁴⁴ Gilmore suggests that in Kincaid's life-writing, the disparity between the names of the author and subject represents 'a way of deflecting the literal truth-telling demands of the autobiographical pact while inscribing a different discourse of truth-telling, one that is more adequate to representing the "truth" and "identity" of a "post"-colonial subject'.⁴⁵

Mittelholzer's text, in contrast, adheres to canonical autobiographical conventions. Published shortly before Guyana achieved independence in 1966, *A Swarthy Boy* is a narrative of childhood which seeks to claim an essentially European identity for the mixed-race Caribbean subject. Michael Gilkes observes that:

Mittelholzer consciously identified himself with the European side of his ancestry, and his work reflects his consistent, determined effort to be accepted by a European "parent stock" and to reject the title of "West Indian" with its legacy of racial admixture and "impurity".⁴⁶

In view of these politically problematic issues, Mittelholzer's writing receives little attention in postcolonial criticism, yet Lamming, among others, acknowledges his significant role in the emergence of anglophone Caribbean literature.⁴⁷ Gilkes suggests

⁴² Ivan Kreilkamp, 'Jamaica Kincaid: Daring to Discomfort', *Publishers Weekly* 243, 1 (1996), 54-55 (p. 54); Diane Simmons, *Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Twayne, 1994), p. 5.

⁴³ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Plume, 1997), p. 79.

⁴⁵ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ Michael Gilkes, *Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel* (Georgetown, Guyana: Ministry of Information and Culture, National History and Arts Council, 1975), p. 7.

⁴⁷ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), pp. 40-41.

that the importance of his oeuvre lies in its 'pioneering concern with the problem of identity', as the author examines the implications of 'his own 'hybrid' pedigree'.⁴⁸ A deeply conflicted postcolonial identity emerges in *A Swarthy Boy*, a text in which autobiographical subjectivity is constructed in relation to bodily discourses of blood, skin and heredity.

i) 'In these days I did not feel like a boy': Gendering the postcolonial child's body

Smith and Watson argue that life-writing is a genre which 'inextricably links memory, subjectivity, and the materiality of the body', a claim which is borne out by Kincaid's, Mittelholzer's and Said's narratives.⁴⁹ While constructing very different models of postcolonial subjectivity, *Annie John*, *Out Of Place* and *A Swarthy Boy* share not only a thematic, but an ontological preoccupation with embodiment. In each text, issues of postcolonial identity are raised by the narrator's account of a childhood experience of subjection to a regime of corporeal discipline involving the parental and institutional supervision of diet, posture and clothing, medical scrutiny, restrictions on physical activity, and the administration of corporal punishment and restraint. In this first section of my analysis, I address connections between the racial and cultural marking of the postcolonial child's body and the formation of gender identity in these regulatory regimes.

In his travel narrative *With a Carib Eye*, a text which aims to overturn 'erroneous conceptions about the Caribbean colonies' propagated by exoticist Western writers, Mittelholzer discusses the development of a class system based on complex racial hierarchies in predominantly hybrid societies such as Trinidad, Jamaica and his natal Guyana.⁵⁰ Within the 'coloured middle-class', a diverse, hybrid grouping he describes as a 'great churning kaleidoscope of tints and tangled strands', each family's precise social

⁴⁸ Michael Gilkes, 'Edgar Mittelholzer', in *West Indian Literature*, ed. by Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 127-138 (pp. 127-128).

⁴⁹ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Edgar Mittelholzer, *With a Carib Eye* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), p. 13.

position is determined by the 'governing influences' of complexion and hair type.⁵¹ He explains that '[i]n the Caribbean a coloured man, endowed by nature with the requisite complexion and quality of hair, could hope to "graduate" out of the ranks of the coloured and marry into a white family and so forget his "dark" past'.⁵² In *A Swarthy Boy*, Mittelholzer's account of his birth underlines the way in which colonial Guyanese society constructs physiognomy as a determinant of identity, through the interpretation of skin and hair as markers which fix the mixed-race subject's position on a continuum between the ancestral "'dark" past', and the aspiration of a family's eventual 'graduation' to whiteness. For this reason, Edgar's arrival is greeted by his father as 'an occasion of momentous disappointment':

Himself fair-complexioned with hair of European texture, as were his brothers and sisters (save Anna, the youngest), and his wife also fair-complexioned and European in experience, he had, naturally, assumed that the chances were heavy in favour of a fair-complexioned baby [...] However, there it was. His first born – a swarthy boy! (p. 17)

This passage is revealing of the 'sense of genetic accident' which, as Gilkes observes, structures Mittelholzer's conception of his identity.⁵³ A 'confirmed negrophobe', Edgar's father displays 'resentment' toward his 'swarthy' son: 'I was the Dark One at whom he was always frowning and barking' (p. 17, p. 28). He forms the habit of drilling Edgar in quizzes before an audience of family members, a process in which, Mittelholzer observes, 'he seemed to go out of his way to try to demonstrate what I can only describe as the "compensatory" side of me. I can almost hear him thinking behind scowls: "Oh, well, he may be dark-skinned, but he does seem to have some intelligence"' (p. 21).

In the title, and in the caption to Plate I – a photograph of the young Edgar glowering in a sailor suit, which precedes the text – the issue of the child's problematic complexion is juxtaposed with that of his gender identity, a second preoccupation of Mittelholzer's narrative. The photograph in Plate I is glossed as the image of '[a] swarthy boy – scowling at the camera because he was forced to wear an effeminate silk bow

⁵¹ Mittelholzer, *With a Carib Eye*, pp. 58-59.

⁵² Mittelholzer, *With a Carib Eye*, p. 18.

⁵³ Gilkes, *Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel*, p. 34.

instead of a tie'. Identifying the occasion of this photograph as one of his most significant childhood memories, Mittelholzer recalls proudly posing in the sailor costume and his father's tie: 'I felt daring and sailorly. I felt I was about to embark on a dashing escapade aboard a dreadnought [...] I not only looked like a sailor but I was wearing a man's tie. I felt like strutting around and throwing out my chest'. His mother, however, insisted on replacing the tie with a 'puffy silk cravat-cum-bow monstrosity', injuring the boy's 'masculine pride' (p. 55).

As maternal supervision of the child's body is antagonistic to Edgar's emergent gender identity, the vexed dynamics of the mother-son relationship stem from the family's response to the boy's 'swarthinness'. The mother assumes an overly protective role as she seeks to compensate for his father's resentful attitude; Mittelholzer recalls that '[i]n these days I did not feel like a boy, and it was because my mother treated me with a sentimentality peculiarly her own' (p. 28). Her 'sentimentality' takes the form of a fetishisation of Edgar's hair, whose texture is an 'important consolation' for the family as it betrays '[n]o sign of any negroid kinks' (pp. 17-18):

Like my father himself, she was enough of a negrophobe to treasure my dead-straight European-texture hair. The result was that she let my hair grow long right to my waist like a girl's so that she could show me off to her friends. My sister and I frolicked around with long dark pigtails, and a stranger could easily have mistaken us both for girls. (p. 28)

The narrator recalls the mother's cultivation of his 'compensatory' hair as an assault on his innate masculinity, compounded by her humiliating practice of administering a 'thrashing or a slapping' for 'the slightest misdemeanour'. While 'soft and sentimental, tender and considerate to the point of molly-coddling', Edgar's mother is also a 'stern chastiser', flogging her children with a dreaded whip, 'Tickle Toby', she reserves for the purpose (p. 30). When the father loses his job, relinquishing paternal 'authority' as the family move in with the mother's relatives, this maternal regime becomes entrenched; Mittelholzer states that his father 'allowed my mother and the other women in the home to assume complete control over us children' (pp. 32-33). The Coburg Street house is ruled by 'the stern discipline embodied in my mother and aunts and grandmother',

collectively designated 'The Authorities' (p. 32, p. 101). Representing both inflexible authority and a 'mollycoddling mire' as they meticulously regulate the boy's diet, clothing and bodily functions, Edgar's female relatives are characterised in terms of gender stereotype. The boy is a 'Warrior-tiger [...] determined not to be smothered', pitted against an excessively 'emotional' mother whose 'capacity for logic has always been poor', and aunts who are given to 'irritable outbursts' and 'weak, weeping displays' (p. 29, p. 48); '[i]t was at home', Mittelholzer declares, 'that my masculinity was perpetually under attack' (pp. 127-128).

If the antagonism between Edgar and The Authorities is represented as a stereotypical conflict of gender, the text's opposition between a feminised domestic space and the Guyanese landscape nevertheless hints at more profound issues of postcolonial identity. For young Edgar, exploration of the natural environment promises an autonomy won through freedom of movement, yet the mother restricts his access to a terrain she perceives to be fraught with peril. Opportunities to play in the yard are strictly regulated, 'because we might get wet in the rain and contract colds or because the sun would give us fever'; Edgar must wear shoes at all times to prevent the incursion of chigoe fleas (p. 46). Despite his triumph over The Authorities in joining 'Lady Davson's Own', an 'elite' scout troop whose collective complexion is 'olive, with many touches of pink', the mother restricts his participation in the 'manly, Scout-like' pursuits of outdoor activities and expeditions, fearing the risks of sunstroke, drowning or illness (pp. 93-95). Edgar idolises Uncle Bishop, a '[f]ilm-star-handsome' figure who manages a plantation 'high up the Canje Creek', in proximity, Mittelholzer notes, to the site of the 1763 Berbice slave insurrection (p. 48, p. 50). In contrast to the emasculated figure of Edgar's father, Bishop is a 'gentleman with a he-man manner' who embodies an ideal of masculine physical prowess and heroic adventure:

He led expeditions into the jungle, and was absent for weeks and months at a time, engaged in timber-cutting and balata-bleeding. He travelled in tent-boats, in canoes and on rafts, in launches. A man of romance and adventure who had encounters with snakes and wild animals and Indians [...] and risked his life over dangerous rapids and falls. (p. 48)

It is this model of colonial manhood, premised on notions of the mastery of a wild interior, with which Edgar identifies, yet his aspirations toward such a career are threatened by the mother's protective regime. Escorted home from school under an umbrella which shields him from the sun, he is condemned as a 'softy' by schoolmates who nickname him 'Umbrella Boy' and 'Mother's Baby Boy' (p. 63, p. 74, p. 64).

The umbrella is significant in its implication of an attempt to guard against a further darkening of Edgar's skin, the sign which betrays the 'dark past' of the near-white family. Just as the father publicly strokes and praises his son's 'European' hair, and subjects him to quizzes designed to prove his 'intelligence', the mother's segregation of Edgar from the Guyanese landscape, as she confines him within the genteel space of a middle-class home furnished with epergnes, antimacassars, pianos and 'reproductions of Lord Leighton's classical-sentimental Victorian masterpieces', suggests a 'compensatory' effort intended to secure the European identity to which the family seeks to 'graduate' (p. 27). As the signifier of a problematic racial inheritance, the young subject's 'swarthinness' is at the heart of the parental regime of corporeal discipline which Mittelholzer remembers as a constraint on his emergent masculinity, and the defining theme of his childhood.

In *Out of Place*, Said also examines the implications of a familial 'contest over my body' which dominated both his childhood and his later sense of self, as his parents constructed an elaborate system for the 'administering of reforms and physical punishment' (p. 66). While Edward's father, Wadie or William Said, 'represent[s] a devastating combination of power and authority, rationalistic discipline, and repressed emotions', his mother, Hilda, exhibits a 'deep-seated and unresolved ambivalence toward the world, and me', alternating between an 'empowering, sunlike smile' and 'sustained frowning dismissiveness'. Together, Said observes, they 'tried to create a world very much like a gigantic cocoon, into which I was introduced' (pp. 12-13). Within this insular environment the child's body is a focus of anxious scrutiny, controlled by a series of 'reforms and strictures' which the young Edward assumes are merely 'elements of the discipline that one went through as part of growing up' (p. 63):

It was my father who gradually took the lead in trying to reform, perhaps even to remake, my body, but my mother rarely demurred, and regularly brought my body to a doctor's attention. As I look back on my sense of my body from age eight on, I can see it locked in a demanding set of repeated corrections, all of them ordered by my parents, most of them having the effect of turning me against myself. "Edward" was enclosed in an ugly, recalcitrant shape with nearly everything wrong with it. (p. 62)

Through the years of his childhood and youth, Said states, he was 'very much controlled' by the father whose 'methods were to shape me', and equally 'imprinted and guided' by his mother, 'my closest and most intimate companion for the first twenty-five years of my life' (p. 12). Bryan S. Turner comments that the 'struggle of identities' portrayed in *Out of Place* is 'classically Freudian', as the 'patriarchal father', whose 'commercial success and regimented asceticism represented a permanent challenge to Said's emerging identity', is 'offset by the sympathetic and intellectual figure of [Said's] mother'. Yet this Freudian scenario of 'familial exile' is complicated by its imbrication with an account of cultural and political exile, as the young subject becomes aware of his conflicted identity as a Palestinian child holding American citizenship who attends British and American schools.⁵⁴

Said interprets the disciplinary regime of his childhood as his parents' response to the insecurity of an 'anomalous national status' (p. 128). He pinpoints its origin in a specific moment of postcolonial history, as in 1942, abandoning Cairo due to their wartime vulnerability as American citizens, the family passed a 'long, perplexing and strange summer in Ramallah', where his father experienced a nervous breakdown. As 'the core of the disciplinary structure devised for my life emerged out of the depredations of 1942', he became classified as 'a thoroughgoing problem boy for whom one unpleasant antidote after another was devised' (pp. 26-28). Through this 'extreme and rigid regime of discipline', Said states, 'I became "Edward", a creation of my parents', whose:

⁵⁴ Bryan S. Turner, 'Edward Said and the Exilic Ethnic: On Being Out of Place', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17, 6 (2000), 125-129 (p. 127).

creation was made necessary by the fact that his parents were themselves self-creations: two Palestinians with dramatically different backgrounds and temperaments living in colonial Cairo as members of a Christian minority within a large pond of minorities, with only each other for support [...] Could “Edward’s” position ever be anything but out of place?’ (p. 19)

While Edward’s maternal relatives are firmly rooted in Levantine culture, Wadie, having acquired U.S. citizenship, ‘always averred that America was his country’. Deriving from his identification with American culture, Wadie’s ‘practice of self-making with a purpose’ extends to a systematic attempt to mould the character of his son (p. 8, p. 10).

In *Out of Place*, as in *A Swarthy Boy*, the troubled dynamics of parent-child relationships reflect broader problems of postcolonial identity. Attributing Edward’s deficiencies to his maternal ancestry, Wadie determines that he must ‘be broken in his course, reeducated, re-formed to be less like’ the maternal uncles he resembles (p. 18). Hilda responds with ambivalence to this ‘child who confirmed the worst of her lineage’, her indulgent praise of Edward’s ‘pretty’ mouth and ‘beautiful’ face prompting Wadie to suspect ‘that I might be a “sissy”’ (p. 18, pp. 66-67). The boy’s perceived inheritance of maternal traits leads to a critique of his masculinity, as his ‘weakness’ is defined against the father’s ‘moral and physical’ strength (p. 55). Said recalls being rebuked for his ‘shamingly awkward’ performance in a Cub Scout football match:

I do not know whether my feelings of physical incompetence, which came from a sense that neither my body nor my character naturally inhabited my assigned spaces in life, derived from this quite unpleasant ordeal at my father’s hands, but certainly I have always found myself tracing these feelings back to that event. Body and character were, I began to discover, interchangeable so far as his scrutiny was concerned. (p. 50)

Wadie points to the strongman Eugene Sandow, whose poses imitated those of classical statues, as an appropriate model of physical prowess for Edward (p. 65).⁵⁵ His scheme for

⁵⁵ Sandow is also cited in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Seven Summers* as an exemplar of a masculine physical ideal. Referring to his restricted diet in childhood, Anand comments that: ‘[n]o wonder that none of us grew to be the Eugene Sandow we longed to be from looking at the pictures of this giant in my father’s dumb-bell

his son's muscular development, involving the prescription of sports, exercises, chest expanders and a truss, coheres around a colonial ideal of the athletic, Western male body; while the blame for Edward's unsatisfactory posture is fixed on a maternal ancestry identified with the Arab world, the truss which will correct his 'Badr family humpback' is, tellingly, purchased in New York (pp. 63-64). Yet Edward fails to distinguish himself at a colonial exercise club which teaches "'fair play" and "sportsmanship"', feeling 'awkward and forlorn' as 'the only non-English boy' (p. 48). When Wadie compels him to wear a 'ridiculous' pith helmet in the height of summer, he cuts a despairing figure as a parodic image of colonial manhood (p. 155). Attending a performance of *Hamlet* in Cairo, he is 'disheartened' by his perception of:

physical incongruencies between myself and the men, whose green and crimson tights set off fully rounded, perfectly shaped legs, which seemed to mock my spindly, shapeless legs, my awkward carriage, my unskilled movements. Everything about Gielgud and the blond man who played Laertes communicated an ease and confidence of being – they were English heroes, after all – that reduced me to inferior status, curtailing my capacities for enjoying the play. (p. 53)

The young subject's feelings of 'awkwardness' and 'inferior status' reflect a fraught sense of embodiment, bound up with his problematic identity as 'an American inside whom lurked another Arab identity from which I derived no strength, only embarrassment and discomfort' (p. 90).

Discussing his childhood relationship with his mother, Said remarks that:

It was my mother's often melting warmth which offered me a rare opportunity to be the person I felt I truly was in contrast to the "Edward" who failed at school and sports, and could never match the manliness my father represented. And yet my relationship with her grew more ambivalent, and her disapproval of me became far more emotionally devastating to me than my father's virile bullying and reproaches. (p. 56)

exercise book'. Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Summers: A Memoir*, ed. and introd. by Saros Cowasjee (1951; New Delhi: Penguin, 2005), p. 220.

Hilda's 'extraordinary physical embrace of her children', as she offers abundant 'kisses, caresses, and hugs' and 'expostulations of delight about our beauty and physical endowments', is matched by the contrary habit of delivering 'devastating negative commentary on our appearance' (pp. 61-62). As the only son, Edward's body becomes the special focus of Hilda's maternal affection and praise, yet also her anxiety and disapproval. She closely supervises his relationship with his sisters, the door of Rosy and Jean's room signifying 'the definitive physical as well as emotional gulf that slowly opened between us' (p. 58). While the siblings were at this stage ignorant of the 'abyss [...] separating a boy's body from a girl's', Said recalls that the 'unstated prohibition on physical contact' heightened their 'sense of the body's peculiar, and problematic, status' (p. 59). He suggests that Hilda:

must have understood sibling rivalry very well and the temptations of polymorphous perversity all around us. But I also suspect that she played and worked on these impulses and drives: she kept us apart by highlighting our differences, [...] she made us feel that she alone was our reference point, our most trusted friend, our most precious love [...] Everything between me and my sisters had to pass through her [...] (p. 59)

This process, he proleptically observes, fostered a sense of 'inviolable union' with his mother which would have 'shattering results' for his later relationships with women (p. 221). The 'intimate' yet troubled connection between mother and son invites a Freudian reading which is, once more, complicated by postcolonial issues. Comparing Hilda's manipulations to a system of colonial rule, Said states that between he and his sisters '[t]here was no common emotional space. Instead there were bilateral relationships with my mother, as colony to metropole, a constellation only she could see as a whole' (p. 60).

While *Out of Place* has been read as a 'classically Freudian' narrative, *Annie John* is often interpreted as a paradigmatic account of female adolescence and the mother-daughter relationship. As Gilmore observes, its critical reception was dominated by a 'rhetoric of universality, accessibility, and transcendence' exemplified by a reviewer's comment which appears on the jacket of most editions: 'Coming of age in Antigua – so touching and familiar ... it could be happening to any of us, anywhere, any time, any

place'.⁵⁶ Portraying the postcolonial location as the colourful backdrop to a universal story of childhood and adolescence, this statement is problematic in view of Kincaid's stated concern with 'the wreck and the ruin and the greed' of Caribbean history.⁵⁷ While critics including J. Brooks Bonson, H. Adlai Murdoch and Helen Pyne Timothy discuss issues of female embodiment in *Annie John*, a reliance on European psychoanalytic perspectives, particularly the theory of the mother-daughter relationship advanced by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, limits their attempts to address the specific Caribbean, postcolonial context in which Kincaid's text is grounded.⁵⁸ Referring to Chodorow's model, Timothy asserts that '[o]bviously, these stages of psychic development take place within any culture, and presumably they provide evidence for a metatheory that has universal application'.⁵⁹ Victoria Burrows, however, questions this presumption, pointing out that Chodorow's theory exemplifies a western feminist tendency to overlook the way in which '[t]he mother-daughter relationship is always already embedded in a socio-cultural and racialised context', thus representing a problematic reference point for Kincaid's narratives of Caribbean childhood.⁶⁰ Many existing readings of *Annie John*, furthermore, rely on somewhat reductive notions of the autobiographical; Bonson enumerates correspondences between the text and Kincaid's own life before concluding that the author's own mother must be a 'contemptuous and abusive woman'.⁶¹ As Gilmore observes, discussion of Kincaid's work has frequently

⁵⁶ Leigh Gilmore, 'Endless Autobiography?: Jamaica Kincaid and Serial Autobiography', in *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*, ed. by Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 211-231 (p. 214).

⁵⁷ Kincaid, quoted in Selwyn R. Cudjoe, 'Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview', in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. by Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990), pp. 215-232 (p. 224).

⁵⁸ J. Brooks Bonson, *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 66; H. Adlai Murdoch, 'Severing the [M]Other Connection: The Representation of Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*', *Callaloo*, 13, 2 (1990), 325-340; Helen Pyne Timothy, 'Adolescent Rebellion and Gender Relations in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*', in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. by Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990), pp. 233-242.

⁵⁹ Timothy, pp. 233-234.

⁶⁰ Victoria Burrows, *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 3.

⁶¹ J. Brooks Bonson, *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 66; H. Adlai Murdoch, 'Severing the [M]Other Connection: The Representation of Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*', *Callaloo*, 13, 2 (1990), 325-340.

centred on its 'autobiographical' nature, yet '[i]n the hands of some of her critics, this description tends to flatten rather than expand interpretive possibilities'.⁶²

In *Annie John* the relationship between the young subject and her mother, also named Annie, is negotiated through the body. On the cusp of adolescence, the girl mourns the loss of a childhood 'paradise' premised on a profound physical identification between mother and daughter (p. 25). In contrast to Mittelholzer and Said, Kincaid initially represents the parent's proprietorial care of the child's body as an affirmation of a dyadic identity. Mother and daughter wear 'dresses made out of the same cloth' (p. 25). Annie Senior supervises the child's diet, chews food for her, and 'examin[es] my body from limb to limb, making sure nothing unusual was taking place' (p. 87). In an *obeah* practice designed to protect her from harm, the narrator recalls, 'my mother would bathe different parts of my body; then she would do the same to herself' (p. 14). Together they clean the trunk which carried Annie Senior's possessions when she left home, now used to store mementoes of Annie's babyhood. In this ritual, the life-narratives and bodily identities of mother and daughter merge, as the mother recounts stories of her pregnancy and Annie's infancy:

As she told me the stories, I sometimes sat at her side, leaning against her, or I would crouch on my knees behind her back and lean over her shoulder. As I did this, I would occasionally sniff at her neck, or behind her ears, or at her hair [...] At times I would no longer hear what it was she was saying; I just liked to look at her mouth as it opened and closed over words, or as she laughed. How terrible it must be for all the people who had no one to love them and no one whom they loved so, I thought. (p. 22)

Gilmore observes that in this way, 'intercorporeality [...] emerges as a defining feature of self-representation' in *Annie John*, as in Kincaid's account of the mother-daughter relationship, 'the body becomes a central locus for working through personae, and related to the process of becoming a person'.⁶³

When Annie turns twelve, her physical maturation, which she perceives as a process of 'turn[ing] into a strange animal', prompts the mother to initiate the separation

⁶² Gilmore, 'Endless', p. 214.

⁶³ Gilmore, 'Endless', pp. 218-219.

of their previously entwined identities (p. 25). Annie Senior's decree that the two can no longer wear matching dresses, as '[y]ou just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me', launches her on a traumatic trajectory of individuation (p. 26). Contemplating her unfamiliar body in the mirror, Annie considers 'begging my mother to ask my father if he could build for me a set of clamps into which I could screw myself at night before I went to sleep and which would surely cut back on my growing' (p. 27). She is informed 'that I was on the verge of becoming a young lady, so there were quite a few things I would have to do differently' (p. 26). As Annie is 'launched into young-ladyness', idyllic 'days spent in perfect harmony with my mother' are replaced by lessons in feminine accomplishments such as 'manners', how to 'meet and greet important people in the world', and piano-playing (pp. 27-28). Echoing the mother's concern with propriety in *A Swarthy Boy*, Annie Senior's regime for her daughter's induction into society, as Brenda F. Berrian observes, demonstrates the 'internalization of imported Victorian rules of etiquette' by a colonial Caribbean middle-class.⁶⁴ In an interview with Selwyn R. Cudjoe, Kincaid, discussing the way in which her relationship to her parents is refracted in *Annie John*, remarks: 'the convention of being this "well-behaved child" ... I just couldn't do it'.⁶⁵ Moira Ferguson comments that the text 'politicizes the concept of the well-behaved child', a statement which is illuminated by Kincaid's declaration, in her postcolonial polemic *A Small Place*, that 'good behaviour is the proper posture of the weak, of children'.⁶⁶

The body is a focus for the codes of 'good behaviour' through which Annie is to be remade in the image of proper colonial femininity. Seeking to evade her mother's 'watchful gaze', she gravitates towards the forbidden company of the Red Girl, of whose unkempt appearance Annie Senior disapproves (p. 62). While Annie must take 'a full bath every morning and a sponge bath every night', ensure her uniform is 'clean and creaseless', and keep her shoes 'polished to a nice shine', the Red Girl refuses to bathe, change her dress, comb her hair or clean her teeth, and plays marbles only with boys (p.

⁶⁴ Brenda F. Berrian, 'Snapshots of Childhood Life in Jamaica Kincaid's Fiction', in *Arms Akimbo: African Women in Contemporary Literature*, ed. by Janice Lee Liddell and Yakini Belinda Kemp (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), pp. 103-116 (p. 110).

⁶⁵ Cudjoe, p. 219.

⁶⁶ Moira Ferguson, *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 48; Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 30.

58). On their first meeting, the Red Girl climbs a guava tree 'better than any boy', winning Annie's adoration as 'I had never seen a girl do this before' (p. 56). In *Out of Place*, Said recollects his childhood obsession with Kalita, a 'girl fakir' described in the *Collins Junior Book of Knowledge* who is 'able to do amazing, unimaginable things with her body', her contortions 'at odds with nature' embodying resistance to 'the positive laws of respectability and decency under which I chafed' (p. 32). Annie's erotic attraction to the Red Girl similarly defies laws of propriety enforced by a parental regime: 'I [...] worshipped the ground her unwashed feet walked on' (p. 59). She fetishises her friend's 'matted and tangled' red hair, which looks 'amphibian and alive', the fingernails which hold 'ten anthills of dirt', her 'big, broad, flat feet' which are 'naked to the bare ground', her disintegrating clothing, and her 'unbelievable, wonderful smell, as if she had never taken a bath in her whole life' (p. 57). Chinmoy Banerjee observes that Annie's idolisation of the Red Girl represents a 'transgression and revaluation of colonial norms', as the girl's defining physical attributes are all 'marks of the colonial pariah'.⁶⁷ Her unshod feet suggest not only uninhibited movement, but a specific, regional form of resistance to colonial oppression; in Caribbean slave communities, Katrak notes, the practice of deliberately allowing chigoes to hatch in the feet, forcing absence from work, was a bodily strategy of resistance.⁶⁸ In *Annie John*, Kincaid's representation of a subjectivity formed in conflict with a regime of control focused on the body invites an allegorical reading as a broader drama of Caribbean, postcolonial identity.

Smith asserts that the woman writer 'carries a history of the body with her as she negotiates the autobiographical "I," for autobiographical practice is one of those cultural occasions when the history of the body intersects the deployment of subjectivity'.⁶⁹ An analogous argument might be made in relation to postcolonial life-writing. In each of the texts under discussion, the account of a parental disciplinary regime, through which the child subject's body is gendered and ethnically marked, gestures towards the 'corporeal processes' which have underwritten colonial rule. In *Annie John*, *A Swarthy Boy* and *Out*

⁶⁷ Chinmoy Banerjee, 'The Erotics of Resistance and Postcolonial Self-Fashioning in *Annie John*', *ARIEL*, 33, 2 (2002), 33-56 (p. 42).

⁶⁸ Katrak, p. 62.

⁶⁹ Smith, pp. 22-23.

of *Place*, autobiographical identities are inflected by a history of empire which is also a history of bodies.

ii) The child's body and the colonial body politic

Reviewing *Out of Place*, Edmund White comments on the text's Foucauldian tone, comparing Said's account of the disciplinary regime of his childhood to Foucault's analysis of the 'systems invented by a reform school for invading and colonizing a little truant's mind'.⁷⁰ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the modern subject is incorporated into the body politic through 'a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge'.⁷¹ Butler takes issue with Foucault's notion of 'a body totally imprinted by history', a phrase which, she observes, assumes 'a body prior to its cultural inscription'.⁷² She argues that the body is more profitably understood 'not as a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained'.⁷³ For Butler, Smith comments, the body represents:

a sorting mechanism whereby the culturally dominant and the culturally marginalized are assigned their "proper" places in the body politic. This politics of the body as border/limit determines the complex relationship of individuals to their bodies, to the bodies of others, to fantasies of the founding subject, and to the body politic.⁷⁴

Despite their differences, both Foucault's and Butler's models emphasise the operations of power as they examine the ways in which relationships between individual subjects and wider society are mediated through the body. In my introduction, I discussed the

⁷⁰ Edmund White, Review of *Out of Place*, *Raritan*, 19, 3 (2000), 135-143 (p. 137).

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 25-28.

⁷² Foucault, quoted in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 129-130.

⁷³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.

⁷⁴ Smith, p. 10.

argument that the idea of childhood, and of the child's embodiment in particular, provides a discursive support for the unruly body politic of empire. Castañeda refers to Herbert Spencer's 1860 assertion that '[a]s the child's features – flat nose, forward-opening nostrils, large lips, wide-apart eyes, absent frontal sinus, &c. – resemble those of the savage, so, too do his instincts'. As the child's body served as a figure for 'other kinds of bodies in the time and space of a "global" human history', she argues, the idea of childhood was used 'to embody [colonialism's] myriad forms of inequality, its global hierarchies'.⁷⁵ Wallace also suggests that the idea of the child as an unformed entity, characterised by 'a subjectivity and a corporeality in need of discipline', paved the way for construction of the colonial relationship through 'parent-child metaphors'.⁷⁶ In Kincaid's, Mittelholzer's and Said's narratives of childhood, representations of corporeal discipline also function as analyses of this colonial discourse of filiation through which subjects are incorporated into the body politic of empire.

Said identifies education as a major theme of *Out of Place*, commenting that 'schools have a privileged place in the story, microcosms of the cities or towns where my parents found these schools and put me' (p. xvi). This statement establishes a link between the child's subjugation to parental and institutional authority, and a parallel between the organisation of schools and the structures of the wider societies they serve. Gezira Preparatory School represents a microcosm of the colonial order, where 'Britannia ruled supreme, and all of us took it for granted' (p. 82). Describing GPS as 'an organized system set up as a colonial business by the British' whose atmosphere was one of 'unquestioning assent framed with hateful servility', Said states that the institution 'gave me my first extended contact with colonial authority in the sheer Englishness of its teachers and many of its students' (p. 42). While an 'invisible cordon' separates Edward from a contingent of English pupils with 'enviably authentic names, blue eyes, and bright definitive accents', the school's 'mongrel-like collection' of local pupils are 'treated as if we should (or *really* wanted to) be English' (p. 42, pp. 38-39, original emphasis). The physical regimentation of pupils is bound up with the promotion of a 'mystifyingly English' curriculum, as 'lessons in English glory' are interspersed with exercises in

⁷⁵ Castañeda, p. 21, p. 14., p. 40.

⁷⁶ Wallace, p. 173, p. 175.

writing, posture, and recitation (p. 39). Tiffin observes that in colonial education systems, the practice of recitation is 'metonymic of the wider processes of colonialist interpellation, in the reproduction, at the colonial site, of the locally embodied yet paradoxically disembodied imperial "voice," in a classic act of obedience'.⁷⁷ Failing to excel at these drills, Edward is admonished for his disorderliness, fidgeting, and failure to sit up straight.

Colonial authority is personified by the headmaster of GPS, Mr Bullen, who whips Edward for a minor transgression. Said states that this occasion 'embodied my first public experience of an impersonal "discipline"':

The pain I felt was less than the anger that flushed through me with every one of Bullen's silently administered strokes. Who was this ugly brute to beat me so humiliatingly? And why did I allow myself to be so powerless, so "weak" – the word was beginning to acquire considerable resonance in my life – as to let him assault me with such impunity? (p. 42)

In an unsympathetic review, Ian Buruma singles out the description of this event as 'a "colonial" experience' as an example of what he considers Said's problematic tendency to draw 'political parallels' from 'personal experiences of alienation'.⁷⁸ In *Out of Place* the family home becomes an extension of the colonial classroom, as institutional corporal punishment converges with a parental regime in which the formation of 'character' necessitates the discipline of the recalcitrant child's 'weak' body. The injustice of the whipping is compounded by the parents' endorsement of Bullen's actions; recalling that 'there was not in their tone the slightest objection to the indecency of the punishment', Said observes that Wadie 'had in fact paid the Bullens to treat me in this way' (p. 42).

The relationship between parental and institutional control of the child's body appears more complex in the light of an 'even more acute, and much more explicit, colonial encounter' occurring shortly after the whipping. Crossing the fields of the Gezira Club, Edward is challenged by the pith-helmeted secretary Mr Pilley, the father of one of

⁷⁷ Helen Tiffin, 'Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid', *Callaloo*, 16, 4 (1993), 909-921 (p. 914).

⁷⁸ Ian Buruma, 'Misplaced Person', *New York Times Book Review*, 3 October 1999, 10 (p. 10).

his GPS contemporaries, who asks: “What are you doing here, boy?” When Edward protests that he is merely ‘going home’, and that his family are members of the club, Pilley insists that ‘you’re not supposed to be here’, ordering him to ‘get out, and do it quickly’ as ‘Arabs aren’t allowed here, and you’re an Arab!’ (p. 44). Referring to Sartre’s observation on ‘the power of the “look of the other” to define and categorise the self’, Paul B. Armstrong remarks that in this incident, ‘the conflict for the boy is that he discovers an affiliation that he had not felt (his identity as an Arab) by being refused recognition for an affiliation that he has taken for granted (membership in his father’s club)’.⁷⁹ An even closer point of reference would be Fanon’s account of the moment in which the white child names the black man as a ‘Negro’, in which a ‘racial epidermal schema’ becomes understood as the sole determinant of the colonised subject’s identity.⁸⁰ Said asserts that he was first made conscious of his ethnicity, and its political implications, in his encounter with Pilley: ‘[i]f I hadn’t thought of myself as an Arab before, I now directly grasped the significance of the designation as truly disabling’. While Wadie’s endorsement of Bullen’s punishment represented complicity between parental and institutional power, the father’s ‘noncommittal’ response to the later incident betrays the limitations a colonial order imposes on his own patriarchal authority. Pilley’s admonishment ‘boy’ denotes not only Edward’s youth, but his racial identity as an ‘Arab’. Thus aligned as subordinates, father and son enter into a ‘fatalistic compact [...] about our own inferior status’ (p. 44).

Said observes that during his secondary education at Victoria College, an institution which was ‘designed to be the Eton of the Middle East’, a ‘putative colonial elite [...] was being schooled in the ways of a British imperialism that had already expired’ (p. 180, p. 185). VC’s pupils are subjected to a rigorous programme of cultural colonisation, compelled to learn about ‘English life and letters’ as the school ‘inculcated and naturalized the ideology of empire’ (p. 186, p. 181). A collective sense of resistance develops among a local student body confronted by English teachers; Said recalls that in an educational culture where ‘[b]eing and speaking Arabic were delinquent activities’, ‘we all felt that we were inferiors pitted against a wounded colonial power that was

⁷⁹ Paul B. Armstrong, ‘Being “Out of Place”: Edward W. Said and the Contradictions of Cultural Differences’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 64, 1 (2003), 97-121 (p. 109).

⁸⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 112.

dangerous and capable of inflicting harm on us' (p. 186). As the boys unite 'in group solidarity as "wogs" confronting our variously comic and/or maimed teachers as cruel, impersonal, and authoritarian Englishmen', Edward achieves 'a kind of bad eminence as a rabble-rousing troublemaker', a position he 'regard[s] as a form of resistance to the British' (p. 183, p. 186). In a second incident of corporal punishment which marks a threshold in the young subject's consciousness of colonial oppression, he receives a 'truly harsh' beating, administered by a secretary under the orders of the headmaster, who has 'subcontracted out to a local' (p. 187). Edward is suspended from VC when his 'delinquency' culminates in a physical tussle with his teacher Mr. Lowe. Walking home in disgrace, he perceives himself to be 'dangerously free' in his liberation from the strictures of school, as he 'experience[s] a floating, literally utopian sensation of not being there, of being disembodied, relieved of all my customary encumbrances, obligations, restraints' (p. 210). This state, however, is shortlived, as he is whipped by Wadie on his return. The subject's desire for the utopian promise of a disembodied identity, free of material encumbrances, underlines the deeply problematic role of the body in Said's text.

Kincaid's narrative also implies that in postcolonial life-writing, the personal cannot be neatly separated from the political. In an interview, she remarks that in the Antigua of her childhood, the colonial situation was 'so normal that we no longer noticed it. The better people were English and that was life'. In the context of a culture that was 'beyond alienation', she remarks, '[i]t was amazing that I could notice politics the way I did, because most of those who took notice did so in some sort of world context [...] I took notice of it in a personal way and I didn't place it within the context of political action. I almost made a style out of it'.⁸¹ In common with *Out of Place*, *Annie John* centres on a child protagonist who is exceptionally aware of the colonial order, as the narrative charts Annie's increasing recognition of the inequalities of power which structure the world she has previously perceived as a 'paradise'.

In chapter two, 'The Circling Hand', Annie's crisis of individuation, with the 'young-lady business', is compounded when she witnesses her mother and father in bed,

⁸¹ Donna Perry, 'An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid', in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), pp. 492-509 (p. 497).

having rushed home from Sunday School in the hope that her 'certificate for best student' will enable her to 'reconquer' her mother's affections (p. 30). In Kincaid's representation of the primal scene, the child is transfixed by the image of the mother's hand 'making a circular motion' on the father's back. The hand is troubling in its simultaneous appearance of the familiar and alien: 'white and bony, as if it had long been dead and had been left out in the elements', it 'seemed not to be her hand, and yet it could only be her hand, so well did I know it' (p. 30). As in *Out of Place*, postcolonial issues complicate the psychoanalytic reading, as the detail of the hand's disturbing whiteness suggests an identification of the mother with the colonial power.

Like Said, Kincaid focuses on the classroom as a primary site for the formation of colonial subjectivity; Ferguson observes that the episodes dealing with Annie's education suggest 'a transference of maternity from the personal to the political'.⁸² The child's disdain for the icon of Queen Victoria adorning her exercise books, 'a wrinkled-up woman wearing a crown on her head', recalls her earlier, reverent perception that her mother is so 'beautiful', her 'head looked as if it should be on a sixpence' (p. 40, p. 18). Annie comments that Miss Moore, her white teacher, 'looked like a prune left out of its jar for a long time', the simile linked to the earlier image of the mother's blanched and skeletal hand (p. 36). With the description of how Miss Moore's 'throat would beat up and down as if a fish fresh out of water were caught inside' as she surveys the class for evidence of 'wrong' behaviour, the child proceeds to consider whether her teacher might also smell like a fish. Here, Annie echoes Annie Senior's condemnation of the poor hygiene of the English, as her mother has told her that 'they didn't wash often enough, or wash properly', and hence 'smell as if they had been bottled up in a fish'. However, the statement that this 'was the only thing she [the mother] didn't like about English people' reinforces the identification of Annie Senior with the colonial power (p. 36).

While chapter four, 'The Red Girl', details the young subject's resistance to her mother's disciplinary regime, the subsequent chapter, 'Columbus in Chains', focuses on her rebelliousness at school. Despite the fact that she is 'among the worst-behaved in my class', Annie's intelligence has won her a book on Roman Britain and the position of

⁸² Ferguson, p. 50.

prefect (p. 73). As the girls study *A History of the West Indies*, she compares herself to Ruth, an English classmate:

Her ancestors had been the masters, while ours had been the slaves [...] Of course, sometimes, what with our teachers and our books, it was hard for us to tell on what side we really belonged – with the masters or slaves – for it was all history, it was all in the past [...] But we, the descendants of the slaves, knew quite well what had really happened [...] (p. 76)

Annie's precocious understanding of an empire built on exploitation opposes the official historical narrative propagated by her 'teachers' and 'books', which would incorporate Caribbean subjects into the body politic of empire through the benign image of the imperial 'family': as Annie remarks, 'all of us celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday, even though she had been dead a long time' (p. 76). Her favourite picture in the textbook shows a 'dejected and miserable' Columbus with his hands and feet bound, 'fettered in chains attached to the bottom of a ship' (p. 77). Delighted at this image of 'just deserts', Annie is inspired to add the caption – in her best 'Old English lettering – a script I had recently mastered' – "The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go" (pp. 77-78). As Tiffin notes, Annie's interpolation identifies the body as a site for the conflicts which have shaped the postcolonial Caribbean: Columbus's 'strategic disembodiment, his temporary leglessness', is recognised as an apt retribution, as it was this imperial father's act of 'discovery' which set in motion a history of the transportation, 'abuse and erasure' of the bodies of Annie's ancestors.⁸³

Significantly, the phrase Annie writes in her textbook echoes her mother's disparaging comment on Annie's grandfather's 'trouble with his limbs', as Annie Senior also interpreted the humiliation of Pa Chess, a domineering patriarch, as a case of 'just deserts' (p. 78). Yet while the girl's repetition of her mother's words draws attention to parallels between modes of colonial and patriarchal oppression, the tentative alignment of mother and daughter cannot be sustained: Berrian comments that in *Annie John*, '[t]here

⁸³ Tiffin, 'Cold Hearts', p. 912.

is no escape from the colonial classroom within the private home'.⁸⁴ Returning home after Miss Edwards has punished her for 'defaming one of the great men in history', Annie looks forward to the 'tonic' of seeing her mother, only to find that Annie Senior has prepared 'the much hated breadfruit' for her lunch (pp. 82-83). When questioned, the mother insists that 'it was a new kind of rice imported from Belgium, and not breadfruit, mashed and forced through a ricer, as I thought' (p. 83). Elsewhere, Kincaid asserts that with its associations of slavery, '[i]n a place like Antigua the breadfruit is not a food, it is a weapon'; 'Antiguan children sense intuitively the part this food has played in the history of injustice and so they will not eat it'.⁸⁵ After the meal, the mother informs Annie that it was, indeed, breadfruit, deliberately disguised 'so that you would eat it'. Displaying her 'big, shiny, sharp white teeth' as she laughs, Annie Senior is likened to a treacherous 'crocodile' (p. 84). As K.B. Conal Byrne notes, the arguments of critics such as Donna Perry, who interprets the relationship between Annie and her mother as fundamentally 'empowering', premised on a West Indian 'matrilinear bond', fall short in relation to these parallels between maternal and colonial power, in which the mother's tyrannical regulation of the child's body is linked to the mechanisms of control which structure the colony's relationship to an imperial 'motherland'.⁸⁶

Prior to her punishment for defacing the textbook, Annie has been disciplined by both Miss Edward and her mother for her role as the 'ringleader' of a group of girls who spend their Friday recess not in the prescribed modes of 'ladylike recreation', but in playing a game 'of which teachers and parents disapproved'. In this game, the girls link their arms around one another's waists and shoulders to form lines, riotously dancing as they sing calypso songs with 'lots of unladylike words' (pp. 79-81):

Up and down the schoolyard, away from our teachers, we would dance and sing. At the end of recess [...] we were missing ribbons and other ornaments from our hair, the pleats

⁸⁴ Berrian, p. 108.

⁸⁵ Jamaica Kincaid, *My Garden* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 101.

⁸⁶ Donna Perry, 'Initiation in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*', in *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*, ed. and introd. by Lois Parkinson Zamora (London and New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 128-137 (p. 134); K.B. Conal Byrne, 'Under English, Obeah English: Jamaica Kincaid's New Language', *CLA Journal*, 43, 3 (2000), 276-298 (pp. 280-284).

of our linen tunics became unset, the collars from our blouses were pulled out, and we were soaking wet all the way down to our bloomers. (p. 80)

After school, Annie and her friends congregate in a graveyard to compare their breasts, legs and underwear while parading on the ‘tombstones of long-dead people who had been the masters of our ancestors’ (p. 50). Their exhibition of female, adolescent corporeality and sexuality bears out Katrak’s observation that if black women’s bodies are subject to double processes of colonisation, ‘strategic use of those same female bodies’ may be ‘the only available avenue for resistance’.⁸⁷ Katrak illustrates her argument with reference to Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, another autobiographical narrative in which postcolonial conflicts centre on the body of an adolescent girl, as the controlling forces of colonialism intersect with those of indigenous patriarchy. Nyasha’s attempts to escape her overdetermined identity are also conducted through the body, as she refuses to eat and ‘shred[s] her history book between her teeth’, declaring, like Annie, that she is ‘not a good girl’.⁸⁸ Tiffin argues that the schoolyard activities of Annie and her friends represent the possibility of reclaiming the black, female Caribbean body, repressed in the processes of colonial education, as a ground of postcolonial identity. In their illicit ‘game’, the girls’ explorations of their developing bodies signify defiance not only of parental, but of colonial and patriarchal law, as they choose the planters’ tombstones as a theatre in which to ‘sit and sing bad songs, use forbidden words, and, of course, show each other various parts of our bodies’ (p. 80).⁸⁹ The girls’ disobedient practices move towards a refiguring of the body in its function as a marker of the ‘boundaries’ which structure the imperial body politic.

The role of the body as a social ‘boundary’, as individual bodies are categorised in terms of meanings which are ‘politically signified and maintained’, is made even more explicit in *A Swarthy Boy*, as Mittelholzer examines how skin colour determines each subject’s position in the intricate hierarchy of a heterogeneous colonial culture.⁹⁰ In his novel *A Morning at the Office*, the elaborate floorplan of the office of ‘Essential Products

⁸⁷ Katrak, p. 3.

⁸⁸ Katrak, pp. 121-122; Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (London: Women’s Press, 1997), p. 201.

⁸⁹ Tiffin, ‘Cold Hearts’, pp. 909-912.

⁹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.

Ltd' symbolises this classification of bodies. As Gilkes observes, the office is a microcosm of both the novel's Trinidadian setting and the Caribbean more generally, as the colony's 'pattern of racial and social echelons is repeated in the organisation of the multi-racial staff'.⁹¹ The office is compartmentalised into 'sections' demarcated by a series of gateways, stairs and barriers, mapping onto the social boundaries which place varying degrees of restriction on the company's non-white employees.⁹² The image of a social body structured by racial classifications recurs in *A Swarthy Boy*, as Mittelholzer professes 'empathy' with his father's negative reaction to his birth:

It requires the minimum of effort for me to put myself in his place. In a community like that, at that time, he would have had to be superhuman not to be disappointed. A bleak morning and a sunny, dry afternoon: such is the analogy of contrast that could be applied to a swarthy and a fair complexion in New Amsterdam in the year 1909. (p. 17)

Here, Mittelholzer suggests that his identity was overdetermined by the social meaning of his 'swarthy' at the specific time and place of his birth. This sense of the body's variable cultural construction is reinforced by frequent allusions to historical shifts in the racial/social stratification of Guyanese society: 'Negroes – the men of pure African blood, had not yet qualified as gentlemen' (p. 12); 'those were the days when only a very few East Indians had "emerged" from the plantation swarm of coolies – a people looked down upon socially by the whites and middle-class admixtures'; 'at that time, Portuguese, like East Indians, had not yet qualified as middle-class' (p. 12, p. 33, p. 38).

Smith remarks that '[t]raditional autobiography most often begins in the midst of "flesh and blood," as the autobiographical "I" opens the narrative with the story of origins, with genealogy'.⁹³ In *A Swarthy Boy*, a life-narrative deeply preoccupied with 'origins', the account of Edgar's birth is secondary to the genealogy traced in the first chapter. Herr C. Mittelholzer, a Swiss-German who arrived in Guyana during the eighteenth-century period of Dutch rule, is identified as the founding father in a

⁹¹ Michael Gilkes, 'The Spirit in the Bottle: A Reading of Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office*', *WLWE*, 14, 1 (1975), 237-252 (p. 238).

⁹² Edgar Mittelholzer, *A Morning at the Office* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 20.

⁹³ Smith, p. 127.

patrilineal succession of plantation managers. The history of Mittelholzer's family is bound up with that of Guyana's colonisation, as he refers to the heirloom of a sabre:

The story is that our ancestor used this sabre to defend himself against the negro slaves when he was a fugitive in the jungle during the savage and bloody slave insurrection of 1763. He is reputed to have hacked off the hand of at least one of his attackers and laid out a number of others before eventually winning his way to safety. (p. 11)

A.J. Seymour observes that the Berbice uprising is a continuous presence in Mittelholzer's work, as across his novels and non-fictional texts, he 'always came back to the 1763 Rebellion and to the Berbice River'.⁹⁴ Seymour's comment implies an obsessive return to this violent point of genealogical 'origin', a historical moment which is seen to determine the autobiographer's conflicted inheritance as a hybrid subject. The uprising of 1763 represents a pivotal juncture in Guyanese history, with its date commemorated in postcolonial Guyana's National Day, yet Mittelholzer's account of the 'savage and bloody' insurrection is notable for its identification with the 'besieged' Europeans, underwriting his claim of filiation to white, planter ancestors.

Mittelholzer's great-grandfather Jan Vincent, however, is the significant figure in the autobiographer's genealogy:

There can be no doubt that it was Jan Vincent on his plantation eight miles up-river who, in the early part of the nineteenth century, dropped the pebble that started the ripple of black blood in the family. I have seen a photo of him, and the picture was clear enough to show that he was pure European [...] (p. 11)

Visible in Edgar's physiognomy a century later, this 'ripple' compromises the subject's relationship to a lineage of European colonists. Gilkes comments that in Mittelholzer's work, a 'stern parental image, at once hateful and binding, lay behind his yearning for an Old World culture, and the status he felt he had been denied by a trick of heredity'.⁹⁵ In *A*

⁹⁴ A.J. Seymour, *Edgar Mittelholzer: The Man and His Work: being the text of the 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures* (Georgetown, Guyana: 1968), p. 24.

⁹⁵ Gilkes, *Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel*, p. 34.

Swarthy Boy, the Caribbean subject's connection to a colonial 'parent' culture, rendered tenuous by the complexion which defines him in relation to his 'other' ancestry, is played out through Edgar's relationship to the remote father with whose 'resentment' he professes 'empathy'. As the narrative focuses primarily on the struggle between Edgar and his female relatives, the father recedes as a representative of authority, yet he remains a crucial, ambiguously drawn figure in Mittelholzer's text.

For the young Edgar, excursions to the grounds of the Lutheran church represent rare instances of paternal affection (p. 42). As the other children playing on the lawns are supervised only by their nurses, the middle-class father's regular appearance is seen as an 'unconventional', even 'eccentric' habit, provoking laughter among the black nurses. He duly responds with 'salvos containing the full pent-up fire-power of his negrophobia', which embarrass Edgar, his sister, and their own nurse (p. 42). It was on these fraught occasions, Mittelholzer recalls, that his father:

was chiefly able to communicate with me and my sister. At home he hardly ever glanced at us. He would stroke our heads and murmur: "Goat-hair." Then with a glance towards the nurses: "Not sheep-wool. They have sheep-wool." And he would stroke his own hair and smile and add: "We have goat-hair." (p. 42)

As they shelter under trees which once served as boundary markers for slaves forbidden from approaching the church, the father's fetishisation of his children's 'goat-hair' represents a reaffirmation of his paternal relationship to Edgar and Lucille, and of the family's claim to European ancestry. He catechises his children in the primacy of their 'German blood': 'Just *one* drop of that great blood. Just one drop in your veins, and it makes you different from everyone else. German blood!' (p. 43). In apparent conflict with his representations of a culturally constructed Caribbean body, Mittelholzer's life-narrative reinscribes this paternal rhetoric of genetic determinism, as he ascribes the qualities of 'thoroughness', efficiency and love of 'routine' shared by his father and Aunt Lou – attributes he also claims for his own character – to the family's 'Teutonic' inheritance (p. 43). This identification between father and son, however, is perpetually threatened by the shameful visibility, on the body, of the boy's 'other' ancestry.

Mittelholzer's stated ambition of achieving success in 'writing novels for the people of Britain to read', Gilkes suggests, reflected his colonial desire 'to be recognised and accepted as an individual in his [own] right by a European "parent"'.⁹⁶ If Edgar's relationship to a fair-complexioned, 'negrophobe' patriarch is analogous to the Caribbean writer's problematic relationship to metropolitan culture, the characterisation of the father in *A Swarthy Boy* is tellingly ambivalent. While thorough and disciplined, he is also prone to 'violent tempers' (p. 30). He fails to assume responsibility for his children, neglecting to provide Edgar with the customary guidance when he finishes school (p. 136). Mittelholzer's account of how he chose to learn German during this aimless period, even adding an *umlaut* to his surname to recover its European authenticity, suggests the young subject's desire to impress a distant patriarch: the restoration of the *umlaut* was an act of which his father 'approved' (pp. 137-138). Tellingly, the quest for paternal approval shapes the beginning of the youth's literary career, as Mittelholzer recalls that his 'first serious story' dealt with 'sober, realistic everyday life. I cannot remember anything about the plot, but there were only two characters – a man and his son'. Only after he has received his father's 'favourable' opinion on this story does Edgar begin his campaign to secure the approval of publishers in London (p. 146).

In common with Kincaid's and Said's, Mittelholzer's narrative of childhood engages with a discourse of colonial filiation which has served to shore up the body of empire. His response, however, is markedly different from those of the two later authors; while this Caribbean autobiographer attempts to reinforce his identification with a colonial 'parent' culture, the precariousness of this filial relationship remains written on his very skin.

iii) 'Awkward about and uncertain of my physical identity': Embodiment and autobiographical subjectivity

If, as Eakin suggests, canonical Western autobiographies frequently efface the body in their reliance on Cartesian notions of a 'disembodied' inner self, my analysis so far has

⁹⁶ Gilkes, *Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel*, p. 7.

examined how embodiment emerges as a primary area of concern in the postcolonial life-narratives under discussion. Citing Butler's assertion that from the Cartesian 'belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others *are* their bodies, while the masculine "I" is the noncorporeal soul', Smith observes that the bounded 'inner self' of Western, male canonical autobiography has been defined against an 'Other' conversely associated with exterior, material corporeality.⁹⁷ In this final section of my discussion, I address the relationship between conceptions of the body and the autobiographical self in Kincaid's, Mittelholzer's and Said's life-narratives, in which constructions of postcolonial subjectivity are negotiated in relation to a colonial discourse which has confined non-Western subjects to the limiting category of embodiment.

Discussing the recurrence of 'the ideal of unencumbered physical movement or the refusal of corporeal determinism in Caribbean literature', Dash argues that in a region where the body has represented a primary site of colonial domination, writers have also drawn on 'corporeal imagery' as a resource for reconceptualising postcolonial subjectivities.⁹⁸ If this observation is pertinent to Kincaid's text, no such celebratory reclamation or reinvention of embodied selfhood occurs in *A Swarthy Boy*. While he critiques the way in which Caribbean subjectivities are overdetermined by social/racial classifications premised on 'complexion and quality of hair', Mittelholzer ultimately adheres to the notion of an 'inner self' whose essential identity transcends a worldly dimension of material, embodied experience, seeking to portray social factors as temporary constraints, rather than formative influences, on individual identity.

In a metaphor suggestive of the slippage between the figures of the child and the 'primitive' in colonial discourse, Mittelholzer refers to his younger self as a 'pigmy of no importance', a term which denotes not only the child's diminutive size, but undeveloped subjectivity and lack of agency (p. 52). He describes early childhood as a 'passive' stage in which his essential personality, overwritten by the regulatory regime of a 'body of adults that pushed around pigmies like myself', had yet to emerge (p. 52, p. 62):

when I look back on my childhood my memory of my own identity tends to be swamped by the background scene and the adult figures in it. I see myself as a static dot of light

⁹⁷ Smith, p. 11.

⁹⁸ Dash, p. 24.

eclipsed by the mobile and authoritative glare of grown-ups. I planned nothing for myself, made no decisions, had no responsibilities, was a passive spectator of the events around me [...] (p. 52)

Two early instances of conflict with 'The Authorities' are remembered as moments when 'the tiny static light that was me glowed brighter and bigger – occasions when something awoke in the pigmy and glared around with an intense awareness' (p. 52). When Edgar receives a 'savage walloping' for a misdeed of which he is innocent, 'something awoke in me', as 'I knew I was a person, and a person who had been gravely wronged' (pp. 54-55). Similarly, the incident of the sailor-suit photograph is a confrontation which 'roused the Me that slumbered in the regimented pigmy', as Edgar's inherent masculinity is 'probed and hurt' by his mother's insistence that he wear the 'effeminate' bow (p. 56).

In contending that individual identity is innate, impervious to the external influences of parental and social regulation, Mittelholzer appeals to the dominant, Western conception of autobiographical selfhood discussed by Smith, in which subjectivity is envisioned as a constant, interior core. The narrative is punctuated by asides in which he declaims his 'contempt for the pontifications of psychologists':

People, I am convinced, are born what they are. Environment and "traumatic" experience cannot change character [...] Under the best of conditions, a neurotic man will remain a neurotic. A sane man will still be sane after he has been made to stand on his head for a year. We are each one of us a mass of inherited contradictions and inconsistencies. (p. 30)

Remembering the experience of being confined to the family home while his scout troop explored 'the perils of the Corentyne Coast', he recalls 'the bitterness of that disappointment', yet proceeds to assert that '[n]o moment of disappointment has ever left a positive mark on my character' (p. 96). Much is at stake in the claim that '[e]nvironment and "traumatic" experience cannot change character', as Mittelholzer aims to demonstrate that society's negative response to his 'swarthinness' exerted no impact on his identity. Yet his repeated protestations to this effect, undermined by the evidence of the narrative, suggest the tenuousness of the postcolonial autobiographer's claim to a conventional model of essential, 'inner' subjectivity.

Moreover, an emphasis on heredity as a determinant of identity complicates Mittelholzer's notion of 'interior' selfhood. The declaration that '[t]wo elements have always lived within me' implies that the 'inner self' of a hybrid, postcolonial subject is necessarily a dual, conflicted essence (p. 126). This uneasy sense of an 'Other within' is reflected in the narrative's ambivalent representation of the Guyanese landscape as a site of both desire, as Edgar wishes to emulate the colonial adventures of Uncle Bishop, and menace. Graham Huggan discusses the significance of the interior in Mittelholzer's novel *My Bones and My Flute*, in which a group travelling upriver from New Amsterdam, towards the location of the 1763 uprising, are menaced by ghosts associated with the region's history of slavery and rebellion. Huggan interprets the novel as 'an allegory of Guyana's mixed racial ancestry', in which the ghosts represent an 'insurrection' of the past, forcing the mixed-race Caribbean subjects to acknowledge their 'other', black ancestors.⁹⁹ In *A Swarthy Boy*, similarly, the wild interior lays bare the precariousness of the autobiographer's claim to a European identity. Bishop, the model of colonial masculinity, mysteriously vanishes from his Berbice plantation:

News came that he had died of some bush-sickness. Rumours of all kinds buzzed like nasty flies in the air. One was that he had had a mistress – an Indian girl called Ruby – and that she had poisoned him. Another that the men under him had had a grudge against him and had murdered him. Another that he had contracted blackwater fever. Another hinted that he might have been the victim of necromancy. (p. 68)

The colonial spectres of miscegenation and insurrection, raised by the Guyanese interior, also haunt Mittelholzer's conception of interior subjectivity. A 'dark past' is seen to be contained within Edgar's very 'blood', overdetermining his identity from within. In its fluidity and inescapability, the motif of blood is connected with the narrative's imagery of the 'dirty, muddy' river connecting New Amsterdam to the jungle, whose 'banks consisted of flat, treacherous stretches of soft, oozy mud', in turn associated with the 'mire' of maternal domination Edgar seeks to transcend (p. 112, p. 101). In *With a Carib*

⁹⁹ Graham Huggan, 'Ghost stories, bone flutes, cannibal counter-memory', in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Frances Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iveson (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 126-141 (pp. 128-134).

Eye, Mittelholzer describes a ‘recurring nightmare’ in which he finds himself returned to the New Amsterdam wharf:

a trapped, claustrophobic panic would gradually take possession of me [...] I was only on a visit, I would assure myself [...] Yet, despite this assurance, the trapped feeling would persist, and suddenly I would know, for certain, that all was lost. I *was* trapped. I would stare at Crab Island, the chunk of mud and jungle blocking the estuary, and the realisation would come upon me that I would never get past Crab Island again. I had escaped once. This time I would fail ... And then, with a shudder, I would awake to find myself in Bagshot, Surrey, or in Montreal, Canada, or on the Maxwell Coast of Barbados, and the relief would be tremendous.¹⁰⁰

A Swarthy Boy charts Edgar’s progression from the status of a ‘regimented pigmy’ to the realisation of autonomous subjectivity, a process contingent on escape from the ‘mire’ of his Guyanese childhood, and movement towards a literary career in the metropolitan centre with whose culture he identifies. For Mittelholzer, however, the very exploration of an autobiographical ‘inner self’ raises the problem of the hybrid Caribbean subject’s conflicted racial inheritance; while the adult narrator emphasises his distance from the landscape of his youth, the ‘swarthy boy’ of New Amsterdam remains within the expatriate adult, a foreign body threatening insurrection.

In contrast to Mittelholzer’s narrative, where autobiographical identity appears dependent on a geographical and cultural movement away from the Caribbean and towards Europe, Said states that his ‘main reason’ for writing a memoir of childhood was to ‘bridge the sheer distance in time and place between my life today and my life then’ (p. xvi). He relates this ‘narrative impulse’ to his diagnosis with leukaemia, which prompted not only his first visit to Palestine in forty-five years, but a concerted attempt to reclaim the vanished world of his childhood through memory. A series of ‘returns, attempts to go back to bits of life, or people who were no longer there’ characterised his ‘response to the increasing rigors of my illness’ (p. 215). The composition of his text is directly linked to this experience of physical suffering, as the project provided ‘a structure and a discipline’ during ‘periods of debilitating sickness’ (p. xiii):

¹⁰⁰ Mittelholzer, *With a Carib Eye*, pp. 134-135.

the writing of this memoir and the phases of my illness share exactly the same time, although most traces of the latter have been effaced in this story of my early life. This record of a life and ongoing course of a disease [...] are one and the same, it could be said, the same but deliberately different. (p. 216)

These comments draw attention to the intimate relationship between subjectivity and embodiment in *Out of Place*. Unlike Mittelholzer, Said suggests that the parental regime of corporeal discipline which dominated his childhood exerted a formative influence on his subjectivity. The fragmentation of Edward's family unit, as a fragile grouping of 'Palestinian-Arab-Christian-American shards disassembled by history', is replicated in the 'disassembly' of the child's body, through a series of 'reforms and strictures' in which 'parts of my body came in for almost microscopic, and needlessly intense, supervision' (p. 268, p. 63). His 'face and tongue, back, chest, hands, and abdomen' are in turn singled out as flawed (pp. 62-63). When his gymnastics tutor informed him that his 'midsection was 'not firm enough', Said recalls, '[a]nother tear opened in the relationship to my body. And as I accepted the verdict I internalized the criticism, and became even more awkward about and uncertain of my physical identity' (p. 67). Identifying the child's body as a unreliable, disorganised structure in need of 'reform', the parental disciplinary regime becomes internalised as an armature for Edward's sense of self; Said asserts that 'the danger of not keeping to its various prescriptions produced in me a fear of falling back into some horrible state of total disorder and being lost, and I still have it' (p. 28).

The young subject's sense of his own disordered corporeality becomes an analogy for fractures sustained by the Palestinian national body in the wake of the *nakbah*. Visiting his aunt Nabiha, who works as an advocate for refugees, Edward is struck by 'the lived unhappiness of unhealthy, disoriented people'. Crises of individual health map onto the fragmentation of the nation; Said recalls that '[t]he overall impression I've retained of that time is of an ongoing state of medical emergency', as 'so many of these Palestinian refugees seemed to have lost their health along with their country' (p. 121). In 1948 Edward and his family travel to New York, where Wadie undergoes kidney surgery, a voyage the narrator retrospectively interprets as part of a larger, Palestinian narrative of

exile, loss, and the disintegration of bodies and selves: 'Palestine had fallen, unbeknownst to us our lives were turning us toward the United States, and both my mother and I were starting the process of life and cancer that would end our lives in the New World' (p. 133).

In his study of autobiographical accounts of illness, G. Thomas Couser notes that experience of 'bodily dysfunction tends to heighten consciousness of self and of contingency' in life-writing.¹⁰¹ This observation recalls Said's suggestion that while his illness is 'effaced' as direct subject matter in a narrative concentrating on his childhood and youth, its 'traces' are present in the structures of autobiographical form and subjectivity. In *Out of Place*, the narrator's experience of illness is linked to a 'disassembling' of the very notion of autobiographical identity. Interviewed during the time he was writing the text, Said referred to the 'formative' experience of viewing anatomical models at the Giza museum which detailed the internal effects of various diseases, remarking that 'the idea that one's body conceals within it, in a way that becomes more and more visible, the progress of a disease, a dread sort of decomposing or degenerative or distorting process, is, to me, extremely compelling'.¹⁰² When Wadie is diagnosed with melanoma, the images of these wax models return to Edward, who is 'able in a series of imagined flashes to see his [the father's] body being taken over by a dreadful, creeping invasion of malignant cells, his organs slowly devoured, his brain, eyes, ears and throat torn asunder by this dreadful, almost miasmatic, affliction' (p. 257). This vision of the dissolution of the father's body, which the youth has associated with invulnerable strength, prompts Edward's recognition of the transience of embodiment, home, and identity:

The gravity of his illness acted as an early announcement of my father's and my own mortality and at the same time signaled to me that the Middle Eastern domain he had carved out for us as a home [...] was similarly threatened with discontinuity and evanescence. (p. 261)

¹⁰¹ G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 5.

¹⁰² W.J.T Mitchell, 'The Panic of the Visual: A Conversation with Edward W. Said', in *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*, ed. by Paul A. Bové (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 31-50 (pp. 39-40).

In an interview, Said spoke of the difficulty of 'intellectually mastering' his illness, as physical deterioration confronted him with the feeling that 'I don't have a centre that isn't somehow tied up with this disease'.¹⁰³ Eroding the body's integrity, illness undermines the notion of an interior subjectivity discrete from corporeal experience. As Sawday discusses, the modern Western notion that an essential 'interiority', unaffected by privations of the body, constitutes the defining 'mark of individuality' developed in relationship to a scientific discourse in which anatomists mapped and mastered the territory of the body.¹⁰⁴ For Said, this model of selfhood is destabilised by the insidious progress of disease, breaching boundaries between the 'interior' self and the corporeal 'surface'. In *Out of Place*, as in *A Swarthy Boy*, disintegrative forces are located not only within the body, but within the very fabric of subjectivity.

In a further parallel with Mittelholzer's text, Said's conception of the relationship between subjectivity and embodied, material experience remains ambiguous. In her review, Sara Salih notes that *Out of Place* juxtaposes the idea of the autobiographical subject as 'a construct' with a contradictory appeal to the 'notion of ontological integrity'.¹⁰⁵ Said asserts that through the regime of his childhood he 'became "Edward"', a being 'whose daily travails a quite different but quite dormant inner self was able to observe' (p. 19). This "Edward" is a 'false, even ideological entity', defined by his acute awareness of a recalcitrant body which is, in turn, the product of his parents' discourse (p. 90). Yet Said emphasises the existence of 'a force, perhaps even another identity underneath "Edward"', his narrative charting the gradual awakening of an 'inner, far less compliant and private self' which 'gave me strength when "Edward" seemed to be failing' (p. 60, p. 165). In writing the autobiography, he states,

The underlying motifs for me have been the emergence of a second self buried for a very long time beneath a surface of often expertly acquired and wielded social characteristics belonging to the self my parents tried to construct, the "Edward" I speak of intermittently, and how an extraordinarily increasing number of departures have unsettled my life from its earliest beginnings. (p. 217)

¹⁰³ *Edward Said: The Last Interview*. Dir. Mike Dibb. First Run/Icarus Films. 2004

¹⁰⁴ Sawday, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ Sara Salih, Review of *Out of Place*, *Interventions*, 2, 2 (2000), 298-299 (p. 299).

In common with Mittelholzer's notion of the 'Me that slumbered in the regimented pigmy', Said's references to a 'core of icy detachment', a selfhood which remains 'impervious to the 'tribulations' of a conflicted external world, suggest a desire for stability and integrity in the context of an 'unsettled' postcolonial history (pp. 165-166).

Armstrong suggests that the 'defining contradiction' of Said's model of subjectivity is 'the doubled condition of desiring a unified, assimilated, "rocklike" identity (all-something, whatever it may be, rather than an ensemble of ill-fitting parts) and of enjoying the liberating, expansive pleasures of multiple identities that never fully cohere'.¹⁰⁶ *Out of Place* concludes with the autobiographer's observation that the trajectory of his narrative, and of his lived experience, has been towards accommodation of an 'unsettled sense of many identities – mostly in conflict with each other' (p. 5). In the final paragraph, he states that 'I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance' (p. 295). Poignantly suggestive of his encroaching illness, this understanding of selfhood, where material boundaries are replaced by a shifting kinetics of identity, might also be interpreted as a model for reconceptualising Palestinian subjectivities shaped by dislocation. Edward's childhood 'wish somehow to be disembodied' is echoed in the adult narrator's search for an appropriate model of unencumbered subjectivity, which would transcend corporeal suffering and displacement while moving beyond the conventional autobiographical model of a coherent, bounded 'inner self' (p. 76).

In her reading of *Annie John*, Tiffin suggests that Kincaid's writing enacts a 'retrieval' of the 'Caribbean voice and body from its entrapment/erasure within European script and from those Anglo-Victorian middle-class values with which an educated Caribbean middle-class were so deeply imbued'.¹⁰⁷ While Mittelholzer seeks to claim an 'inner' subjectivity discrete from vexed issues of embodiment, the body becomes a ground of autobiographical identity in Kincaid's text, corroborating Dash's observation that in the Caribbean, a region where the body has been a locus of colonial oppression,

¹⁰⁶ Armstrong, p. 101.

¹⁰⁷ Tiffin, 'Cold Hearts', p. 912.

representations of embodiment become a key to 'the tensions that underlie the process of self-characterisation'.¹⁰⁸

Nicole C. Matos applies Dash's argument to Kincaid's work, in an essay which examines the 'elastic and evolving dichotomy between body and cloth, naked and clothed' in *Annie John* and the author's broader oeuvre. In Kincaid's writing, she observes, the 'motif of the unencumbered body as an image of potential and liberation', as discussed by Dash, is 'counterbalanced by the use of clothing as a primary image of suppression', reflecting issues of gender.¹⁰⁹ She refers to the episode, in chapter six, when the fifteen-year old Annie glimpses her own reflection in a shop-window:

I saw myself just hanging there among bolts of cloth, among Sunday hats and shoes, among men's and women's undergarments, among pots and pans, among brooms and household soap, among notebooks and pens and ink [...] but I didn't know that it was I, for I had got so strange. My whole head was so big, and my eyes, which were big too, sat in my big head wide open, as if I had just had a sudden fright. My skin was black in a way I had not noticed before [...] (p. 94)

The protagonist's vision of her body 'hanging' in the window, Matos notes, 'depicts a scenario in which the resistant forces of the body are wholly disarmed and the differences between the body and cloth effectively erased'.¹¹⁰ Kincaid's account of Annie's adolescent crisis of identity highlights a specifically corporeal dimension of the Caribbean subject's alienation. Echoing Fanon's description of how the black man is 'overdetermined from without', as he is written into a body 'woven' out of the coloniser's 'stories', the image of Annie's body as an unfamiliar suit conveys the way in which colonial discourse interrupts a 'corporeal schema' of embodied selfhood.¹¹¹ Kincaid foregrounds the way in which gender issues compound this process for the young female subject, as, turning away from the window, Annie encounters a group of boys who mock her as they parody the formal speech of 'grownup gentlemen living in

¹⁰⁸ Dash, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Nicole C. Matos, "'The difference between the two bundles': Body and Cloth in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid", *Callaloo*, 25, 2 (2002), 844-856 (pp. 844-846).

¹¹⁰ Matos, p. 854.

¹¹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 116, p. 111.

Victorian times' (p. 95). On her return home, the injustice is compounded when she is accused by her mother, who has witnessed the incident, of 'behav[ing] in the manner of a slut' (p. 102).

In the subsequent and penultimate chapter, 'The Long Rain', Annie's individuation process culminates in a crisis of body and identity, as she is bedridden by a mysterious illness while Antigua is swept by torrential rains. Unable to 'even so much as lift my head if my life depended on it', she is physically dependent on her parents, who 'handled me as if I were just born' (p. 109, p. 113). As in Said's narrative, the representation of illness calls into question conventional boundaries between the self, other subjects, and the external world. During her illness, Annie perceives language itself as embodied, experiencing her parents' utterances as concrete entities: 'I couldn't hear what it was that they said, but I could see the words leave their mouths. The words travelled through the air towards me, but just as they reached my ears they would fall to the floor, suddenly dead' (p. 109). She is left to surmise the content of their conversation; while her father would have attributed her condition to her hard work at school, her mother 'would have said that, just to be sure, she would call Ma Jolie, an obeah woman from Dominica'. In response, her father 'would have said "Very well, but count me out; have her come when I am not here' (pp. 109-110).

With the parents' opposed responses to Annie's illness, Tiffin observes, 'Western medical constructions of the body are challenged by competing curative systems' rooted in Caribbean conceptions of embodiment and identity. Annie's father, Tiffin notes, is 'more deeply interpellated by the western construction of the body', while the mother maintains a belief in *obeah* inherited from her own mother, Ma Chess.¹¹² The parents' re-organisation of the medicine cabinet symbolises these oppositional regimes, as remedies recommended by the *obeah* woman Ma Jolie are first placed beside Dr. Stephens's 'vitamins and purgatives', then moved to the back shelf when Annie's father objects (pp. 117-118). As Ferguson observes, references to *obeah* subtly reinforce the text's critique of colonialism, as the practice was historically linked to anti-colonial resistance.¹¹³ Implicated in uprisings such as the Jamaican rebellion of 1760, *obeah* was outlawed by

¹¹² Tiffin, p. 912.

¹¹³ Ferguson, p. 42.

the British colonial administration.¹¹⁴ Questioned, in her interview with Cudjoe, on the significance of *obeah* in *Annie John*, Kincaid remarks that 'it's lodged not only in my memory but in my own unconscious. So the role *obeah* plays in my work is the role it played in my life'.¹¹⁵ Within Annie's family, *obeah* practices are a matrilineal tradition. Ma Chess is instrumental in the girl's recovery, their relationship replicating the original, embodied bond with her mother (p. 123):

Sometimes at night, when I would feel that I was all locked up in the warm falling soot and could not find my way out, Ma Chess would come into my bed with me and stay until I was myself – whatever that had come to be by then – again. I would lie on my side, curled up like a little comma, and Ma Chess would lie next to me, curled up like a bigger comma, into which I fit. (p. 126)

Invoking gestation, the simile of the two commas suggests an embodied, matrilineal language, recalling Gilmore's observation that Kincaid's model of autobiographical subjectivity replaces the notion of an autonomous self with an understanding of Caribbean, female identities as fundamentally intersubjective and intercorporeal. Kincaid has stated that *Annie John* 'is about a girl's relationship with her mother because the fertile soil of my creative life is my mother'.¹¹⁶ While the text refuses a conventional autobiographical pact premised on the identity between the names of the author, narrator and protagonist, it becomes significant, in this respect, that the subject's name Annie is the given name of Kincaid's own mother.

The narrator's attitude towards this intercorporeal, intersubjective model of identity, however, remains ambivalent. Emerging from her illness, Annie 'long[s] to be in a place where nobody knew a thing about me', as 'the whole world into which I was born had become an unbearable burden' (pp. 127-128). The narrative concludes as she prepares to leave for England, conscious that her identity will remain incomplete until she has travelled 'away from my home, away from my mother, away from my father,' away

¹¹⁴ Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), p. 132.

¹¹⁵ Cudjoe, p. 229.

¹¹⁶ Cudjoe, p. 222.

from the everlasting blue sky, away from the everlasting hot sun, away from people who said to me, “This happened during the time your mother was carrying you.” (p. 134). She is dressed in white underclothes and a neck chain Ma Jolie has treated for her protection, the white garments suggesting colonialism and a patriarchal script of proper femininity while the neck chain aligns the mother’s *obeah* with slavery. Annie duly ‘place[s] a mark against obeah women, jewelry and white underclothes’ on her list of ‘things I never wanted to see or hear or do again’ (pp. 134-135). Her ambivalence towards the maternal bond is manifested in a bodily response to Annie Senior’s parting assertion that their identities will remain inextricably linked:

She then tightened her arms around me and held me to her close, so that I felt I couldn’t breathe [...] Still holding me close to her, she said, in a voice that raked across my skin, “It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother and this will always be your home.” (p. 147)

As Laura Niesen de Abruna observes, *Annie John*’s examination of this fraught maternal connection consistently links the mother-daughter dynamic within an individual family to the vexed relationship between a Caribbean island and the European ‘parent’ culture.¹¹⁷ Annie’s relationship to her mother, and motherland, at once constitutes and constrains her subjectivity. While Kincaid, Mittelholzer and Said all employ past tense narration, Kincaid’s voice does not incorporate the frequent and specific time-markers Mittelholzer and Said both use to underscore the temporal and spatial distance between their child subjects and adult narrators. The text’s narrative mode conveys the continuing bond between Annie, Annie Senior and Antigua.

¹¹⁷ Laura Niesen de Abruna, ‘Jamaica Kincaid’s Writing and the Maternal-Colonial Matrix’, in *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English*, ed. by Mary Condé and Thorunn Lonsdale (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 172-183 (p. 174).

Conclusion

In *Annie John*, *A Swarthy Boy* and *Out of Place*, postcolonial child protagonists are subjected to elaborate disciplinary regimes focused on the body. The three authors, however, differ in their analyses of implications for subject formation. In the narratives of Mittelholzer and Said, the relationship between the body and self is marked by contradiction. In counterpoint to the 'Edward' who is the product of a regime shaped by conflicts of postcolonial history, Said invokes a 'dormant inner self' unaffected by privations of the body (p. 19). Linked to a postcolonial experience of exile and illness, this conception of a 'disembodied' autobiographical identity is very different, however, from the canonical, Cartesian model.

While Mittelholzer makes a more sustained claim for an 'inner' subjectivity impervious to environmental influences, this overt argument is contradicted by the substance of his text. Bearing the imprint of an unresolved postcolonial history, his narrative suggests that the colonial marking of the racialised body is, indeed, a constitutive influence on autobiographical identity in *A Swarthy Boy*.

In each of the three narratives, issues of cultural and racial identity intersect with those of gender. Both Mittelholzer and Said examine how the overdetermining influence of a colonial order troubles the formation of a young male protagonist's gender identity. Kincaid, in turn, highlights the processes by which Annie's growing body is simultaneously gendered and racially marked. At the same time, *Annie John* is a narrative which considers the body's potential as a site of resistance to prescribed codes of colonial femininity. Foregrounding the embodied connections which tether Annie's subjectivity to the identities of her mother and Antiguan motherland, Kincaid's narrative suggests that notions of autonomous selfhood are inadequate for the comprehension of female, Caribbean postcolonial identity.

Chapter Three: Spatial Location

Introduction

In *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja calls for the ‘reassertion of a critical spatial perspective’, as he argues that modern Western philosophy has been dominated by a ‘despatializing historicism’ whose rise coincided with the ‘age of empire’. While temporality has been represented in terms of dynamism and agency, Soja suggests, space has been understood as an inert surface, perceived in terms of an ‘illusion of transparency’ which occludes the complexities of its cultural construction.¹ Soja’s text is representative of what Elizabeth Ferrier describes as a “spatial turn” within social and cultural theory’ from the mid-1980s onwards, in which ‘the mapping of space is linked with the mapping of power’, a trend contemporaneous with the development of postcolonial criticism.² In *The Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter argues that a mode of ‘imperial history’, which ‘reduces space to a stage [..and] pays attention to events unfolding in time alone’, underwrites colonial expansion.³ Echoing Fabian’s analysis of temporal distancing, Doreen Massey also discusses how, through a ‘sleight of hand in terms of the conceptualisation of space and time’, a dominant historicist philosophy ‘turns geography into history’, as non-Western cultures are represented not as ‘coeval others’, but as less developed entities ‘at an earlier stage in the one and only narrative it is possible to tell’.⁴

If colonialism involves the contestation of space on both a material and a discursive level, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson argue that in a postcolonial world, traditional conceptions of the relationship between place and identity, in which sovereign national communities are mapped onto neatly bounded geographical areas, need to be

¹ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 1, p. 4, p. 7.

² Elizabeth Ferrier, ‘Mapping Power: Cartography and Contemporary Cultural Theory’, *Antithesis*, 4, 1 (1990), 35-49 (p. 35).

³ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber, 1987), p. xvi.

⁴ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 2005), p. 5.

rethought: as 'actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate' with cultural and geographical shifts in the wake of colonialism, 'ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient'. In cases such as Palestine, Gupta and Ferguson observe, 'imagined homelands' are a crucial component in the construction of 'imagined communities'.⁵ In chapter two, I argued that a productive critical approach to postcolonial embodiment would address both the body's materiality, and its cultural construction. Alison Blunt and Cheryl McEwan call for an equivalent approach to issues of postcolonial space and location. Noting that '[a]n emphasis on the spatiality of postcolonial thought can help to move beyond the impasse of thinking primarily in temporal terms', they suggest that in examining 'intersections of place, politics and identity' in postcolonial culture and literature, critics should attend to the 'spatiality of colonial discourse' and 'the spatial politics of representation', while maintaining a concrete focus on 'the material effects of colonialism in different places'.⁶

Within autobiography criticism, the topic of spatial location has not yet been addressed in detail. Analysis of traditional autobiography theory would corroborate Soja's assertion that in the post-Enlightenment West, space has been subordinated to time at 'every level of theoretical discourse'.⁷ The very notion of the 'inner self' implies a spatialised model of subjectivity, yet while Gusdorf describes autobiography as an 'involution of consciousness', this spatial voyage of introspection is merely a figure for the process of uncovering a historical narrative of the subject's development.⁸ His contention that the autobiographical genre is limited in both 'time and space', as it 'is not to be found outside of our cultural area', exemplifies the process of temporal distancing.⁹ Enshrining autobiography as the product of a progressive Western culture which has entered the 'perilous domain of history', Gusdorf locates other geographical regions at less advanced stages in a global narrative of development, dismissing non-Western autobiography as culturally imitative.¹⁰ If it is couched in spatial rhetoric, Gusdorf's

⁵ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, 'Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference', *Cultural Anthropology*, 7, 1 (1992), 6-23 (p. 8, p. 10, p. 12).

⁶ Cheryl McEwan and Alison Blunt, 'Introduction', in *Postcolonial Geographies*, ed. by Cheryl Blunt and Alison McEwan (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 1-6 (pp. 1-3).

⁷ Soja, p. 15.

⁸ Gusdorf, p. 32.

⁹ Gusdorf, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰ Gusdorf, p. 30.

argument rests on an essentially temporal framework, one which is linked to a colonialist historical narrative.

In her 1993 essay 'Locating the Subject of Post-Colonial Autobiography', Linda Warley addresses the way in which Western autobiography theory 'tends to ignore the issue of place – that is, spatial and geographic location – as a constitutive element of the autobiographical "I"'. Citing Olney's assertion that 'autobiography is more universal than it is local', she discusses how criticism has traditionally presupposed a fundamentally 'unlocated subject'. This 'forgetting of the locatedness of the subject', she argues, 'speaks of an imperialist assumption of centrality that has never been possible for the post-colonial writer', who is likely to:

struggle to construct a viable representation of the 'self' as a located 'self'. At stake here is more than local colour, painting in words a landscape against which the 'I' can authentically figure. The post-colonial autobiographer is engaged in a project of imaginative possession of place, an act of self-articulation at once necessitated by and working in opposition to the invasion of both territory and mind enacted by Europe upon colonial space.¹¹

Critiquing 'the persistent refusal of Euro-American theory to adequately address the imperatives of specific, local, material, historical, and geographic differences', Warley asserts that 'the particular geographic and micro-spatial location of the autobiographical "I" must be read as an important element of textual identity, for *all autobiographical subjects are located subjects*'.¹²

Despite Warley's persuasive argument, spatial location remains a relatively neglected area in autobiography criticism; writing nearly a decade after the publication of her essay, Smith and Watson comment that while location 'shapes the contexts of both autobiographical subjectivity and the kinds of stories that can be told', the topic is 'as yet rarely studied by critics who tend to see the site as a backdrop'.¹³ The present chapter will contribute towards redressing this lack of analysis in specific relation to postcolonial life-

¹¹ Linda Warley, 'Locating the Subject of Post-Colonial Autobiography', *Kunapipi*, XV, 1 (1993), 23-31 (pp. 23-25).

¹² Warley, pp. 28-29. Original emphasis.

¹³ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 58.

writing, as I focus on issues of location in Mulk Raj Anand's *Seven Summers*,¹⁴ Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*,¹⁵ and Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood*.¹⁶ Cultural conceptions of space and place differ across Anand's account of childhood in early twentieth-century India, and Soyinka's and Falola's more recent narratives of Nigerian childhood, yet common themes and preoccupations also emerge in a comparison of these three texts, in which the recollection of childhood is bound up with the representation of specific geographical places.

Named for the district within the town of Abeokuta in Nigeria where Soyinka grew up, *Aké*'s very title indicates a relationship between location and autobiographical identity. Soyinka's description of his text as a 'childhood biography' is suggestive both of the difference between the adult life-writer and his 'previous' child self, and the author's intention to portray not only an individual subject but the wider milieu in which this 'previous self' was located.¹⁷ Soyinka evokes the location of *Aké* in the 1930s and 1940s through a narrative which vividly re-creates a child's sensory relationship to place. As Raisa Simola observes, the boundaries of childhood are spatially as well as temporally drawn in this autobiography, which concludes at the point of Wole's departure from home as he prepares to study at Government College, Ibadan.¹⁸

Anand's *Seven Summers*, the first volume in his autobiographical series *The Seven Ages of Man*, was written some two decades before its eventual publication in 1951; Gita Bamezai dates the text's completion to 1935.¹⁹ Anand alludes to the composition of *Seven Summers* in *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, the memoir which records his encounter with British literary culture in the 1920s, when he travelled to London after serving a jail

¹⁴ Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Summers: A Memoir*, ed. and introd. by Saros Cowasjee (1951; New Delhi: Penguin, 2005). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁵ Toyin Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt: An African Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁶ Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981; London: Methuen, 2000). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁷ Soyinka refers to *Aké* as a 'childhood biography' in the preface to his subsequent autobiographical volume, *Isara*. Wole Soyinka, *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"* (London: Minerva, 1991), p. v.

¹⁸ Raisa Simola, 'Aké: The Years of Childhood: The Roots of Wole Soyinka's Postcolonial Resistance', in *Postcolonialism and Cultural Resistance*, ed. by Jopi Nyman and John A. Stotesbury (Joensuu, Finland: University of Joensuu Press, 1999), pp. 222-230 (p. 223).

¹⁹ Gita Bamezai, *Mulk Raj Anand: The Journalist* (New Delhi: Kanishka, 2000), p. 19. Anand published three further volumes in the series: *Morning Face* (1968), *Confession of a Lover* (1976) and *The Bubble* (1984).

term for involvement in the Civil Disobedience movement. He recalls that on reading Joyce's *Portrait* during this 'self-imposed exile', he determined to write his own autobiographical 'confession', which he later names as 'my confession called *Seven Summers*'.²⁰ In common with *Portrait*, *Seven Summers* centres on a young autobiographical protagonist whose identity is bound up with the dynamics of postcolonial history – Krishan Chander, who, Anand states in a letter to the critic Saros Cowasjee, is 'also me'.²¹ During the years of Anand's childhood, colonial resistance was gathering momentum in India; he observes that '[t]he era to which I had been born was, thus, the historic turning point of my country'.²² In *Seven Summers*, an author conscious of his geographical distance from the 'realities of the freedom struggle' recollects this transitional era, in an autobiographical narrative which locates the child subject within the remembered landscape of India's Northwest frontier.²³

Published in 2004, Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* is described by its publisher as 'far more than the story of one man's childhood experiences', a text which '[r]edefin[es] the autobiographical genre altogether' in its interweaving of 'personal, historical, and communal stories'. In the preface, Falola observes that growing up in the Nigeria of the 1950s and 1960s he was a witness to momentous political shifts, his early years 'marked by the end of British rule', independence and the establishment of the First Republic. He also comments that beyond autobiography's traditional individualist concerns, '[e]xtended families, the city, and the politics of the city and nation provide the larger context' for his narrative. Reviewing *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Jan Vansina argues that in this broader focus the text is a distinctively 'African Memoir: a memoir about growing up in Ibadan and gradually discovering the world, a memoir of the social history of the city of Ibadan between 1953 and 1966, and above all a memoir about the acquisition of identity'.²⁴ For Falola, as for Anand and Soyinka, this autobiographical identity is inextricably linked to that of place.

²⁰ Mulk Raj Anand, *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (London: Wildwood House, 1981), p. 16, p. 6, p. 94.

²¹ Saros Cowasjee, *So Many Freedoms: A Study of the Major Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 168.

²² Mulk Raj Anand, *Apology for Heroism* (Bombay: Kutub Popular, 1957), p. 22.

²³ Anand, *Conversations*, p. 5.

²⁴ Jan Vansina, 'Young Falola', *Journal of African History*, 46, 2 (2005), 362-363 (p. 362).

i) 'The cosmic order that I had been inventing, to understand my little world': Remembering the child's sense of place

In each of the texts under discussion, an adult autobiographer reconstructs his childhood sense of affinity with a physical environment. Coe identifies this sense of place as a defining preoccupation of the Childhood genre; Warley observes that as he focuses on representations of 'the "small world" that is the special habitat of the child', *When the Grass Was Taller* is an exception to the critical tendency to regard '[d]etails of place' as 'set-dressing, not constitutive elements of the autobiographical 'I'.²⁵ Coe proposes that in autobiographies of childhood, the portrayal of place becomes a site for recovering the fundamentally different consciousness of a 'previous' self, as the adult autobiographer seeks to recapture the child's sense 'of "being-in" or "being-with" [... the] phenomena of the outside world; a closeness verging on fusion, the self absorbing, or being absorbed by, the presence of the inanimate'. Quoting Thomas Wolfe, he states that '[t]he child lives "midget-near the live pelt of the earth," and its awareness of what can exist there is consequently not only more intense, but utterly different from the awareness of those whose eyes are situated six feet above it'. The 'child's world' nostalgically recreated in the autobiography of childhood, Coe observes, is a miniature, enclosed territory, a world 'not of steppes and prairies, but quite specifically of gardens'.²⁶ The young subject's apprehension of location within a wider landscape entails a movement towards adult identity, a point Coe illustrates with reference to Anand's *Seven Summers*, in which, he argues, Krishan's 'first full awareness' of the mountains of the Northwest frontier 'marks the end of his childhood'. In keeping with his thesis that the Childhood genre addresses a 'mythical' domain of essential identity beyond the influence of politics and history, he argues that universal myths and symbols emerge from autobiographical accounts of the child's 'existential awareness of nature and of the world', a claim which is called into question by the political functions of location in texts such as Anand's, Falola's and Soyinka's.²⁷

²⁵ Warley, pp. 29-30, p. 24.

²⁶ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 118, p. 121, p. 130.

²⁷ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 132, p. 123.

In his seminar on *Aké* with Jo Gullede, Soyinka responds to a question about ‘the importance of place in recovering an earlier self’, as he is asked, in terms which echo Coe’s, to what extent the autobiographical subject is ‘only found in terms of relationships to a physical place, to a physical world, or a map that you re-create’. He describes how *Aké*, initially conceived as a biography of his relative, the Reverend I.O. Ransome-Kuti, developed into an attempt to reconstruct ‘the whole physical property’ of the world he inhabited. Soyinka decided to ‘recapture that period in its own right’, an undertaking which required him to ‘reenter it almost in a physical sense’:

recapturing space in physical terms, in tactile terms, is very important for some kinds of autobiographical writing [...] [I]t didn’t make sense to me to spend time on it unless I could capture it from the viewpoint of a child – the way I sensed it at the time. Obviously, it would not be the same language that I would have used at the time, but one could at least attempt to enter that world as one experienced it through the senses and physical place.

He states that as a child, ‘I never resisted the shaping of *Aké* in its physical sense – the terrain [...] In a sense there was never any real dichotomy, no will to separation, between me and the influences of *Aké*’.²⁸ If the ‘terrain’ exerted a formative influence on the young subject, Soyinka suggests that his efforts to comprehend it, conversely, shaped the landscape; moved ‘by a desire or a need constantly to link one thing to another’, the inquiring child ‘constructed’ an ‘entire cosmological universe’.²⁹

Appropriately, then, *Aké* begins not with the autobiographical ‘I’, but with a detailed account of place:

The sprawling, undulating terrain is all of *Aké*. More than mere loyalty to the parsonage gave birth to a puzzle, and a resentment, that God should choose to look down on his own pious station, the parsonage compound, from the profane heights of Itoko [...]

On a misty day, the steep rise towards Itoko would join the sky. If God did not actually live there, there was little doubt that he descended first on its crest, then took his

²⁸ Jo Gullede, ‘Seminar on *Aké* with Wole Soyinka’, *The Southern Review*, 23, 3 (1987), 511-526 (pp. 513-514).

²⁹ Gullede, p. 518.

one gigantic stride over those babbling markets – which dared to sell on Sundays – into St Peter’s Church, afterwards visiting the parsonage for tea with the Canon [...] God strode straight into St Peter’s for morning service, paused briefly at the afternoon service, but reserved his most formal, exotic presence for the evening service which, in his honour, was always held in the English tongue. The organ took on a dark, smoky sonority at evening service, and there was no doubt that the organ was adapting its normal sounds to accompany God’s own sepulchral responses, with its timbre of the *egungun*, to those prayers that were offered to him. (p. 1)

Richard Priebe observes that in this description, ‘we are given images of a world well-ordered by the irrefutable logic of a child’; it is ‘not just a question of showing us what the child sees, but showing the patterns of thought of a young person struggling to order his world’. A space which is ‘clearly marked off by certain physical boundaries’, the small world portrayed in *Aké*’s opening pages is meticulously structured, its religious, social and topographical aspects harmoniously integrated.³⁰ The Canon’s house, which, as ‘the highest lived-in point of the parsonage’, provides appropriate lodgings for ‘God’ during his visitations, is neatly separated from a ‘pagan’ domain beyond the parsonage wall:

Its back was turned to the world of spirits and ghommids who inhabited the thick woods and chased home children who had wandered too deeply in them [...] The Canon’s square, white building was a bulwark against the menace and the siege of the wood spirits. Its rear wall demarcated their territory, stopped them from taking liberties with the world of humans. (p. 2)

Priebe notes that the withholding of the ‘I’, in the text’s first few pages, evokes the way in which ‘a very young child does not distinguish himself from his environment’, as Soyinka presents ‘what appears to be an idealized view of childhood and the child’s world’.³¹ So far, this might appear to substantiate Coe’s claim that in representing the

³⁰ Richard Priebe, ‘On form and ideology with specific attention to Soyinka’s *Aké*’, in *African Literature Studies: The Present State/L’État Présent*, ed. by Stephen Arnold (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1985), pp. 123-134 (pp. 127-8).

³¹ Priebe, pp. 127-8.

small world of childhood, the adult autobiographer nostalgically seeks to recover a prelapsarian domain of essential identity, as the narrative momentarily shifts to the present:

An evil thing has happened to Aké parsonage. The land is eroded, the lawns are bared and mystery driven from its once secretive combs [...] The surviving houses, houses which formed the battlements of Aké parsonage are now packing cases on a depleted landscape, full of creaks, exposed and nerveless. (pp. 3-4)

Priebe discusses how this juxtaposition of an idyllic childhood world with its loss in the corrupted present calls up the 'romantic, even nostalgic vision of childhood' common in canonical autobiography: '[t]he convention could have come straight out of a western writer like Dylan Thomas and his "Fern Hill."' He also observes, however, that '[h]owever unified and Edenic the world of these early pages is to the child, it is presented to us as both illusion and reality'.³² On closer examination, Soyinka's recollection of a lost childhood world is more than an exercise in nostalgia. As with Khoo Thwe's account of Phekhon's 'blue remembered hills' in *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Soyinka's initial description of Aké manipulates a distance between the perceptual frameworks of the remembering adult and the child subject in order to imply that the childhood 'paradise' was always illusory. Priebe argues that:

If this difference in position, time and identity between the child and the adult allows for nostalgia, it also allows for irony, since irony always exists when there is a discrepancy of knowledge or understanding between two positions [...] The adult can ironically indicate that there were cracks in the world the child perceived as Edenically whole. The price of cultural change has been to exalt foreign elements over indigenous ones; thus the child sees God especially "honored" when religious services are held for Him in English and not in Yoruba. At the same time, the adult can exalt the child's power of imagination (to be read as the collective force of the culture itself) to transform the foreign elements.³³

³² Priebe, pp. 128-129.

³³ Priebe, p. 133.

While demonstrating the overdetermining influence of a narrative of missionary Christianity on the African child's sense of place, Priebe suggests, the text simultaneously highlights the transformative, resistant potential of language and culture. Louis James also discusses how, in *Aké*, the process of constructing landscape through language is portrayed in terms of both creativity and constraint.³⁴ Wole experiences a particular rock as 'a unique confidant', 'a replete, subsuming presence', until the moment his Sunday School teacher points it out to the class as an indication of the size of the biblical whale. In turning the boy's 'very own secret habitat' into 'something from the Bible', the teacher has irrevocably altered the identity of the place: 'after that, the patient, placid presence, hitherto unnamed, became Jonah. Permanently' (p. 64). While the child's personal cosmological universe is formed through naming and narrative, these very same processes threaten to overwrite and rigidify the landscape when deployed by others.

Both of these tendencies are illustrated in the account of the Orchard. While it is described as a space 'too varied, much too profuse to be called a garden', Soyinka's 'Orchard' invokes the convention of representing the child's small world as a garden of Eden (p. 2). Olney focuses on the description of the Orchard in an essay which compares *Aké* to Joyce's *Portrait*, as he argues that both texts recover a 'childhood world and consciousness' by examining the relationship 'between sensory experience and language that grows out of and turns back on that experience'.³⁵ Joyce's protagonist inscribes on the flyleaf of his geography book the details of 'himself, his name and where he was': 'Stephen Dedalus/ Class of Elements/ Clongowes Wood College/ Sallins/ County Kildare/ Ireland/ Europe/ The World/ The Universe'.³⁶ Comparably, Olney suggests, the young Wole's bodily relationship to place is the 'very compass' of *Aké*, the narrator recalling that '[i]f I lay across the lawn before our house, face upwards to the sky, my head towards BishopsCourt, each spread-out leg would point to the inner compounds of

³⁴ Louis James, 'Wole Soyinka's *Aké*: Autobiography and the Limits of Experience', in *Autobiographical and Biographical Writing in the Commonwealth*, ed. by Doireann MacDermott (Barcelona: Editorial AUSA, 1984), pp. 113-116 (p. 115).

³⁵ James Olney, 'Wole Soyinka's Portrait of the Artist as a (Very) Young Man', *Southern Review*, 23 (1987), 527-540 (p. 533).

³⁶ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 12.

Lower Parsonage' (p. 4).³⁷ Soyinka's account of the Orchard, Olney argues, encapsulates the way in which landscapes are created through the translation of physical, sensory experience into language, as the child's perceptions move 'from the sensory appeals of the natural African world through a respondent and correspondent language to legends and tales and myths: from nature to literature by way of a necessary linguistic nexus'.³⁸ The Orchard's flora is 'an extension of scripture classes, church lessons or sermons', as the Soyinka children interpret their surroundings through Christian narratives which escape the 'time-border of Sundays' (pp. 2-3). They reject an adult's explanation of the pomegranate, a fruit which 'transported us to the illustrated world of the Biblical Tales Retold':

It grew only in the Orchard, Gardener said. The pomegranate was foreign to the black man's soil, but some previous bishop, a white man had bought the seeds and planted them in the Orchard. We asked if it was *the* apple but Gardener only laughed and said No. Nor, he added, would that apple be found on the black man's soil. Gardener was adjudged ignorant. It was clear that only the pomegranate could be the apple that lost Adam and Eve the joys of paradise. (p. 3)

The pomegranate's transplantation represents colonialism's imposition on an African world, a political point Olney does not fully consider in his discussion of how Wole, 'like Adam in the Garden of Eden, gives order to the world through language and naming'. The overdetermining influence of a colonial narrative calls into question a model of located subjectivity premised on notions of Adamic sovereignty, yet simultaneously, as Priebe observes, the child's own mythology disrupts the imposed European culture, as Wole and his siblings opt to disregard Gardener's authority, giving the apple 'an African identity'.³⁹ The child's modification of the biblical narrative subtly redefines the Edenic garden, in a move which is suggestive of the wider appropriation and adaptation of European elements within a postcolonial African culture.

³⁷ Olney, 'Wole Soyinka's Portrait', p. 537.

³⁸ Olney, 'Wole Soyinka's Portrait', p. 534.

³⁹ Priebe, p. 134.

Issues of spatial location are equally prominent in Anand's narrative of 'the first seven years of my own half unconscious and half conscious childhood' (p. 229). In common with *Aké*, *Seven Summers* begins with a detailed description of place, as the narrator recalls 'one of my first vivid memories': a sensory impression of the scene outside his family's house in Mian Mir cantonment, where his father was stationed as Head Clerk of the 38th Dogra Regiment. As in Soyinka's text, the opening passage reconstructs the perceptions of a young child who is 'oblivious of the past and the future, excited by my own happiness at finding myself wandering freely in the wide open world' (p. 3):

Sunshine scatters like gold dust. A buzz in the air, as though the pinpoints of gold are flying hither and thither. The green trees of the grove spread the shadow of their protection on the white-bearded spirit of Mian Mir, which, mother has told me, lives in the Persian wheel well. On one side of the house are the straight barracks, where the soldiers live, on the other side are the bungalows of the Sahibs, with their gardens, white-washed and still, and hazy with their mysteries before my eyes. (p. 3)

As in *Aké*, the small world of infancy is both meticulously ordered and neatly bounded, as Krishan is forbidden to cross the road which passes his house. Once more, the colonial presence is evident even within the nostalgically remembered idyll of childhood; just as Wole envisages God striding over Itoko, Krishan's emergent consciousness registers the spatial boundary which marks a rigid social division between soldiers and Sahibs. The narrator's first memory is one of transgressing this boundary, as Krishan is compelled by a 'violent urge' to disobey his mother and 'rush blindly across the barrier' of the road, infiltrating the garden of a 'fearsome' Sahib and stealing a rose (p. 4). In the way Coe discusses, *Seven Summers* emphasises the child subject's sense of fusion with an inanimate, external world; Krishan is an 'elemental creature' who 'like[s] the sweet dry, dusty taste' of the earth (p. 225, p. 30). Yet despite his acknowledgement that *Seven Summers* represents a 'rare' example of a 'politicised' Childhood, Coe does not fully address the postcolonial issues which emerge in Krishan's relationship to the physical

environment. At the outset of Anand's text, the postcolonial child is not an Adamic sovereign, but an interloper in a garden which is possessed by others.⁴⁰

In Part I, 'The Road', the adult narrator charts the small world of his early years, in which 'I was my own master, supreme ruler of the phantasmagoric kingdom of my strange visions and stranger dreams' (p. 52). The recovery of this previous child self is bound up with the recollection of place, as the young Krishan is:

in tune with the shade of the dense trees in the grove where I roamed, the grasses and flowers of the Sahib's garden, where I occasionally strayed, and the ever-changing life of the road – the road which I crossed from the protection of one line of casuarina trees, stirred by the nimble breeze, to the other, the road in whose dust I rolled, the road where I held conversation with men and beasts and birds, the road which dominated my life with its unknown past and undiscovered future. (pp. 25-26)

From the age of four or five, the narrator states, 'I can recollect the contours of the history and geography of a fairly comprehensible world' (p. 9). Similarly to Soyinka, Anand foregrounds the processes by which the child's small world is comprehended through language. Krishan's sensory experience of the environment is mediated by the 'myths and legends' he is told by his mother, which he adapts and incorporates into the personal 'cosmic order that I had been inventing, to understand my little world' (p. 17).

The landscape of Mian Mir is mapped through a 'cosmogony of jinns and bhuts and fakirs', as the location is seen to be inhabited by a plethora of spirits including 'the ghosts of countless Tommies buried at various spots in the cantonment' (p. 9). The road, which represents Krishan's 'first vivid memory as well as the last impression of Mian Mir', persists as 'an ever-present reality' in the consciousness of the expatriate adult narrator (p. 50). Cowasjee observes that in *Seven Summers* the road is a multivalent symbol, evocative of Krishan's 'love of the earth' and the trope of 'the journey of life' while also representing social and political divisions within a colonised Indian landscape, as 'it is the road that divides the rich from the poor, the barracks of the sepoy from the plush bungalows of the white officers'.⁴¹ The road of Krishan's childhood has particular

⁴⁰ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 234.

⁴¹ Cowasjee, p. 168.

significance as a stretch of the Grand Trunk Road, originally constructed by the Mughals yet resurfaced by the British, whose imperial power it both facilitated and symbolised. The narrator recalls how, during the first five years of his life, this road became 'indelibly imprinted' on his consciousness (p. 50):

there were no standards to check my imaginings about the humanity which had passed down this road, except that the outlines of the figures were suggested by the medley of sights and sounds that I had experienced up to the age of five years. And yet there was no confusion in my muddled fantasy world. (p. 51)

As with Wole's perceptions of the Orchard, the young Krishan's naïve understanding of the road subtly undermines a monolithic colonial narrative which would overdetermine and appropriate the Indian landscape. His mother recounts stories of how the road has been variously traversed by the Sun God Surya, the Rain God, the Gods of the River, the 'ancient kings', Rama and Krishna, saints and fakirs, the sage Valmiki, the Mughals, and, latterly, 'the armies of the Ferungis'. Krishan glimpses 'vague visions of these fabulous figures', travellers he perceives to be literally present on the road, inhabiting it as the ghosts, jinns and bhuts inhabit the cantonment grounds. Apprehended by the child as a grand site of both history and myth, the road predates the incursion of the 'ferungis', who are merely incorporated into a larger, Indian tapestry (pp. 50-51).

The narrative charts Krishan's growing consciousness of the colonial order structuring the environment in which he lives. The death of his infant brother Prithvi provides the first indication of not only emotional, but cultural and political discord in the Chander household; when his maternal aunt Aqqi begins to beat her breasts in the ritual mourning of the *siapa*, the father reprimands her: 'This is not Amritsar. It is the cantonment. And the sahibs are within earshot' (p. 19). The opposition between 'Amritsar' and 'the cantonment' reinforces the immutable division between indigenous and colonial spaces which is symbolised by the road; as Krishan comes to recognise, this political division is reproduced on the level of domestic space, within his family home. Kristin Bluemel notes that Anand's autobiographical writings 'document his divided position in India – a division that is evident on the micro level of family politics as well

as the macro level of caste allegiance'.⁴² Anand's – and Krishan's – paternal ancestors had adopted the 'low profession' of copper and silversmithing, degrading their inherited status as members of the martial *kshatriya* caste, a 'stigma' the father sought to redeem by pursuing a career in the British-Indian army (p. 113). With the 'naïve, frank eye of the observant child', Krishan is 'aware of a slight contempt in which our family was held because we were originally craftsmen and not combatants and because our ancestors had believed in the Aga Khan' (p. 218). The father abandons the Ismaili faith of his *thathiar* brotherhood of metalsmiths when he strategically joins the Hindu reformist organisation of the Arya Samaj 'in order to keep my position in the regiment and among intelligent people in the Sadar Bazaar' (p. 113). He leaves the Samaj, however, when the organisation comes under colonial suspicion as 'a hotbed of intrigue and sedition' following an attempted bomb attack on the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge (p. 113).

The father's subsequent efforts to 'sedulously cement' his place in the 'estimation of the sahibs', as he cultivates the favour of Colonel Longdon, reveal what K.V. Suryanarayana Murti describes as a 'schism' in the Chander household (p. 116, p. 118).⁴³ The father reads the *Civil and Military Gazette* and decorates the house with pictures of English society women and 'reproductions of paintings of lords and ladies in hunting dress', which he has 'cut from old and discarded copies of the *Tatler* and *Bystander* from the Officers' Mess'. In contrast, Krishan's mother is characterised by her faith and superstition, presiding over domestic 'ceremonies and festivals [...] with the devotion of a naïve peasant woman' (p. 120). Images of Krishna, Ganesh, Vishnu, Yessuh Messih, Buddha and the Aga Khan jostle for space on her family shrine, while copies of the Bhagavad Gita, the Sikh Gospel, 'an Angrezi "anjeel"' and 'a symbolic copy of the Koran' also 'rubbed shoulders or rather elbowed each other away from the platform' (p. 121). Mocked by her husband for the eclecticism of her worship, she retorts that: 'If your own religion was just a way of becoming the Pradhan of the Arya Samaj and then leaving it faintheartedly as soon as you knew that the Sarkar wouldn't like it, leave others to pray if they want to!' In the aftermath of the attack on Hardinge, the parents' fundamentally

⁴² Kristin Bluemel, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 88.

⁴³ K. V. Suryanarayana Murti, 'Seven Summers: Anand's Fictional Matrix', *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, 11, 1 (1977), 71-84 (p. 73).

different perspectives on the colonial occupation of India are laid bare. Born in a rural Sikh community to a family who have strenuously resisted the British, the mother expresses a 'revolutionary ardour' on the subject of the bombing (p. 115):

'What is so terrible about it?' mother said coolly. 'After all they deserve what they get, these Angrez [...] They have no religion, no shame. Look how they butchered the Sikhs! My father lost half his land because of their injustice when they rewarded the traitors. The eaters of their master!' (p. 112)

While the father concedes that the *ferungis* have indeed 'occupied other people's land', he justifies his collaborative position with the argument that they 'can hardly quit now' (p. 114). His wife is not persuaded, and rebukes him for his association with 'usurping foreigners' who 'come and occupy other people's land', enjoining him to '[b]e a man like my father, the Sikh Surma, who never accepted defeat even though he lost his land!' (p. 114, p. 131). On the wall of the family's living room hangs a 'portrait of Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy, inset in a calendar of Munshi Gulab Singh and Co., booksellers', a perpetual reminder to Krishan of the conflict between his parents. In *Seven Summers*, the struggle for possession of the Indian landscape shapes not only the exterior space of the cantonment, but the interior of the childhood home (p. 131).

In common with *Aké* and *Seven Summers*, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* begins with chapters which establish the young subject's sense of geographically located identity. The autobiographer's relationship to the city of Ibadan is represented as the very foundation of his subjectivity, reflecting the Yoruba cultural framework in which the text is rooted. *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* opens with the declaration that 'I know when I was born', gesturing towards the generic convention by which autobiography commences with an account of the subject's entry into the world. As Falola proceeds to contextualise his birth in relation to the histories of his clan and city, however, it becomes evident that this autobiographical narrative is the account not only of an individual life but of a broader culture, one which is in the process of radical change (p. 1).

The narrator observes that the date of his birth, unlike the birth dates of previous African generations, is officially documented: 'too many authentic records date my

beginning to the first day of January 1953' (p. 8). At the time he was born, 'Africans [...] were moving into a different world' structured by Western-style 'birth certificates' and government appointed 'timekeepers' who monitor the dates of each subject's birth, immunisations, retirement and death (p. 11). While his parents also 'knew' when they were born, their knowledge took different cultural forms, as 'different generations of Africans tend to reckon and calculate time in different ways' (p. 1). Falola outlines the differences between his personal experience and the way in which his father, James Adesina Falola, would have comprehended his own life-story: '[n]ot only did my father know when he was born, he was always more than happy to tell it, though not to write it down; to tell is to build a house, to see time as a narrative; to write is to see time as a single moment' (p. 4). The narrator imagines a scene in which, questioned by a colonial official who wishes to establish his birth date, James Adesina Falola responds by 'chant[ing] his praise name' and declaring that 'I was rushed out of my mother's womb by war songs, the last war songs that the Ibadan army sang' (p. 5). Falola observes that '[t]ime can be measured and presented as an event', as, in the traditional Yoruba culture of Ibadan, individual lives are interpreted in relation to communal history. In this way, his father's birth was fixed in reference to the year in which 'the Yoruba ended their long century of warfare' (p. 7). This year, 1893, saw British rule imposed on Ibadan with the installation of the first Resident, Captain Bower:

Strangers mediated in the wars and dispersed the Yoruba warriors [...] These strangers from a foreign land, then and now called the British, decided to take Ibadan and others as their own war booty. In its long history of successful wars, Ibadan would take war booty but leave something for the defeated. Now when it was the turn of the British, they took everything [...] (pp. 7-8)

With this shift, Falola suggests, the identities of Ibadan and its inhabitants were dramatically reshaped. The legacy of colonial administration was the gradual erosion of a traditional conception of identity structured through oral narrative and an archive of collective memory, and its replacement by a system of official documentation in which, by the time of his own birth, 'memory and money were becoming mixed' (p. 11).

As an autobiographical narrator, Falola portrays himself as a mediator between cultures. Born during a period of transition, his sense of self is shaped both by a Western education, and the traditional Yoruba culture through which he learned to comprehend the world as a child:

As I have enjoyed the lived culture, embodying many aspects of it, I have also grown to be the narrator of a past that is no more [...] I have read about profound cultural changes in centuries long gone, but I never knew that a similar process could occur within a life span, within my own generation [...] I have never fully recovered from the shock of change and the agony of revisiting a past that has been violently reshaped. (pp. 161-162)

In a society where, '[n]ext to knowing the location of the mother's breast to learn milk, the child learns how to greet', Falola discusses how his sense of the 'boundaries of time, season, gender, occupation and space' was instilled through childhood training in traditional 'greeting' forms (p. 18). Addressing an implied Western reader unfamiliar with Yoruba culture, he elaborates on how the interrelated identities of subjects, families, and geographical places are constructed in language through the oral literary genre of *oriki*, a form he translates as 'greetings', 'cognomens' and 'praise names'. Karin Barber describes *oriki* as 'attributions or appellations: collections of epithets, pithy or elaborated, which are addressed to a subject'. In Yoruba discourse, *oriki* are 'believed to capture the essential qualities of their subjects', whether the subject is an individual, a clan, or a place. Simultaneously establishing 'unique identities' and affirming the relationships between subjects, they represent a medium through which individual and collective identities, and the broader environment, may be mapped and understood.⁴⁴ At birth, Falola was given the praise-name 'Isola'. The history of his city, he explains, is compacted and rehearsed in his personal *oriki*: '[t]o call me Isola is to move me quickly past the recent years, back to the nineteenth century', the period when his clan settled in Ibadan (p. 21). 'The cognomen of Isola', he states, 'moves me to the dead, much closer to memory, opens the door to a history long forgotten, [and] creates puzzles in language and vocabulary' (p. 22). The very act of inscribing 'a few lines' of this text within his

⁴⁴ Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 1.

autobiography embodies a cultural shift which would have been incomprehensible to his ancestors: 'No one ever thought that Isola's *oriki* would be written down, as it was meant to be chanted not read' (p. 22).

Falola moves from his own *oriki* to that of Ibadan, explaining that:

Just as I have a praise poem, my city also has its own. Not just my city, all Yoruba cities have their panegyrics, the *oriki orile*. No one knows who composed them; no one is interested in their authorship but only in their rendition. A city poem is collective property, to be recited by anyone who cares. (p. 29)

By the age of six, he recalls, he was able to recite the *oriki orile* of his birthplace, whose verses were 'a distillation of history, the compression of multiple events into lines that summarize the character of a city' (pp. 29-30). Barber observes that *oriki orile* 'are about places in interaction with people; places that have been made by people out of the available natural resources; places which bless their inhabitants with prosperity and wellbeing'.⁴⁵ Falola's narrative conveys this Yoruba sense of the mutually constitutive relationships between geographical environments and the subjects who inhabit them. Ibadan's *oriki orile* highlights the city's defining characteristic of belligerence, which Falola suggests is embedded within his own subjectivity. As his individual identity is inflected by his inheritance of the city's 'genes of battle and war', his boyhood rivalries and skirmishes are seen to recapitulate Ibadan's historical conflicts: 'Isola and Ibadan are connected, not as twins but as history' (p. 37).

Falola identifies linguistic proficiency as a second attribute of the Ibadan character, one which underpins his claim to narrative authority. The city's cognomen, 'Mesiogo', is glossed as a name which evokes 'the ambiguity of words, their capacity to multitask and create many exit points for an individual' (p. 42). He recalls that as '[l]earning words, expanding vocabularies, and putting words together is one of the essentials of growing up in Ibadan', he and his generation acquired complex linguistic skills from infancy: 'we had to start quite early in life, mastering codes and signals' (pp. 52-53). In both Anand's and Soyinka's texts, the re-creation of a young subject's naïve

⁴⁵ Barber, p. 139.

and idiosyncratic sense of place enables the destabilisation of overdetermining colonial narratives which have served to legitimate territorial occupation. In *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Falola's narrative voice is more emphatically that of the remembering adult, as he aims to demonstrate the sophistication of the indigenous African culture in which his text is rooted. In her review, Marcela Sulak refers to the sense of 'firm grounding and placement' established by the text's opening chapters. She also comments on the 'didacticism' of the 'narrative style' by which Falola constructs this sense of place, remarking that as the autobiographer sets the cultural and historical scene of his childhood, his 'approach is almost pedagogical'.⁴⁶ The distinctive narrative voice has the effect of foregrounding differences between the world of the autobiographer's childhood and that of the implied reader, who is periodically interpellated as 'you'. As the text's early chapters reconstruct the sense of geographically located identity into which Falola was initiated in infancy, the Western reader is placed in the position of the uneducated child, who must acquire specific cultural knowledge in order to begin interpreting the elaborate 'codes and signals' which structure this postcolonial narrative of located identity.

ii) 'The parsonage wall had vanished for ever': Mobility across postcolonial spaces

In each of the texts under discussion, an autobiographical narrative of childhood is structured by a trajectory of spatial movement as well as one of temporal progression, as a child subject's precocity is reflected in an impulse to explore the physical environment. At the beginning of Anand's text, Krishan's disobedient crossing of the road represents a transgressive movement, 'the limit of all my previous trancies' (p. 4). This section focuses on the theme of 'truancy' in *Aké*, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* and *Seven Summers*, discussing how, in each narrative, postcolonial locations are mapped through an account of the wanderings of an errant child protagonist.

⁴⁶ Marcela Sulak, 'An Unpredictable Sojourner', *Texas Observer* (September 10, 2004) <<http://www.texasobserver.org/article.php?aid=1751>> [accessed 13 March 2007] (paras 2, 4 of 11)

The two parts of *Seven Summers* are titled 'The Road' and 'The River', suggesting an analogy between the unfolding of subjectivity, and mobility across space. The narrator asserts that in childhood,

I never followed the maxims laid down by my elders at this time of my life. I went wherever my fancy took me, wandering all over the barracks, the regimental bazaar, the followers' lines, on the track of all kinds of adventures [...A]ll my manhood was built up on the experiences of these irrelevant moments spent in truancy. (p. 150)

Murti argues that for Anand, the 'phenomenology of movement' becomes a means of charting the stark polarities of the colonial order, as the dynamic child protagonist traverses the political divisions which fracture the spaces of his family home, the cantonment, and the colonised Indian landscape.⁴⁷

Initially, Krishan identifies with the father he idolises as a 'demigod', this 'hero-worshipping attitude to my father' linked to the child's 'absurd and romantic wishes to cultivate Englishness' (p. 40, p. 218). Krishan's anglophilia begins with his mother's account of how an *Angrezi* midwife presided at his birth, which leads the father to proclaim that he 'is an auspicious child. He might go to Vilayat' (p. 65). This 'phrase about Vilayat', the adult Krishan explains, 'became a keynote to the history of my later life. For as I grew up from the impetuosity of my childhood to school and college and the wide open world I looked westwards' (pp. 65-66). 'Compared with my own people', he recalls, 'the Angrez Sahibs seemed so remote and so romantic that I soon wanted to be like them even as I wanted to go to Vilayat' (p. 99). The young subject 'buil[ds] up an idea of Englishness in the light of which all the details of my home life seemed a sordid drudgery, an interval of lustreless, "natu" existence, relieved only by the few rays of the exotic which entered our home' (p. 99). Identifying with a 'vivid dreamworld Vilayat', the postcolonial child is alienated from the *natu* [native] space of his home.

Visiting the Officers' Mess with his father, Krishan develops the 'vaulting ambition' of riding to the hockey maidan in Captain Owen's gig. He succeeds in inveigling himself into the carriage, observing that 'all the boys of the regiment

⁴⁷ Murti, p. 81.

whispered to each other to see me thus arrive at the match in glory'. This display of precocity earns him the position of regimental 'mascot', yet while he is '[p]ampered and spoiled' by his father's colleagues,

The disadvantage of my position as a mascot of the regiment was, however, that I had to be regimented, being advised to behave as a kind of mechanical toy, performing certain discreet movements, but for the most part remaining immobile and static like a much loved, much handled and much admired doll. (p. 43)

While Krishan's admiration of the Sahibs remains undiminished, these constraints on his mobility lead him to 'reach[...] out to newer and more splendid worlds to conquer', as he begs his parents for excursions 'beyond the barracks of the cantonments' (pp. 43-45).

As Govind N. Sharma observes, the climactic point of Krishan's anglophilia is his journey to the Delhi Durbar of 1911.⁴⁸ Developed by the Mughals, the institution of the *darbar*, as Ian Talbot comments, was appropriated and adapted by a British colonial government seeking to 'traditionalise itself'.⁴⁹ While providing a display of imperial grandeur, the pageantry of the ceremony was intended to create a legitimising history for British rule, shoring up colonial loyalties in the wake of the 1857-58 'Mutiny' and the consolidation of power in the hands of the Crown. The 1911 Durbar was the occasion for the announcement of the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, a decision which, Sunil Khilnani argues,

was the summation of British efforts to hoist the imperial pennant on Indian territory [...] Delhi's attraction was both its rich historical associations as the seat of past imperial overlords, and its provision of a virgin space on the which the marshalled layout of the canvas Durbar city could be engraved permanently into the rocky Indian landscape, the chosen site where a late imperial idea of power could be entombed.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Govind N. Sharma, 'Anand's Englishmen: The British Presence in the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand', *WLWE*, 21, 2 (1982), 336-341 (p. 339).

⁴⁹ Ian Talbot, *India and Pakistan* (London: Arnold, 2000), pp. 12-13.

⁵⁰ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp. 120-121.

Khilnani's comments draw attention to the complex manipulations of space, both discursive and material, which underlie colonialism. In common with the re-engineering of the Grand Trunk Road, the development of Delhi as the Indian capital both facilitated British control of the colony, and provided a visual display of imperial might. Hosagrahar Jyoti discusses the way in which Delhi, and the Durbar in particular, became physical 'sites for the conquest and control of symbols'. The Durbar ritual was structured through the meticulous organisation of space and movement, as 'individual roles, positions and moves were all assigned and orchestrated in time and space'. Its rhetorical operations were twofold, constructing an image of the British as 'the rightful, almost indigenous, rulers of India' while 'reaffirm[ing] the dominating colonial concept of the "Orient" as tradition-bound, its people as susceptible to parade and show'. Beyond mere 'visual displays', Jyoti argues, Durbars were spatial theatres for 'playing out and reaffirming' the colonial order.⁵¹

In the company of the regiment, Krishan travels 'to attend the Coronation Durbar of George Panjam, Badshah of Englستان and Shahinshah of Hindustan and his consort, Mary', his father 'suppos[ing] that my predilection for Vilayat and Sahibdom would be stimulated by a vision of these exalted personages' (p. 97). The Durbar journey, however, becomes an occasion of 'terrors of one kind or another' (p. 101). Forbidden to enter his father's compartment of the regimental train, 'for fear so flagrant a breach of army discipline as an Indian child travelling in the same train as a 'Jarnel' might be discovered', Krishan travels concealed in the servants' carriage, where 'the orderly in charge of me kept covering me up by a blanket so that I might not be seen by a Sahib' (p. 101). On arrival, his father and the regiment proceed to the 'white canvas city' of the Durbar encampment, 'a sublime abode of gods, in which only the great white Sahibs and their chosen retainers were allowed'. The boy, however, is not among these 'chosen retainers'; 'because my father thought that I might become conspicuous and the Sahibs might tell him off for bringing so discordant an element into so gorgeous a ceremony', he is left in the care of a host family outside the white city (p. 101).

⁵¹ Hosagrahar Jyoti, 'City as Durbar: Theater and Power in Imperial Delhi', in *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. by Nezar Al Sayyad (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), pp. 83-105 (p. 83, p. 89, p. 90, p. 92).

Krishan indeed becomes a 'discordant element' in the ceremony, disrupting the choreographed celebrations as he fails to follow instructions to shout and wave at the passing King, cries 'at that delicate moment when everyone was supposed to present a smiling face', and strays from his chaperone, becoming 'lost in a hostile world' (pp. 103-104). This disastrous experience somewhat tempers the young subject's reverence for 'Sahibdom', as its legacy is 'the horror I developed of "Jarnels" and "Karnels"'. On a discursive level, Anand's focalisation of the Durbar through the eyes of the wandering child becomes a means of undermining the colonial authority the ritual was designed to reinforce. As Priebe observes, the discrepancy between the child subject and adult narrator in autobiographies of childhood 'allows for irony, since irony always exists when there is a discrepancy of knowledge or understanding between two positions [...] The adult can ironically indicate that there were cracks in the world the child perceived as Edenically whole'.⁵² Cowasjee notes that in this way, Anand's account of the Durbar exploits the distance between a naïve child subject and a knowing adult narrator in order to deflate the pomp of the imperial ritual.⁵³ The construction of the colonised subject as a passive object of scrutiny, paraded before the surveying eye of the imperial power, is ironically reversed in the image of Krishan peering at the procession and 'struggling to distinguish the greatest "Jarnel" of the world, Badshah George Panjam' (p. 103). As the Union Jack is raised and the King addresses his subjects in a 'hoarse' and 'incomprehensible' accent, Krishan passes a loud remark on the ruler's 'hat', prompting a neighbour to supply the information that '[t]hat red stone in his hat', the Koh-i-Noor, was 'snatched' by the British (p. 107). The Durbar is intended to promote a colonial order imagined through the rhetoric of filiation, asserting the authority of a paternalistic regime which legitimately commands the obedience of its 'children'. In Anand's narrative, however, the child subject's disobedient movements are mirrored in the increasing unruliness of an 'irrepressible' and resistant Indian crowd. Despite the efforts of policemen 'riding up and down enforcing respectful attention', Krishan observes that people 'whispered and gossiped and babbled', displaying an irreverent 'lack of discipline' which gave way to 'loud protests' with the announcement of the capital

⁵² Priebe, p. 133.

⁵³ Cowasjee, pp. 172-174

transfer. He later learns that 'not only the crowd, but one of the Princes, the Maharaja of Baroda, had been disrespectful to the King-Emperor', turning his back on the King and failing to bow his head in a deliberate breach of protocol. As the adult narrator wryly comments that 'the bad behaviour of the crowd at the Delhi Durbar had created a most unfavourable impression on the Angrezi Sarkar', a parallel is drawn between the child's errant movements, and the broader dynamic of a colony's resistance to imperial regimentation (pp. 107-108).

In *Aké*, similarly, Soyinka's account of the child subject's mobility, as Wole begins to explore locations beyond the parsonage, serves to map the structures and limits of colonial authority. Ayling remarks that the cultural matrix of Soyinka's text is one of 'worlds within worlds', as the anglophone Christian community into which he was born is 'a private domain within the local Yoruba world, which is, in itself, enclosed by the larger Nigerian mosaic, further enfolded within the British Empire and subject to the dictates of Westminster'.⁵⁴ In his discussion with Gullede, Soyinka himself employs this spatial metaphor of 'worlds within worlds', as he describes the parsonage as a 'semi-hermetic', 'enclosed society' 'where I grew up as a child, all the while foraging far out from time to time to imbibe the other side of the world'.⁵⁵ The narrative of *Aké* charts a series of progressively adventurous forays beyond the parsonage walls.

The text's first reference to an excursion beyond the compound also provides an initial glimpse of the white, colonial presence in Abeokuta. Having been taken on an excursion by his mother, named 'Wild Christian' in the narrative, Wole and his siblings pass the 'imposing entrance' to a building titled 'THE RESIDENCY', deducing that '[s]ome white man clearly lived there, [as] the gate was patrolled by a policeman in baggy shorts who stared over our heads' (pp. 12-13). Intrigued by a pair of cannons which 'pointed at us', Wole quizzes Wild Christian on the relationship between these guns and the 'canon' he has met in the parsonage, Pa Delumo. Although she outlines the distinction, Wole prefers his own explanation, which connects the shape of Pa Delumo's head, and his 'strength and solidity', with the force of the cannon ball (p. 13). His idiosyncratic assumption accurately relates the missionary Christianity of the parsonage

⁵⁴ Ayling, p. 44.

⁵⁵ Gullede, p. 511.

to a wider formation of colonial authority in Nigeria. In parallel to Anand's narrative, the portrayal of a young subject's innocent logic enables Soyinka to conduct a sly, humorous analysis of the power relations which structured the colonial world of his childhood.

Boundary-markers such as gates and walls are a dominant motif in *Aké*. In infancy, Wole perceives himself to be '[s]ecure within' an enclosure whose walls and 'corrugated roofs gave off an air of fortifications' (p. 2). As Priebe notes, the small world evoked in the early pages of the narrative is co-existent with the spatial limits of the parsonage, a location which is both 'physically and spiritually secure'.⁵⁶ In chapter three, however, Wole, hoisted onto Joseph's shoulders, surveys the compound walls and recognises 'that we in the parsonage were living in a separate town by ourselves, and that Aké was the rest of what I could see' (p. 37). On an occasion shortly afterwards, he exits the compound through an open gate, encountering a police band followed by a 'ragged', 'motley' group of truant children who are 'imitating the march of the policemen' (p. 45, p. 37). Joining this procession, Wole begins a journey which reconfigures his sense of place:

the wall rolled away into a different area I had never seen before. Soon it moved away altogether, was covered up by houses and shops and disappeared for ever. It upset my previous understanding of the close relationship between the parsonage and Aké. I expected the wall to be everywhere [...] The parsonage wall had vanished for ever but it no longer mattered. Those token bits and pieces of Aké which had entered our home on occasions, or which gave off hints of their nature in those Sunday encounters at church, were beginning to emerge in their proper shapes and sizes. (p. 38)

As the procession moves further away from the child's residence, the boundaries of Aké shift, no longer identical to those of the parsonage. As Ruth Lindeborg observes, Wole's 'journey with the police band gives him a new interpretive matrix in which to place the objects that populate the protected world of the compound'.⁵⁷ The band's tuba is interpreted in terms of its visual resemblance to the 'funnel' on the logo of the parsonage

⁵⁶ Priebe, p. 130.

⁵⁷ Ruth Lindeborg, 'Is This Guerilla Warfare? The Nature and Strategies of the Political Subject in Wole Soyinka's *Aké*', *Research in African Literatures*, 21 (1990), 55-69 (p. 62).

gramophone, inscribed with the words 'HIS MASTER'S VOICE' (p. 41). As with the alignment of cannon and Canon, the child's logic pertinently connects the 'master's voice' of the gramophone – a European import which symbolises both cultural and economic aspects of colonialism – to the colonial authority personified by the police.

During the march, the seemingly hermetic, enclosed society of the parsonage is located in relation to the larger district of Aké and the town of Abeokuta, which is in turn situated within the wider space of Nigeria, a colony bound to the imperial centre. As the parade passes through a commercial district, Wole, a prodigious reader, notices 'inscriptions everywhere'. Shop signs such as 'LONDON TRAINED PORTRAITIST', 'MRS T. BANJOKO. LONDON-TRAINED SEWING MISTRESS', and 'Miss McCutter's Maternity Clinic', point to Abeokuta's location within a colonial economy (pp. 38-40). The latter sign causes 'trouble' for the child, as 'we knew her simply as Miss Makota, and there had been no previous hint that her name might be spelt differently' (p. 39). Just as Wole maintains, despite the contrary insistence of adults, that the pomegranate in the parsonage garden is *the* Edenic apple, and that the Canon is so called because his head resembles a cannonball, his doubt over the sign's accuracy manifests scepticism of an adult authority which, in each instance, is linked to colonial power. Furthermore, the production of an Africanised spelling hints at an appropriation and modification of the English language. In common with the indigenisation of the biblical apple, the transformation of McCutter to Makota implies an analogy, as Priebe observes, between the power of the child's 'imagination' to reconfigure the received order of the adult world, and the tendency of the wider postcolonial culture to incorporate and 'transform' European cultural elements.⁵⁸ This tendency towards 'incorporativeness and porosity', Ato Quayson points out, is 'inherent' in Soyinka's Yoruba culture.⁵⁹

The expedition culminates in a more direct encounter with the colonial presence. As the band files into a police station and the children disband, Wole realises he is lost. A sergeant and a 'smartly uniformed' white policeman, whom he initially assumes to be an albino, benignly question him about where he lives and how he has reached Ibara from Aké (p. 45). In *Seven Summers*, Krishan's unfavourable comparison of the 'sordid

⁵⁸ Priebe, p. 133.

⁵⁹ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Wole Soyinka and Ben Okri* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), p. 13.

drudgery' of his home to the glories of the Sahibs reflects his internalisation of colonial discourse (p. 99). Wole's response to European culture, however, is very different. The white police officer speaks to the lost child in Yoruba with 'the most unlikely accent I had ever heard' (p. 46). Replying in English, Wole discovers that the white man's command of his mother tongue is only marginally more satisfactory than that of his Yoruba: 'I could not understand why he should choose to speak through his nose' (p. 46). Noticing a copy of the English-language newspaper to which Essay, his father, subscribes, Wole informs the officer: 'You are reading my father's paper' (p. 48). Lindeborg observes that in Soyinka's narrative the pomegranate, the 'newspaper, the English language and the Bible all become signs of the Western-educated Africans, not of European colonizers'. The narrative's focalisation through the eyes of a young subject is crucial in this process of appropriation, as Wole's inquiring 'childhood consciousness tests and redefines the boundaries of the spatial and cultural worlds in which he moves'.⁶⁰ While addressing Aké's location within an imperial system, the account of the procession also conveys the extent to which the Christian, European-influenced Yoruba world of Wole's childhood is one of syncretism rather than colonial imitation. The centrifugal momentum of Soyinka's narrative, as Wole traverses a broadening series of spatial settings, serves to locate the parsonage compound, which superficially appears to be an insular, Europeanised space, as part of a complex postcolonial world.

Priebe briefly suggests that the mobility of *Aké's* child subject may relate to a distinctively Yoruba conception of the child as a being in the process of 'transition', a liminal subject who is potentially mobile across boundaries. He observes that '[i]n the traditional Yoruba world there is a boundary behind as well as in front of the child. As threatening as the child who [breaches] the boundary of the adult world, is the child who threatens to go back to the spirit world'.⁶¹ While the precocious Wole breaches the boundary of an adult world of knowledge in claiming authority for his alternative interpretations of the pomegranate, the canon, and Miss Makota's clinic, a series of minor child characters in *Aké* transgress more metaphysical borders. Wole's mother informs him, for example, that his Uncle Sanya is an *oro*, a tree spirit; in childhood he was always

⁶⁰ Lindeborg, p. 62, p. 61.

⁶¹ Priebe, pp. 129-130.

'off into the woods on one pretext or another', abandoning flesh-and-blood siblings for his other brethren (pp. 8-9). Bukola, a playmate of Wole's, is known to be an *abiku*, the child who, in West African belief, is recurrently born and dies. Wole is intrigued by Bukola's difference as a child 'not of our world', a 'privileged being who, unlike Tinu and me, and even her companions in that other place, could pass easily from one sphere to another' (p. 17). Wole's young sister Folasade bears a similarly ambiguous metaphysical identity, not only the fact that she dies in infancy, but that she 'had chosen to go on her very first birthday', evidence of her unusual status (p. 98, p. 146). With Sanya's absences, Bukola's mysterious voyages and the wilful departure of Folasade, the text portrays child figures engaged in varieties of metaphysical truancy.

This Yoruba understanding of the child as a mobile, unsecured subject, dangerously prone to subverting the order of the adult world, is developed as a more central theme in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*. As he discusses his childhood education in traditional 'greeting' forms, Falola explains that:

Greetings were my first lesson in values, the appropriateness of each to denote respect and social hierarchies: the child who is not afraid of anyone will develop bad manners, the manners that can endure for long and follow one to the grave. With the corpse and bad manners wrapped together, the soul is in trouble, deciding whether to wander back to the world [...] Should it sneak back, it may enter the womb of a pregnant woman [...] (p. 26)

The capricious, or even malicious 'soul' to which he refers is that of the disloyal *abiku*, whose allegiance lies primarily with a domain beyond the human, terrestrial world. Summarising a complex area of Yoruba thought, J.S. Eades discusses how Yoruba views of the world 'make an important distinction between *orun* or heaven on the one hand, and *aiye* or the world on the other', *abiku* spirits traversing this cosmological divide.⁶² In an essay which identifies the *abiku* motif as a 'major tradition within Nigerian literature', Douglas McCabe suggests that *abiku* could be characterised in English by the term 'errant',

⁶² J.S. Eades, *The Yoruba Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 121-122.

a word that combines the two interrelated senses of vagrancy and delinquent behaviour. That is, *abiku* are geographically nomadic, [...] unclaimed by any one geographical place; and *abiku* are wayward, straying delinquently and wilfully from the norms defining the *ile*, profiting unethically by exploiting the *ile*'s constitutive attachment to definite geographical locations (houses, villages, ancestral cities) and practices (having children and perpetuating the patrilineage).

As McCabe notes, *ile*, a Yoruba term sometimes translated as household, denotes a concept embracing both the ancestral lineage and the geographical place in which it is rooted.⁶³ Falola suggests that the acquisition of 'greeting' forms – the *oriki* of the subject, clan and ancestral city – is intended to anchor the child, a liminal being potentially mobile within a wider cosmogony, more securely within terrestrial society and, more specifically, the *ile* into which he/she is born.

In chapter three, Falola recounts how a boyhood episode of truancy led to his identification as an *emere*, a form of *abiku*, thus permanently reshaping his identity. An unauthorised railway journey precipitates the nine-year-old subject's abrupt 'change in metaphysical status' (p. 111). Toyin and his friends are fascinated by the railway, a symbol of unfettered strength and mobility as it is able to travel for many miles, from east to west, south to north, without complaining, without being tired' (p. 60). The boys construct 'toys of train and rail lines, stringing together discarded tins of milk and tomato paste, beer bottles, small pebbles, pieces of clay, and other objects', and compose songs in praise of the train (p. 60). Their interest leads them to conduct metaphysical discussions on the meaning of suicide, as the railway lines represent a sense of power inherent in the option of being able to die 'whenever we chose'. Here, Falola alludes to the Yoruba notion of the child's tenuous relationship to his/her family and wider society, as he recalls that as they pondered suicide on the railway tracks,

[b]oys who wanted to punish their parents would leak the information to their mothers that they knew the road to heaven. The mothers would panic, beg the boys for

⁶³ Douglas McCabe, 'Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba *Abiku* Texts and Soyinka's "Abiku"', *Research in African Literatures*, 33, 1 (2002), 45-74 (p. 45, p. 47).

forgiveness. Were they to tell their fathers, they would be encouraged to pack their bags and travel on the glorious road, if only to reduce the household expenses. (p. 60)

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi suggests that the concept of *abiku* 'serve[s] as a master-narrative of the parent-child relationship in Pan-African social-political contexts and literary texts'.⁶⁴ In *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, the power struggle between parents and children, as errant boys seek to exploit maternal fears for their safety, is framed by this culturally specific notion of the young subject's potential disloyalty to the terrestrial domain: before adolescence, the possibility remains that a child may reveal itself as *abiku*.

Toyin's excursion on the train is interpreted in these terms, as his preoccupation with the railway leads him to stray increasingly far from home. Initially, '[s]eeing the rail lines itself was an act of conquest. To sneak away from the house and school for about two hours without being discovered was a victory'. Becoming eager to see 'the "Station" itself', he approaches one of the older boys who have 'begun their careers as businessmen by taking younger boys to the Station' in exchange for their lunch allowances (p. 61). Like Krishan's triumphant journey to the hockey maidan in the Sahib's carriage, Toyin's success in reaching the station 'uncaught by parents' confirms his 'credentials to boast, to declare my boyhood', garnering the respect of less adventurous peers (p. 62). As no boy has yet 'gone to the Station to board the train all by himself', Toyin returns alone, entering the very 'belly of the train' in his quest to become 'the most important boy in the school' (p. 63). The train pulls out of the station, transporting him out of Ibadan. Disembarking at the city of Ilorin, he is adopted by a begging gang and set to work as a 'stick boy' for a man who poses as blind. Some time later, his identity is discovered when he speaks to the postman in English, an incongruous act for a street child, and is matched with the image on his 'missing person' poster and sent home.

On his re-entry into Ibadan, Falola states,

the interpretation of my existence and reality had to change. Indeed, it did.

⁶⁴ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'An Abiku-Ogbanje Atlas: A Pre-Text for Rereading Soyinka's *Aké* and Morrison's *Beloved*', *African American Review*, 36, 4 (2002), 663-678 (p. 663).

Unknown to me, I had acquired a new status, a new life. I was now an *emere!* Everyone had proclaimed the boy and the trip as mysteries that brought misery. Even the respected clergymen at the cathedral confirmed that the boy's character was out of the ordinary [...] *Emere* was a child who could come and go at will, an unpredictable sojourner among the living. (pp. 72-73)

The *emere*, in Falola's definition, is a particularly duplicitous variant of *abiku*, as this 'unpredictable sojourner' fails to manifest early clues to his/her status, 'trick[ing] the parents into a false sense of security so that they would not go to the diviners to make *egbogi* and *agbo* (herbal medicine) and *ero*, the balm to appease death' (p. 73). In the Yoruba cosmos, he explains, 'Earth and Heaven were always engaged in a fight over supremacy'; while living on Earth, the *emere* 'gave unconditional support to Heaven, distorting the balance of power, betraying the Earth and its followers' (p. 74). Toyin's newly discovered metaphysical status sees him stigmatised, therefore, as a traitor to the *ile*; on his return from Ilorin he is received by a crowd of resentful neighbours, 'some abusing me, others cursing me' (p. 71). He is called an 'omo ale', an insult 'communicating the negative notion of a bastard, the illegitimate son who would create troubles for the family' (p. 71).

The narrator remarks, however, that while '[f]or a Mesigo, "omo ale" was the ultimate insult', the illegitimacy it denoted was not a concept indigenous to Ibadan, in whose culture 'all wives' and their offspring were 'legitimate': '[t]he British must have introduced the notion of a bastard to my people' (p. 71). The very choice of insult the community applies to its wayward child serves to illustrate the degree of Ibadan's cultural hybridity after five decades of colonial rule. Falola notes that when faced with the task of persuading the *emere* to 'commune with God so that he could opt to stay only on Earth', his family did not follow traditional African prescriptions, but instead 'chose the Christian God', dispatching their son to prayers, Sunday School and communion (p. 76).

Commenting that '[t]he *abiku*'s is a nervous condition in the Fanonian sense, as he flirts with multiple worlds', Ogunyemi argues that in centring on an 'elusive child who disorients his parents and the community because of his many incarnations and cultural pluralism', the *abiku* narrative offers a suggestive framework for the interpretation of

shifting postcolonial identities. The *abiku*'s 'inventiveness, transformations, and migrations' bear 'socio-political and metaphoric implications for Africa and the diaspora', offering a trope of flexibility, multiplicity and reinvention.⁶⁵ While this argument is persuasive, Ogunyemi's discussion tends somewhat towards generalisation, and should be set against McCabe's warning, in an essay which more carefully examines the historicity and heterogeneity of the *abiku* corpus in Nigerian literature, against a temptation for critics to 'hastily appropriate *abiku* to serve as a symbol for present-day, metropolitan concepts and concerns'.⁶⁶ In the case of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, however, the parallel between the child's 'change in metaphysical status' and the transformations concurrently reshaping the identity of his city and nation is explicitly drawn by a didactic narrator. Noting that his transgressive childhood journey was enabled by the colonial railway, Falola asserts that in their angry response to the disappearance and return of Toyin/'Emere',

His people forgot to take into account the forces at work, forces that they did not control, whose consequences they must interpret. The train that took him to Ilorin and the road that brought him back were part of the changes that the British introduced after 1893 [...] The train that Emere took did not end in Ilorin; it went further north to bring to Lagos peanuts that would find their way to far-flung places such as New York and London. New roads were built, the arteries to supply blood to the railways [...] Emere did not create the trains or the roads; he only used them for small geography lessons. (pp. 77-78)

In the latter part of the chapter Falola provides the reader with these 'small geography lessons', as he contextualises his acquisition of *emere* status in relation to the social, economic and cultural shifts which were reshaping his birthplace. He states that by the mid-twentieth century, Ibadan's landscape 'had been transformed so rapidly that the warriors of the nineteenth century would not recognize many parts of the city were they to wake up in their graves and take a walk'. While Europeans were ensconced in the

⁶⁵ Ogunyemi, pp. 664-665. Ogunyemi's essay explores how the *abikuloibanje* [the corresponding term in Igbo culture] trope is reconfigured by writers including Soyinka and J.P. Clark, whose poems, each titled 'Abiku', move the concept 'from a West-African, religio-medical terrain to the Westernized political and literary arena' (p. 665), Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, and, in a diasporic context, Toni Morrison in *Beloved*.

⁶⁶ McCabe, p. 45.

'zoo' of the Government Reservation Area, groups of African migrants, as well as Indian, Syrian, and Lebanese merchants, had also taken up residence, fundamentally altering the city's structure. Falola draws a distinction between the inherent heterogeneity and fluidity of traditional Yoruba society, and the disoriented chaos of the new, postcolonial city:

The warriors wanted to create a heterogeneous city, and they did so. Their concept of expansion and accommodation was different from the later concept. New people, usually young and restless, would identify themselves with a host and compound and be absorbed as family members. In the Ibadan of Emere's time, the city was more than heterogeneous, but the strangers created their own paths, brought their own goods, and created their own gods. (p. 78)

This disintegration of the traditional social fabric, Falola suggests, led to the unmooring not only of Ibadan's cultural identity, but of his own subjectivity, as '[i]n moving out of the older city, living in the new city with strangers, participating in new occupations and a new religion, a family could produce an *emere*' (p. 85).

Discussing the significance of the *ogbanje* motif in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, Eldred D. Jones notes that while literary representations of the *abiku/ogbanje* cycle have often focused on a 'sense of loss', the trope also bears the important connotation of 'rebirth'.⁶⁷ If Toyin's errant movements and ambiguous metaphysical status are analogous to the shifting identity of his city and nation during the turbulent transition from colonisation to independence, Falola's autobiography also mines the positive associations of the *abiku* as a figure embodying renewal. The use of the *abiku* child as a metaphor for Nigeria's problematic identity echoes the suggestion in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, whose young protagonist Azaro is also an *abiku*, that '[o]ur country is an *abiku* country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong'.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Eldred D. Jones, 'Editorial Article: Childhood Before and After Birth', in *Childhood in African Literature*, ed. by Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marjorie Jones (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 1998), pp. 6-8 (p. 7).

⁶⁸ Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 478.

iii) 'The genes of Ibadan growing in my body': Locating the postcolonial subject

Focusing on the child subject's relationship to the physical environment in Anand's, Falola's and Soyinka's life-narratives, my discussion so far bears out Warley's assertion that 'spatial location is crucial to post-colonial autobiographical self-representation'.⁶⁹ In calling for a more spatially-oriented critical approach, Warley highlights a need to address the diversity across formations of geographically located subjectivity in life-writing, arguing that readings of autobiographical texts 'must begin from the ground up and be alert both to the idiosyncratic and to the shifting nature of that ground'.⁷⁰ In this final section of my analysis I examine the precise 'grounds' of autobiographical identity in *Aké, A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, and *Seven Summers*, discussing how models of spatially located postcolonial subjectivity are constructed in each of the three texts.

In the final chapter of *Seven Summers*, the narrator states that 'when I think of the armed camps of Mian Mir and Nowshera, I recall the enchantment of many adventures not only in the heart of my own dreams and fantasies but in the broad outer world' (p. 229):

In what enchanted hours my senses and my heart opened to the beauties and terrors of the frontier landscape I do not remember. But I know that when I was nearing the age of seven, certain sights and sounds became indelibly fixed on my mind and formed the stable background of all my memories of later years. (pp. 229-230)

Krishan's very sense of self is shaped by his formative impressions of this 'outer world', the physical environment of his childhood. The young subject's gradual shift away from a colonial identification with 'Vilayat and Sahibdom', towards an incipient postcolonial subjectivity, unfolds in relation to his encounters with a series of spatial locations.

As Sharma observes, the young Krishan's consciousness is 'torn between the two polarities of the West and the East, represented at the simplest level by the father and

⁶⁹ Warley, p. 23.

⁷⁰ Warley, p. 29.

mother'.⁷¹ Cowasjee notes that in his autobiographical writings, '[w]hat is characteristic of Anand's relationship with his father is a complete reversal of opinion: a change from near-worship to a detestation of all things his father stood for', as 'Sahib and father came to be polarized against love for mother and country'.⁷² In *Seven Summers*, this transition begins in the aftermath of the Durbar, when Krishan's parents come into conflict over the bomb attempt on Lord Hardinge, perpetrated by 'Bengali secessionists who objected to the transfer of the capital' (p. 111). As the Arya Samaj is investigated by colonial authorities, the father develops a 'persecution mania', fearing his position in the regiment is under threat due to his previous membership of the organisation (p. 118). At this point, the narrator recalls, 'I began to notice a conspicuous change in my father's relations with us all' (p. 124). Krishan receives a 'violent thrashing' from his father, which 'made me hate him for ever on one side of my nature and largely transformed me into the uncompromising rebel that I became' (p. 125). The child's sense of injustice at the loss of paternal favour is contemporaneous with his recognition, as he enviously watches the chaperoned perambulations of John Longdon, the 'exalted son' of 'the "Karnel" Sahib' who is forbidden from talking to 'ragged native children' such as Krishan, 'that the splendours of life were only for the Sahibs in Lal Kurti, the English part of the cantonment, and degradation for those in the native regiments' (p. 129).

As a second bomb succeeds in wounding Lord Hardinge, anti-colonial resistance gathers pace after the Durbar. The 38th Dogra Regiment is mobilised when a group of rebel Pathans take Rawalpindi's Stationmaster hostage (p. 135). During this period, Krishan accompanies his father on official missions to the regiment's station in the frontier hills, the narrator recalling how 'I learned to know and love the changing colours of these hills through our visits to the camp' (p. 133):

And as the camp lasted for nearly three months, I came to know the devious tracks of the hills [...] And the secret thought arose in me: how many worlds there were beyond the beaten tracks of the cantonment! And what muscles were necessary to climb the hills and trudge through the dales! And how violent was the big world outside our home [...] (p. 134)

⁷¹ Sharma, p. 339.

⁷² Cowasjee, pp. 5-6.

With 'the pertinacity in logic of the enfant terrible', Krishan has comprehended the extent to which 'the whole atmosphere of the cantonment was dominated by the superior, exalted white sahibs, who lived rich lives in sequestered bungalows, curtained off and protected from the dust, the flies and natives by tall privet hedges' (p. 97). In the frontier hills he encounters a geographical space beyond the cantonment, a contested landscape which reveals the limitations of colonial power. The military operation ends in humiliation for the British, who are forced to pay the ransom. The narrator recollects that:

It filled my childish mind with great admiration for the daring of the Pathans when it became known that, far from taking him into the fastnesses [sic] of Waziristan, the thieves had sat with their victim for months under the railway bridge on the river Indus at Attock, while hundreds of sepoy had marched up and down the Grand Trunk Road. (p. 134)

In the wake of this incident, he states, 'the fear of the Sahib's might seemed to evaporate from people's minds, and even little children like myself mocked at the sepoy for having to eat humble pie from a handful of Pathans who had dared to defy the Angrezi Sarkar!' (p. 135).

The development of Krishan's postcolonial consciousness is linked to a transition towards identification with his mother, who 'was proved to be right' in her prediction that the army's route marches would fail to quell rising anti-colonial sentiments (p. 133). Shortly after the kidnapping episode, Krishan falls seriously ill when he is hit by a stone. His recovery marks the end of an 'earlier phase of my life when I had been more or less egocentric, regarding the whole world as an extension of my wishes', and the beginning of a second period in which he 'absorb[s] the outside world' (p. 162). His interest in the external environment is mediated by his mother, as during his convalescence she 'was building this world up for me every day, with stories and legends and myths' (p. 168):

My mother had a vast fund of folk tales, having heard them in her childhood from her own mother, as legends, fables, myths and other narratives of gods and men and birds and beasts have been told in endless variations for thousands of years on the flat roofs of the mud huts in the villages. (p. 165)

Coe notes that the trajectory of the relationship between Krishan and his mother in *Seven Summers* is 'unusual' within autobiographies of childhood, as 'it reverses the normal evolutionary pattern of the child-mother relationship, beginning with criticism, and culminating in admiration and love'.⁷³ Over the course of the narrative, the protagonist's initial admiration of his father, and the colonial power he serves, is replaced by a 'secret understanding between my mother and myself', as the child begins to value the indigenous culture he has previously considered unsophisticated (p. 168).

While the father is associated with the ordered colonial space of the cantonment, the mother is associated with 'the wild, free, open atmosphere of the village' (p. 193). It is a visit to his mother's birthplace in the Punjab, '[a]n episode which has almost come to seem idyllic in my later imaginings', which consolidates Krishan's nascent sense of postcolonial identity (p. 186). Leaving the 'clear-cut, neat and official world of Nowshera Cantonment', he travels with his mother and brothers to Daska, a picturesque agricultural village located in a 'vast stretch of green' (pp. 186-187). While the landscape is one of vibrant fertility, as Krishan admires the 'blades of green grass', yellow mustard fields and 'the blueness of that sky', the villagers are characterised by their 'generosity' and 'warmth' (p. 187, p. 189). Daska represents a location of indigenous identity and postcolonial resistance, as the child is addressed by his grandfather Nihal Singh, 'whose audacious deeds in the last Sikh War against the English had become imprinted on my mind' (p. 187):

[...] I know your mother is a rebel like me, for I filled her with hatred for the ferungis, who bought us off through the traitors rather than beat us into submission ... I have fought for the Khalsa, and I hope when you grow up you will be like me and your mother, rebels against the ferungis. You must not become their servants like your father [...]

(p. 190)

While she is criticised by relatives for her marriage to an army clerk and relocation to the city, the visit marks the boy's discovery of 'a new love for my mother, whom I came to

⁷³ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 152.

regard, in spite of the fact that her relations thought her a traitor to her village, as the very soul of this village of Daska' (p. 210). Just as the mother is characterised as 'a force of nature' who 'let us grow up in the dust as elemental creatures', Daska's rich cultural traditions represent an identity firmly rooted in the Indian soil (p. 225). Previously 'nurtured [...] on respect for the angrezi git-mit of the cantonment', Krishan acquires 'a love for Punjabi speech which I have never lost' as he listens to the recitation of poetry and folk songs:

the simple ditties of the Punjab, sung in the melodious voice of Uncle Sardari, broke the walls of the quarter in the cantonment in which we lived, demolished the barracks of Lal Kurti and the bungalows of the Sahibs by the river Lunda, and led me, across many deserts of hills and stones, along the Grand Trunk Road towards a country where there were no horizons, but only the vast and endless landscapes of Central Punjab with an open sky above [...] (p. 210)

As the barracks and the Sahibs' bungalows are symbolically 'demolished', the vision of a landscape without horizons suggests a space unmarked by colonial divisions. Listening to the song, Krishan both comprehends 'the reason for uncle Sharam Singh's jibe against us for being "townees and Babus"', and perceives that 'I had been sinning gravely in not worshipping every word my mother said. Somewhere in me I realized that, in spite of my own dependence on my mother, we had so far been much more our father's children than our mother's' (p. 210). In *Seven Summers*, the journey from the cantonment to Daska is instrumental in the formation of Krishan's postcolonial subjectivity (p. 196, p. 197).

In *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Falola also elaborates a fundamentally located model of autobiographical selfhood. Describing the naming ceremony which followed his birth, in which he received his *oriki*, he underlines the interconnections, in Yoruba culture, between the identities of the subject, clan, and geographical place:

I only had the genes of Ibadan growing in my body, as I relied on my main foods: milk and corn pap. I also had the prayers, with their set contents, added to my being. They repeated part of the prayers every morning. They began to call me Isola and to recite my poem, adding that of the city [...] (p. 56)

He records a mythical narrative of Ibadan's origins, in which the settlement's founding warriors consult a *babalawo* [diviner] in order to understand the character of their embryonic city. The *babalawo* releases two hundred snails which scatter in all directions, revealing the place's identity as one which is premised on dynamism and expansion: 'as the snails travel the city spreads' (p. 54). With his own birth, Falola comments, '[a] new child had come to expand the family and the city. One day, the baby would become an adult and follow the snail' (p. 56):

one segment of the family branched off to Western education during the twentieth century. One of the snails that the diviner requested when Ibadan was founded probably crawled to the coast, dropping into the sea and swimming across the Atlantic. Ibadan has expanded beyond the sea, bringing Toyin to the United States. (p. 55)

Citing Olabiyi Yai's assertion that 'the Yoruba have always conceived of their history as diaspora', Quayson emphasises the 'general notion of hybridity and inter-cultural exchange in Yoruba culture'.⁷⁴ Falola argues that during the height of Ibadan's 'modernity' in the nineteenth century, this 'city state' actively 'redefined the meanings of tradition, the boundaries of space, the character of individuals' (p. 35). As its essential character is one of hybridity, flux and transformation, the city's traditional identity is one which is able to accommodate the autobiographer's journey of expatriation.

Falola suggests, however, that this fluid indigenous tradition has been weakened by a very different, colonial model of static 'tradition' which was imposed on Ibadan, the city's dynamic culture rigidifying as the British disbanded its warriors and installed a 'gentle king' (p. 35). In 1893, the year that the British arrived and his father was born, 'my city, too, was reborn. It was reborn into tradition, losing its modernity. Rather than becoming postmodern, it regressed into the neotraditional' (p. 41). At the point when its inhabitants 'were about to move to the postmodern, the British came to force them to abandon modernity. Ibadan was not planning on tradition, it was the British who forced them' (p. 35). With independence, furthermore, a neo-colonial elite sought 'to enjoy life

⁷⁴ Quayson, p. 12.

and alienation as westerners, [...] to abandon tradition and rush to modernity', a shift which was equally detrimental to the city's native culture (p. 35). As J. Charles Taylor observes, Falola's use of the autobiographical form enables him to illustrate the impact of colonialism on individual subjects as well as broader communities.⁷⁵ The changes which 'violently reshaped' twentieth-century Ibadan have two major consequences in the life of the young Toyin: firstly, his acquisition of *emere* status; subsequently, the result of the inheritance parley which follows his father's death, identified by Falola as 'the second most important event that I remember from my childhood, the first being the train ride to Ilorin a year before' (pp. 106-107).

While James Adesina Falola died shortly after the birth of his son, the inheritance parley lasted a protracted ten years, as the family was 'caught in the middle of changing rules regarding inheritance and the rights of children, wives and the clan' (p. 105). The outcome sees the ten-year-old Toyin relocated to his cousin's home in an outlying district. Both geographically and culturally distant from the new city, Ode Aje is labelled a 'jungle' by his schoolfriends, who 'mocked me for going to the "interior," a sort of primitive backwater, instead of Lagos or London' (p. 113):

The big boys meant by a "jungle" the opposite of the notion of "civilization" – areas far away from Lagos and the Station were regarded as "backward" by the big boys, places to be avoided by those dreaming about traveling to London or Chicago [...] At first, I thought that the big boys were right. Much later I discovered for myself that my place of birth was the real jungle, located far away from established traditions, enduring customs, and tested habits. (p. 117)

Toyin's journey of discovery parallels Krishan's, as, in contrast to the Westernised space of metropolitan Ibadan, Ode Aje represents a rich 'laboratory of cultures'. This intricately built 'cobweb of compounds', where 'Yoruba was the only language of communication', is described as a 'zone of cults, homes of gods and goddesses, and celebrated masquerades' (p. 119). Ode Aje is a reservoir of the dynamic culture native to Ibadan,

⁷⁵ J. Charles Taylor, 'A Mouth Sweeter than Salt: An African Memoir', *Journal of Third World Studies* (Fall 2006) <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3821/is_200610/ai_n17195879> [accessed 14 July 2007]

which Falola identifies as a formative influence on his identity. By the age of twelve, he states,

I had come to understand my environment [...] I had become both Yoruba and Ibadan in the process [...]. Becoming Yoruba I owe to Ode Aje. If the big boys in the new city wanted me to think about change and overseas trips, I became a big boy myself at Ode Aje, thinking about Yoruba and old traditions [...] (p. 137)

The narrative challenges the colonial assumption, internalised by Toyin's classmates in the new city, that his relocation to Ode Aje was 'a journey of regression' while movement to Lagos, London or Chicago would have represented progress (p. 198). Falola discusses how such notions were perpetuated after independence by an urban elite scornful of *ara oko* [villagers]. Just as 'nineteenth-century European visitors to Africa' deemed the natives they encountered to be 'no better than dogs', in the twentieth century 'the new elements in the city' likened rural compatriots to 'monkeys on a tree' (p. 197). In this way, Falola remarks, both 'the racist Europeans and the "civilized Yoruba"' sought to 'turn others, because of their location outside the cities, into primitives, comparing them with monkeys, infantilizing their ideas, marginalizing their abodes' (p. 198). Falola's text inverts the conventional pattern of temporal distancing, in which a linear narrative of cultural development is mapped onto geographical space. Just as Krishan's postcolonial subjectivity crystallises in his encounter with the soil of Daska, Toyin's maturation is equated with his journey away from the new city, towards a space of indigenous culture.

If Ibadan is a place which 'redefined the meanings of tradition, the boundaries of space, the character of individuals', Taylor observes that the 'theme of redefinition' is central to Falola's autobiography. While foregrounding the postcolonial shifts which have reconfigured Ibadan, the narrative simultaneously appropriates and 'redefines' cultural forms the reader may have presumed to be a Western preserve.⁷⁶ Falola remarks that long before he went to university, his experience in Ilorin, by which he acquired the label of *emere*, was an education in 'postmodernism':

⁷⁶ Taylor (para. 2 of 4)

At the age of nine, I already knew the practice of deconstruction, only no one had told me there was a theory behind it. And years later some scholars made big names for themselves by talking about the multiple realities of an event, the multiple interpretations of an episode. (p. 67)

While the autobiographer's individual identity cannot be separated from that of Ibadan, the essence of this geographically located culture, far from representing a static past superseded in Nigeria's 'progress' towards Westernisation, embodies a resolutely non-Western 'modernity' or even 'postmodernity'. In moving beyond an isolate subject to address broader issues of postcolonial identity, *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* redefines both the generic conventions of autobiography, and the cultural assumptions of an implied Western reader.

In Soyinka's *Aké* the location of Isara, culturally remote from the Westernised enclave of the parsonage compound, assumes a significance comparable to that of Anand's Daska and Falola's Ode Aje as a space which is instrumental in the formation of the protagonist's postcolonial subjectivity. James Gibbs observes that while Abeokuta was a centre for missionary activity and European commercial activities from the mid-nineteenth century, Isara remained 'relatively isolated from the influence of Christianity and had comparatively little contact with white traders'.⁷⁷ Each New Year Wole's family decamps to this paternal ancestral community, perceived by the child as a 'second home – Essay's natal home'; 'another kind of home – several steps into the past' (p. 66, p. 67). Isara's traditional, agrarian Yoruba society is contrasted with the literate, Christian world of Aké, the differences between the two locations highlighted in the community's affectionate teasing of the 'Teacher's children' (p. 139). Taking Wole to visit his farm, Broda Pupa greets him with the announcement that 'I am taking you to school', handing him a cutlass in place of a 'pencil' (p. 131). When the party encounters a snake and Wole asks what he should do, he is advised to '[s]peak English to it' (p. 133).

Wole's paternal grandfather, 'Father', plays a crucial role in the narrative, as he teaches the boy that '[t]here is more to the world than the world of Christians, or books'

⁷⁷ James Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986), p. 2.

(p. 143). In the town of Isara, Soyinka explains, '[a]ll the grandparents were Father and Mother – and somehow we said these as if with capital letters' (p. 66). The naming of Father, however, is significant in its implication of the autobiographical subject's filiation to a patriarch who stands resolutely outside the Europeanised world of the parsonage. Wole notes that while Father's head is 'almost identical with the Canon's' in its impression of 'energy' and impregnability, his grandfather represents a cultural identity diametrically opposed to that of Pa Delumo:

The fact was barely discussed but I knew that he belonged in that same province of beliefs as the *ogboni* of Aké, as the priests and priestesses of various cults and mysteries against whom Wild Christian and her co-religionists sometimes marched [...] The occasion chosen for such a forage was the anniversary of the missionaries' arrival in Egbaland; their mission was to perpetuate the spirit of those missionaries and bring a few more pagans into the christian fold. (p. 139)

In this observation, the child distances himself from his mother 'and her co-religionists', this de-privileging of the imposed European religion reflected in the lack of a capital letter for 'the christian fold'. When Wole receives two hornet stings on a hunting expedition in Isara, he states that 'I bore my wounds proudly home and displayed them – not to Teacher and Wife – but to that other parent who had become a fellow conspirator, who truly embodied the male Isara for me in its rugged, mysterious strength' (p. 139). As 'home' becomes the ancestral compound in Isara, the child's biological parents – now 'Teacher and Wife' – are temporarily displaced by Father's alternative patriarchal authority. Wole recalls how, on the hunting expedition, he felt that he 'was under some special protection; in Isara, this was a constant, unquestioned state of mind, nothing could even threaten to unsettle it' (p. 138). When he relates this perception to Father,

he did not say, as Wild Christian would have done, 'God moves in mysterious ways'; he remarked instead:

'Ogun protects his own.'

I had heard that name before. I said to him, 'Ogun is the pagans' devil who kills people and fights everybody.'

'Is that what they teach you?' he asked. (p. 140)

Their exchange concludes with Father's declaration that '[y]ou and I have business tomorrow' (p. 143). This 'business' is the 'unprepared-for immersion' of a ceremony in which, by cutting and treating Wole's ankles, Father dedicates his grandson to the Yoruba divinity Ogun (p. 147). Gibbs observes that 'in the growth which *Aké* charts', this episode 'represents a profound and formative experience', an 'earthing' in which the adult Soyinka's literary and theoretical work is grounded.⁷⁸

In an interview, Soyinka himself suggests that this initiation at the hands of Father provided a framework for both his sense of self and of the broader world, as he describes how 'I use the Yoruba gods as creative metaphors. Sometimes as metaphors for my own existence'.⁷⁹ Discussing Soyinka's 'veneration of his Yoruba culture and [...] conviction that its world view offers a valid and adequate ground of metaphysical location for the Yoruba subject', Mpalive Hangson-Msiska observes that in Soyinka's writings on the Fourth Stage, 'Ogun's character and journey function as both metaphorical and metonymic of the structure of human experience as well as subjectivity'.⁸⁰ Ogun, the 'master artist' and the god of iron, is described by E. Bolaji Idowu as a 'pioneer deity' who 'goes in advance to prepare the road for others', a figure who mediates between worlds, as he is the first god in the Yoruba pantheon to breach the boundary separating the realm of divinities from terrestrial, human space.⁸¹ In his essay 'Morality and aesthetics in the ritual archetype', Soyinka argues that in Yoruba drama, the movements of the 'hero-gods' Ogun, Obatala and Sango constitute 'a projection of man's conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonise with his environment, physical, social and psychic'. Ogun, in particular, is associated with the liminal 'fourth space' which Soyinka terms 'the abyss of transition'. As 'his was the first rite of passage through the chthonic realm', Ogun embodies the 'creative and destructive essences' for

⁷⁸ James Gibbs, 'Biography into Autobiography: Wole Soyinka and the Relatives Who Inhabit *Aké*', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26, 3, (1988), 517-548 (pp. 524-525).

⁷⁹ Gullede, p. 512.

⁸⁰ Mpalive Hangson-Msiska, *Wole Soyinka* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 5.

⁸¹ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), pp. 85-87.

which this realm is a 'storehouse'.⁸² In *Aké*, Ogun's mobility across borders physical and metaphysical is echoed in the theme of boundary-crossing, as the young Wole's transition from an infant's consciousness to a fully-fledged subjectivity is forged through his exploration of physical environments beyond the compound. As Lindeborg notes, Wole is a figure in motion, a child who seeks to understand the journeys of metaphysical 'border-crossers', such as the *abiku* and *oro*, 'who inhabit the Fourth Stage'.⁸³ The boy scrutinises his *abiku* playmate, Bukola, as a conduit into 'something that would answer barely formed questions' (p. 100).

Phillip O'Neill suggests that as a figure who inhabits multiple spaces, calling up 'a system of plural meanings, a domain of related ideas that are present at the same time', Ogun represents a key to '*Aké*'s conception of how the self is written'. An initial reading of Soyinka's text might focus on the apparent 'contradiction between traditional life, and Wole's Christian upbringing', interpreting Father's ceremony as an induction into an 'authentic' African identity uncontaminated by colonial influence. O'Neill argues, however, that such a reading would fail to account for how *Aké*'s young subject is located in a culturally syncretic space from the very beginning, as the Christian 'God' envisaged on the first page is one whose voice has 'the timbre of the egungun'. In Soyinka's text, he suggests, the subject of postcolonial autobiography is 'no longer a purely private self but one that is distributed between two worlds', as *Aké* draws on 'neither an originary, romantic, Edenic Yoruba social and religious formation, nor a victorious, and hegemonic colonial Christianity to provide a basis for a unitary self'.⁸⁴ Instead, as in Falola's text, subjectivity is premised on a Yoruba worldview whose dynamism and 'incorporativeness' is able to accommodate cultural hybridity:

The world *Aké* describes is [...] a profoundly Yoruba world; the dominant interpretive framework is Yoruba. To this degree it is already postcolonial: instead of total replacement of the Christian world, *Aké* is an expression of a displacement of the

⁸² Wole Soyinka, 'Morality and aesthetics in the ritual archetype', in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1-36 (p. 1, pp. 26-27, p. 2).

⁸³ Lindeborg, p. 65.

⁸⁴ Phillip O'Neill, 'Postcolonial Subjectivity and Religious Systems in Soyinka's *Aké*', *New Literatures Review*, 24 (1992), 59-67 (pp. 60-63).

imposed religion [...] Christianity (and a Christianity that few Westerners would feel comfortable with) becomes just another discourse among many.⁸⁵

Prefiguring Falola's use of the *emere* trope, Ogun's mobility across co-existent spaces provides a model for Soyinka's conception of autobiographical subjectivity, as *Aké* rejects the canonical model of a stable, 'unitary and sovereign' self, 'produc[ing] instead a polytheistic and polycultural network in which the subject moves'.⁸⁶

This dynamic conception of postcolonial selfhood and cultural identity, O'Neill observes, is reflected in the political transition charted in *Aké*'s later chapters, as Wole participates in the 'Great Upheaval' of the women's movement (p. 181).⁸⁷ In his interview with Gullede, Soyinka responds to a question about the shift from the 'personal' to the 'political' at this juncture in the narrative. Reiterating that he aimed to 'capture a period' rather than an isolate autobiographical consciousness, he comments that this rebellion 'against the feudalism which existed and was protected by British colonialism' was 'one of the most dramatic, most memorable experiences of my childhood'.⁸⁸ Headed by Wole's aunt Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the women's movement challenges the taxes levied on trading women by the Alake of Abeokuta. Styled as the 'benevolent' 'father' of Egbaland (p. 193), the Alake is in fact an instrument of colonial power, bypassing Yoruba land laws to serve British interests; Ransome-Kuti later stated that in organising the rebellion, 'I didn't really attack Ademola [the Alake], I attacked imperialism. Those Europeans were using him against his people'.⁸⁹ Traversing *Aké* and its environs, Wole becomes the women's 'courier extraordinary, scout and general factotum', 'moving swiftly' between locations and 'settling down longest wherever there appeared to be some promise of action' (p. 213, p. 198). As Mary T. David observes, this experience represents 'an important stage in Wole's growing awareness of a world larger than *Aké* or Abeokuta'.⁹⁰ Beginning with defiance of the tax collectors they deem

⁸⁵ O'Neill, p. 65.

⁸⁶ O'Neill, p. 66.

⁸⁷ O'Neill, p. 67.

⁸⁸ Gullede, p. 520.

⁸⁹ Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 72.

⁹⁰ Mary T. David, "'There was a boy": *Aké* as Romantic Autobiography', *Literary Criterion*, 31 (1996), 83-93 (p. 90).

'servants of the white man in Lagos', the women's movement, with the postwar momentum towards decolonisation, becomes 'tangled up in the move to put an end to the rule of white men in the country' (p. 183, p. 200). The transgressive mobility of the women, as they breach the boundaries of the Alake's palace and the private, masculine space of the *ogboni* society, is mirrored in the dynamics of Wole's individual identity as he plans an 'assault on the broad fields and orchards of Government College', his interview at the school in Ibadan being the first time he has 'travelled out of Abeokuta without either parent' (p. 222, p. 186). Beginning with Wole's truant expedition with the police band, *Aké* charts a series of journeys across physical, cultural and political boundaries. In keeping with the subject's dedication to Ogun, the narrative traverses a series of interpenetrating worlds, Soyinka's postcolonial autobiographical identity formed in the movement between these spaces.

Conclusion

In each of the texts under discussion, colonial and postcolonial spaces are mapped through the account of a child subject's 'truant' mobility across spatial, social, and even metaphysical borders. In *Seven Summers*, Krishan traverses the political faultline manifested in the road which separates the cantonment's native and European zones, as Anand recalls the polarised colonial world of his childhood. In Soyinka's and Falola's texts, the syncretic spaces of postcolonial Nigerian societies are explored through Wole's and Toyin's errant journeys. In each text, a rural location of indigenous culture plays an instrumental role in the development of the protagonist's subjectivity, challenging the colonialist convention of mapping a narrative of cultural 'progress' onto geographical space, a conceit internalised by both Toyin and Krishan in their initial assumptions that the villages of Ode Aje and Daska represent primitive, undeveloped locations. *Seven Summers* invokes a traditional notion of indigenous subjectivity, as the maturing Krishan perceives his identity to be rooted in the ancestral village of Daska. In *Aké*, Isara is a site of comparable significance, yet the Yoruba identity into which Wole is initiated is one which is characterised by its dynamic capacity for reinvention. *A Mouth Sweeter than*

Salt, similarly, emphasises the mobile adaptability of the Yoruba culture which is foundational to Falola's sense of self. In this way, while portraying himself as an expatriate and a nostalgic 'narrator of a past that is no more', Falola is nevertheless able to draw on the traditional culture of Ibadan as an armature for his unconventional life-narrative. This culture is conceived not as a moribund subject for anthropological salvage, but a mobile resource, 'embodied' by the protagonist, which enables the continual reshaping of identity.

Chapter Four: Individual and Collective Representation

Introduction

While Olney names autobiography's defining concern as 'the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience',¹ Gusdorf argues that this individualist consensus arises only in the modern West, as:

conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life is the late product of a specific civilization. Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community.

No mode of autobiography, he claims, could emerge in 'primitive societies', as it 'is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist'.² In this way, as Smith and Watson observe, the notion of autobiography as a 'narrative enshrining the "individual" and "his" uniqueness' is premised on the definition of the Western sovereign self against an Other 'whose "I" has no access to a privatized but privileged individuality'. While 'Western Man' has been conceptualised as 'a unique individual rather than a member of a collectivity', the colonised Other has been subsumed into an 'amorphous, generalized collectivity', denied individual identity.³ In dominant Western discourse, the child has served as a figure for the individual's essential 'uniqueness', leading to the argument that narratives of childhood are 'the purest form of autobiography'.⁴ Coe asserts that as an introspective voyage into the private self, the autobiography of childhood is a characteristically Western genre which would be

¹ Olney, *Metaphors*, pp. 20-21.

² Gusdorf, pp. 29-30.

³ Smith and Watson, 'De/Colonization', xvii.

⁴ Pascal, p. 85.

'impossible' in cultures 'where the clan structure still predominates' and the subject 'derives his significance [...] not from his own qualities, still less from his own "uniqueness" as an identity, but rather from his family, his class, his totem, or the deeds of his remoter ancestors'.⁵

While Coe's model remains the standard reference point for interpreting autobiographies of childhood, the 'individualist' paradigm has been vigorously challenged within the wider field of autobiography criticism. Swindells argues that as it exposes 'tensions between consciousness and the social world', 'minority' life-writing requires a critical approach which moves 'beyond the subject of individual speech and individual authorship'.⁶ In her critique of the 'isolate individualism' propounded by Olney and Gusdorf, Friedman observes that while an 'emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities', it also fails to account for the role of collective consciousness as a 'source of strength and transformation'. Collapsing Gusdorf's argument that a sense of 'interdependent' identity would preclude the composition of autobiography, she suggests that for both of these reasons, the life-writing of women and minorities may emphasise 'interdependence' rather than independence.⁷

In an essay which considers these feminist responses to the individualist rhetoric of 'second wave' autobiography studies, Nancy K. Miller affirms the importance of investigating collective and relational identities, yet warns against assumptions that women's life-writing is definitively concerned with collective identity while male autobiographers necessarily adhere to an individualist model.⁸ In his essay on Soyinka's *Aké*, O'Neill makes a parallel point in relation to postcolonial life-writing. Addressing the formation of Wole's subjectivity in relation to collective social, cultural and political identities, he proposes that 'competing forces and traditions writing the self are more evident' in postcolonial literature, yet also cautions against presuming 'too rigid an opposition between the postcolonial self, one written by larger forces, and the traditional

⁵ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, pp. 15-16.

⁶ Swindells, p. 4, p. 6.

⁷ Friedman, p. 34, p. 56, p. 39.

⁸ Nancy K. Miller, 'Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography', *Differences*, 6, 1 (1994), 1-27 (pp. 3-5).

private self of the West'.⁹ An approach premised on simplistic oppositions between a presumed Western individualism and a non-Western concern with communal identity could lead to a reification of dominant critical assumptions, and a neglect of diversity within the category of 'postcolonial life-writing'.

These problems are evident, for example, in Olney's work on African life-writing. If Western autobiography is preoccupied with the 'isolate uniqueness' of the individual, Olney proposes that in contrast,

the life-portrait that the African autobiographer executes is not the portrait of "moi, moi seul," where the subject makes a claim of absolute uniqueness and imagines that his experience is unrepeated and unrepeatable; instead the African autobiographer executes a portrait of "nous, nous ensemble," and the life shared by the group now – by the phyle – is one lived countless times before, shaped by the ritual stages of birth and naming, initiation, marriage, parenthood, eldership, and death that have given form to the life of this people for as far back as the legendary, mythic memory of the people extends.¹⁰

While Olney's basic claim for the prominence of collective identities in African life-writing is supported by the recent work of African and diasporic critics such as Adetayo Alabi and Chinosole, his perceptive analyses of authors such as Camara Laye are undermined by a dualistic framework which leads to generalisation on a continental scale. He argues that while there may be a 'superficial diversity' across African autobiographies, all such texts have in common a 'typical unity' which reflects the 'extraordinary unity and cohesion' of 'African life' itself. This 'single, comprehensive premise' of 'unity', Olney claims, is 'to be found [...] in all African autobiography'.¹¹ While accepting the premise of Olney's communal thesis, Alabi criticises the binaristic, Eurocentric terms in which his argument is framed.¹² With Olney's Greek-derived coinage 'autophylography', a term intended to denote the centrality of group-

⁹ O'Neill, p. 67.

¹⁰ Olney, 'The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies: African vs. Western Autobiography', in *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by William L. Andrews (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 212-223 (p. 218).

¹¹ Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 52-54.

¹² Adetayo Alabi, *Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 6.

consciousness, African texts are generically partitioned off from Western autobiography, leaving intact assumptions about the individualist concerns of autobiography 'proper' while laying down a homogenising approach to the diverse field of African life-writing. Olney's generalisation about the communal 'unity and cohesion' expressed by African autobiographies leaves little room for considering texts which address social and cultural fragmentation in the aftermath of colonialism.

In their introduction to the recent volume *Telling Lives in India*, David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn also emphasise the need to avoid assumptions that non-Western life-writing is necessarily preoccupied with collective identity. If 'a paradigm of "collectivity" has tended to prevail' in South Asian cultural and literary criticism, as caste and other collective identities are assumed to take precedence over 'individual agency and a sense of selfhood', Arnold and Blackburn point out that this is partially a legacy of imperial, Orientalist scholarship and its assumption that 'articulate individuality was a hallmark of the West'. Arnold and Blackburn suggest that while autobiography critics should not expect 'to find the peculiar forms of individualism that emerged in the West replicated in India', South Asian life-narratives should be read not only for evidence of collective representation, but also for the different models of individual identity which may be found in non-Western cultures.¹³

Holden addresses this issue in his critique of Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography*. While the authors argue that contemporary postcolonial life-writers 'are proposing new concepts of subjectivity, as transcultural, diasporic, hybrid, and nomadic', engaging in 'autobiographical acts [which] move the "I" towards the collective', Holden observes that:¹⁴

There is a danger here that autobiographical texts are read in a way that confirms critical desire, that the "collective, provisional and mobile" subjects which the third wave of criticism celebrates are discovered in texts which may, in fact, resist such subject formation. Neocolonial and national projects in the South, for example, have frequently

¹³ David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, 'Introduction: Life Histories in India', in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, ed. by David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 1-28 (pp. 2-3).

¹⁴ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 132.

made use of collective identities in oppressive ways, and individual autobiographies have resisted this.¹⁵

In his study *Autobiography and Decolonization*, he comments that ‘unitary selfhood, on the one hand, and community, performativity, and hybridity, on the other, do not automatically fall into easy opposition in the manner Smith and Watson suggest’.¹⁶

This chapter discusses individual and collective representation in three contemporaneous life-narratives: Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*,¹⁷ George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*,¹⁸ and Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child*.¹⁹ Lamming’s narrative of childhood in Barbados moves beyond the individual subject to address a wider community; in an interview with George Kent, he suggests that in contrast to the metropolitan writer’s ‘atomized’ sensibility, the Caribbean author is concerned with a ‘public task’ of ‘shaping [...] national consciousness, giving alternative directions to society’.²⁰ Sandra Pouchet Paquet describes *In the Castle of My Skin* as a text which is ‘both singular and collective’ on not only a thematic, but a formal level, as Lamming’s analysis of relationships between subjectivity and communal identity in the postcolonial Caribbean is reinforced by challenges to generic convention.²¹

Natalie Sandomirsky refers to Laye’s *The Dark Child*, originally published in French as *L’Enfant Noir*, as ‘the earliest and most important avowed autobiography’ by a francophone African writer.²² With the appearance of James Kirkup’s English translation, the text was installed as a canonical work of African literature more generally; indeed,

¹⁵ Holden, ‘Other Modernities’, p. 92.

¹⁶ Holden, *Autobiography and Decolonization*, p. 40.

¹⁷ Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951; Mumbai: Jaico, 2000). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁸ George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953; Harlow: Longman, 2000). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁹ Camara Laye, *The Dark Child*, trans. by James Kirkup and Ernest Jones (1953; New York: The Noonday Press, 1995). All further references are to this edition; page numbers will be given in parentheses in the main text. Kirkup’s English translation was first published as *The Dark Child* (London: Collins, 1955). The 1965 Collins edition was published as *The African Child*, later editions returning to the title *The Dark Child*. All citations of the French text refer to Camara Laye, *L’Enfant Noir* (Paris: Plon, 2005).

²⁰ George E. Kent, ‘A Conversation with George Lamming’, *Black World*, 22, 5 (1973), 4-15 and 88-97 (p. 90). Original emphases.

²¹ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 111.

²² Natalie Sandomirsky, ‘Africa: West and Central (Francophone)’, in *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. by Margaretta Jolly (London and New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), vol. I, pp. 13-15 (p. 14).

Adele King notes that ‘more criticism has been written on Laye by English-speaking than by French-speaking Africans’.²³ *The Dark Child* represents an apt choice for analysis in the present chapter, as it has been extensively discussed by anglophone critics in relation to issues of individual and collective representation. While referring primarily to the English text, I will also be drawing comparisons with Laye’s original French as I highlight issues raised by the translation process.

While Lamming’s and Laye’s accounts of childhood are framed by the metropolitan exile of their young adult narrators, Chaudhuri’s persona in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is that of a middle-aged man who has never visited England ‘nor in fact anywhere outside my own country’ (p. 1). In the course of the narrative, however, his relationship to his ‘own country’ is revealed as deeply problematic. Ambiguously dedicated ‘to the memory of the British Empire in India which conferred subjecthood on us but withheld citizenship’, the *Autobiography* subverts the celebratory narrative of Indian nationhood. Upon its publication, Eunice DeSouza observes, Chaudhuri was variously denounced in his homeland as ‘anti-Indian, pro-British, a fascist, a man and a writer as atavistic as he says India has become’.²⁴ While, as R.K. Kaul notes, the *Autobiography* sits uneasily within the conventional schema of a transition from ‘colonial’ to ‘postcolonial’ consciousness, it is a more complex and contradictory text than the straightforward apologia for imperialism it has sometimes been taken to represent.²⁵

My discussion begins by focusing on generic hybridity, and its implications for autobiographical voice, in Chaudhuri’s, Lamming’s and Laye’s texts. The second section addresses issues of individual and collective identity raised by representations of ancestry, place and community. I conclude with an analysis of the precise relationships between individual and collective representation in the three narratives.

²³ Adele King, *The Writings of Camara Laye* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 107.

²⁴ Eunice DeSouza, ‘Nirad C. Chaudhuri’, in *A History of Indian Literature in English*, ed. by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 209-218 (p. 209).

²⁵ R.K. Kaul, *Nirad C. Chaudhuri: The Renaissance Man* (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1998), pp. 14-15.

***i) 'More of an exercise in descriptive ethnology than autobiography':
Representative voices and generic hybridity***

Chaudhuri describes *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* as 'more a national than personal history', and '[m]ore of an exercise in descriptive ethnology than autobiography' (p. 547, p. 149). In the sequel volume *Thy Hand, Great Anarch*, he reasserts that '[i]n spite of its title', his earlier text 'was not truly an autobiography. It was a picture of the society in which I was born and grew up'.²⁶ The suggestion that the postcolonial autobiographer simultaneously becomes an ethnographer or historian implies a degree of generic hybridity, and a contingent modification of the autobiographical voice. Similar issues are raised by *In the Castle of My Skin*, which has generally been categorised as 'autobiographical' rather than 'autobiography' proper. In his introduction to the 1953 McGraw-Hill edition, Richard Wright classifies the text as an 'autobiographical summation of a tropical island childhood', while observing that if 'Lamming's story [...] is his own, it is, at the same time, a symbolic repetition' of a broader pattern of Caribbean and black experience.²⁷ This simultaneous articulation of individual and collective histories entails a disturbance of autobiography's conventional boundaries.

While Chaudhuri's and Lamming's texts, in these different ways, foreground their own ambiguous generic status, Laye's *The Dark Child* has often been interpreted as a straightforward example of the autobiography of childhood, in which a first-person narrator identified by name with the author recollects his early life and the development of his identity. In the preface which has accompanied most editions, Philippe Thoby-Marcelin praises the author's 'candid sincerity' and 'the authenticity of the testimonial', affirming that this is 'not a novel. It is an autobiographical story' (p. 7). Yet the very description of Laye's text as a 'testimonial', whose value resides in its 'authenticity', attributes to the postcolonial life-writer a responsibility for accurately representing his/her broader culture. In sharp contrast to the criteria of individuality against which Western autobiographies would typically be measured, Thoby-Marcelin states that as a reader, he

²⁶ Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), p. xiv.

²⁷ Richard Wright, Introduction, *In the Castle of My Skin* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), pp. v-viii (pp. v-vi).

‘can not resist the temptation of applying to the whole Malinké people’ Laye’s observations about his childhood experience (p. 11). Thus, even when read by metropolitan critics as an unmediated account of ‘the simple life of a dark child of the great plain of Guinea’, *The Dark Child* has raised issues of collective representation (p. 11).

Invoking a generic ‘dark child’ – or, in Laye’s original choice, ‘Guinean child’ – the title suggests a significance beyond the individual life.²⁸ King describes *The Dark Child* as a text which ‘builds upon the European model of the story of a child’s initiation into a gradually wider society, and seems to be addressed first of all to foreign readers for whom Laye wants to establish the dignity and value of traditional Malinké culture’.²⁹ While Laye cited Flaubert’s *L’Éducation Sentimentale* as a primary influence, King suggests that in *The Dark Child*, this Western narrative model is reshaped, made to incorporate an ethnographic function in order to advance a postcolonial agenda of collective representation.³⁰ Through explanatory accounts of Malinké custom, and a widespread use of collective pronouns, the text sets up a relationship between a representative African narrator and an implied Western reader. In this way, Laye’s individual memories become an ethnographic record, as he states that ‘among my people children are weaned very late’, and ‘[i]t is the custom with us for twins to agree about everything’ (p. 65, p. 71). Interestingly, this tendency is amplified in the English translation, particularly its earlier editions. As King notes, Kirkup introduces first-person collective pronouns where none exist in the original: in the 1955 Collins edition, for example, ‘our dry season’ is substituted for ‘la saison sèche’.³¹ Effecting a subtle shift in autobiographical voice, and a reconfiguration of the relationship between the narrator and implied reader, this editorial decision may reflect the same metropolitan assumptions

²⁸ King discusses how Laye’s original title, *L’Enfant de Guinée*, was changed at the request of the publisher, Plon, ‘presumably to give the book a wider appeal’. King, *Camara Laye*, p. 5.

²⁹ Adele King, ‘Audience and Exile: Camara Laye and Mongo Beti’, in *Artist and Audience: African Literature as a Shared Experience*, ed by Richard A. Priebe and Thomas A. Hale (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1979), pp. 141-148.

³⁰ John Conteh-Morgan, ‘Laye, Camara’, in *Encyclopaedia of African Literature*, ed. by Simon Gikandi (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 284-286 (p. 285).

³¹ Laye, *The Dark Child* (London: Collins, 1955), p. 53; Laye, *L’Enfant*, p. 55. My emphases. See King, *Camara Laye*, pp. 104-5.

about the 'representative' value of non-Western autobiography which inform Thoby-Marcelin's preface.

The use of a child protagonist underwrites the text's ethnographic agenda, as the young subject's gradual acquisition of knowledge provides a structural device for the Western reader's own introduction to Malinké society and culture. Discussing the tropes of childhood and education in *The Dark Child*, Christopher Miller argues that as the text simultaneously records the child's education and 'performs education' for a primarily Western audience, this didactic function carries a political implication. In the context of Africa's colonisation, he observes, the concept of childhood 'is anything but an innocent idea', one which 'cannot be separated from the political control of knowledge in the colonial context'. In one of the first francophone African texts to gain a popular Western readership, Miller points out, the opening statement 'I was a child' resonates with postcolonial significance.³² If the autobiography of the African as a child foregrounds the trope of infantilisation which has historically debarred the colonised Other from autobiographical narration, Miller suggests that Laye inverts this colonial hierarchy through the repositioning of the Western reader as an ignorant 'child' in relation to the intricate structures of an African culture, an argument corresponding to my own reading of Falola's text in chapter three.

In a speech delivered to a 1963 Dakar conference on francophone African literature, translated into English as 'The Soul of Africa in Guinea', Laye addresses the relationship between individual and collective representation, autobiographical and ethnographic impulses. Living in Paris, he feared the fading of memories of 'my own country and my family' which sustained him. The autobiography enabled an imaginative reclamation of Guinea, as 'I would sit down to write and, in my thoughts, I was back again with my friends and family, beside our great river, the Niger'. Initially, he states, 'I was only thinking of myself', writing 'in order to feel less alone', the composition of an autobiography consolidating his sense of identity in the face of dislocation. He argues, however, that his narrative developed into a wider attempt to revive the 'mysteries' of an African culture to which his childhood was witness. Addressing the francophone African

³² Christopher L. Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 127-128. The translation is Miller's; in Kirkup's text, Laye's 'J'étais enfant' (p. 9) is translated as 'I was a little boy' (p. 17), gendering the child figure.

intelligentsia present at the conference, Laye offers *The Dark Child* as a contribution to postcolonial cultural nationalism in its expression of a collective 'African soul'.³³

Appealing not only to a Western but an African readership, and combining elements of autobiography and ethnography, Laye's narrative exemplifies Mary-Louise Pratt's model of 'autoethnography', which she defines as writing:

in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.

These heterogeneous texts, Pratt argues, are 'addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group', and involve 'partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror'.³⁴ In *The Dark Child*, individual and collective identities are negotiated through just such a 'dialogue'. In an essay on Nafissatou Diallo's account of Senegalese childhood, Julia Watson discusses the way in which Diallo's 'narrative role hovers between performing ethnographically as a cultural witness and acting autobiographically as the constructor of a past to frame her own subjectivity', an instability which 'reflects her complex discursive positioning as an autoethnographer'.³⁵ The same process is evident in *The Dark Child*.

Laye's narrative, however, continually foregrounds the limitations of the autoethnographic undertaking. A second distinguishing feature of his autobiographical voice is a tentative, conjectural tone which represents a counterweight to the authoritative use of collective pronouns, reflecting the 'sense of cultural loss' which, Thomas A. Hale has noted, 'permeates' the text.³⁶ In the first chapter, the child's observation of his father

³³ Camara Laye, 'The Soul of Africa in Guinea' in *African Writers on African Writing*, ed. by G.D. Killam (London/Ibadan/Nairobi: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 156-164 (p. 157, p. 158, pp. 160-162).

³⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7. Original emphasis.

³⁵ Julia Watson, 'Unruly bodies: Autoethnography and authorization in Nafissatou Diallo's *De Tilène au Plateau* (A Dakar Childhood)', *Research in African Literatures*, 28, 2, 34-56 (p. 42).

³⁶ Thomas A. Hale, 'From Written Literature to the Oral Tradition and Back: Camara Laye, Babou Condé, and *Le Maître de la Parole: Kouma Lafôlô Kouma*', *The French Review*, LV, 6, (1982) 790-797 (p. 793).

with a totemic black snake, the 'guiding spirit of our race', prompts an awareness of his own uneasy propulsion into another culture and episteme (p. 26):

It was like a conversation. Would I too converse that way some day? No. I would continue to attend school. Yet I should have liked so much to place my hand, my own hand, on that snake, and to understand and listen to that tremor too; but I did not know whether the snake would have accepted my hand, and I felt now that he would have nothing to tell me. I was afraid that he would never have anything to tell me. (pp. 28-29)

Robert Green discusses how the 'theme of ruptured knowledge' is reinforced by a narrative voice which communicates 'the difficulty Laye experienced in *understanding* and explaining what he could *recall* with such clarity'. As an exilic auto-ethnographer, Laye's 'informants' and 'archives' are 'limited to his own bare memories', yet cultural distance from his childhood community limits his comprehension of these sources.³⁷ The visual recollection of the father's 'magic charms', a 'row of pots that contained extracts from plants and the bark of trees', is unproblematic, yet the narrator fails to explain their significance, his observation that 'they were the most important things in the hut', and that each had 'its own particular property', followed by the admission that 'exactly *what* property I did not know: I had left my father's house too soon' (p. 19, original emphasis). Green notes that the text is dominated by 'a pattern normally very rare in the conventional memoir or autobiography – a pattern of self-interrogation, succeeded by a negative answer and/or a provisional hypothesis'. Referring to the tom-tom signal which heralded the harvest at Tindican, Laye remarks that: 'I could not have said then why it was kept and why the signal was only given after the cutting of a swath from each field. I knew that it was customary and inquired no further [...] I was not old enough nor curious enough to inquire, nor did I become so until I was no longer in Africa'. No authoritative explanation of the ritual can be provided, as his survey of possibilities is marked by conjecture: 'Today I am inclined to believe'; 'I do not remember'; 'Was that what was involved here? I can not say. All I know is that [...]' (p. 56). As Green suggests, the

³⁷ Robert Green, "'L'Enfant Noir" and the Art of Auto-Archaeology', *English Studies in Africa*, 27, 1 (1984), 61-72 (p. 66, p. 61, p. 62). Original emphases.

hypothesising tone problematises any interpretation of *The Dark Child* as a 'straightforward, uncomplicated record of [Laye's] childhood in Guinea'.³⁸

Jonathan Carr-West contends that *The Dark Child* is fractured on the levels of both autobiography and ethnography, as the narrative dramatises a 'process of loss, deriving from an incomplete movement between two paradigms'.³⁹ In the previous chapter I referred to O'Neill's argument that in *Aké*, Soyinka constructs autobiographical identity in a flexible movement between disparate cultures and epistemologies, representing the inherent hybridity of a Yoruba worldview. For Laye, Carr-West argues, such accommodation is not a possibility, as his text reinforces, and fails to bridge, an assumed dichotomy between Cartesian rationality and the radically different worldview of the writer's Guinean childhood. If *The Dark Child* 'is not only a childhood memoir' but 'also a fundamentally ethnographic project, an attempt to explain Africa to a non-African audience', Carr-West notes that both of these genres require the narrator's childhood 'to be precisely recollected and accurately represented through clearly comprehensible categories'. Laye, however, is faced with an 'epistemological crisis between past and present', as lacunae arise from the autobiography's failure to adequately 'encompass a childhood experienced on the basis of a different cultural and signifiatory praxis'.⁴⁰ Far from offering an unmediated testimonial of 'the simple life of a dark child' of Guinea, *The Dark Child* foregrounds the postcolonial life-writer's precarious relationship to the collective identity for which he speaks.

Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that in Chaudhuri's work, a 'compulsive autobiographical impulse' is bound up with an equally compulsive concern with national identity, as his 'twin themes' are 'himself and India, sometimes himself as an Indian, at other times India as defined by his own life'.⁴¹ In *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, his record of childhood in East Bengal is bound up with an account of Indian history and the culture of the Bengal Renaissance. In the prefatory note to Book II, Chaudhuri explains how these historical and 'ethnological' aims have forced him to

³⁸ Green, p. 62, p. 61.

³⁹ Jonathan Carr-West, 'Forgotten histories, misremembered cultures: literature and the politics of cultural memory in francophone West Africa', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 1, 3 (2001), 21-34 (p. 27).

⁴⁰ Carr-West, pp. 27-28.

⁴¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 117.

depart from generic conventions of the autobiography of childhood, differentiating his text from canonical works by Aksakov, Renan, France, Hudson and even Tagore:

I am not, like them, calling up its [childhood's] memories and recording them either as things interesting in themselves or as a foil to my later life. It is not the aim of this book to create that kind of romantic interest or contrast. There is no room in it, since it is more of an exercise in descriptive ethnology than autobiography, for presenting childhood against the background of age, for presenting it as a submerged City of Ys or as the times when the intimations of immortality lay about us. If there is to be any vanished or vanishing Atlantis to speak of in this book, it should and would be all our life lived till yesterday. All that we have learnt, all that we have acquired and all that we have prized is threatened with extinction. (p. 149)

As Alastair Niven observes, Chaudhuri's tone 'is not the conventional melancholy of experience looking back nostalgically upon lost innocence but the despair of an historian witnessing the waning of civilisation'.⁴² Rather than offering a Romantic portrait of childhood as a kernel of autobiographical selfhood, the narrator declares his 'aspiration that the book may be regarded as a contribution to contemporary history' (p. ix).

Cynthia Abrioux argues that this generic hybridity represents a 'fundamental methodological confusion' in the *Autobiography*.⁴³ A proliferation of methodological notes, in a series of prefaces and asides, suggests authorial anxiety over the unconventional structure of a text which is both a public autobiography, and a historiography in 'autobiographical form' (p. ix). As in *The Dark Child*, these issues of hybridity are linked to the relationship between a postcolonial autobiographer and an implied Western reader, as Chaudhuri states that 'I have written the book with the conscious object of reaching the English-speaking world' (p. x). His later reflections on the genesis of the *Autobiography* highlight the problem of his tenuous claim to narrative authority as an 'unknown' postcolonial subject. While wishing to record 'the kind of life

⁴² Alastair Niven, 'Contrasts in the Autobiography of Childhood: Nirad Chaudhuri, Janet Frame and Wole Soyinka', in *Autobiographical and Biographical Writing in the Commonwealth*, ed. by Doireann MacDermott (Barcelona: Editorial AUSA, 1984), pp. 175-180 (p. 177).

⁴³ Cynthia Abrioux, 'A Slow Alienation: Nirad Chaudhuri's Bengali Childhood in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, *Commonwealth*, 15, 1 (1992), 20-28 (p. 26).

we had in India, especially in Bengal, in the last decades of British rule,' he doubted 'that anybody would pay any attention to the autobiography of a wholly unknown and obscure man'. He intended to make his name with a 'serious historical work', to which the autobiography would be an 'epilogue', yet academic failure thwarted this ambition. In the year of India's independence, he experienced an epiphany:

As I lay awake in the night of 4-5 May, 1947, an idea suddenly flashed into my mind. Why instead of merely regretting the work of history you cannot write, I asked myself, do you not write the history you have passed through and seen enacted before your eyes, and which would not call for research? The answer too was instantaneous: I will. I also decided to give it the form of an autobiography.⁴⁴

In place of the history he is not authorised to write, a modified version of the autobiographical form enables Chaudhuri to assert an alternative authority for his record of India, which he outlines in the final chapter of the *Autobiography*:

I am setting down all this with the sole object of making it clear to the reader that to the interpretation of Indian history I am offering I have brought something more than mere reading. I have lived a part of the history of my country and my people in my own life and that has put me in sympathy with the entire process, so that my conception of Indian history is no longer purely external. I do not need to discover India by reading books, mostly in English by Englishmen [...] I have not uprooted myself from the native soil by sojourn in a foreign country or by foreign schooling [...] (p. 553)

Here, the text's generic hybridity appears not so much a 'methodological confusion' as a considered response to the precarious authorial status of an 'unknown Indian'. Asserting a narrative authority premised not on 'foreign schooling' but on participation in a lived 'Indian history', Chaudhuri closes his text with an overt challenge to the methods of colonialist historiography, paralleling his initial declaration of intent to transgress conventions of the autobiography of childhood.

⁴⁴ Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand*, pp. 868-869.

This combination of the autobiographical form with elements of historiography and ethnography is reflected in the text's narrative focalisation and voice. Niven notes that the *Autobiography* differs from other postcolonial autobiographies of childhood, such as Soyinka's, in that rather than recreating the naïve 'artlessness of childhood', Chaudhuri projects a learned, adult perspective back onto his earliest memories.⁴⁵ The departure of the rainy season, for example, is likened to 'passing from Shakespeare's sea dirge to Webster's land dirge' (p. 9). In his recollections of the Durga Puja celebrations, the autobiographer positions himself both as a participating subject and a remote observer, recalling how '[w]e the boys' were immersed in the festival, yet also remarking that the Puja rituals are a matter for a 'Frazer or a Dumezil to unravel' (p. 74, p. 73). Such shifts between familiarity and scholarly defamiliarisation underline Chaudhuri's ambiguous relationship to the community he portrays. Chetan Karnani observes that while the descriptive account of the Puja is constructed as an 'anthropological showpiece' for a Western readership, its tone is also 'nostalgic', as the autobiographer seeks to reclaim a childhood place and culture from which he is estranged.⁴⁶ Autobiographical and ethnographic impulses map on to contradictory cultural positions, as the narrator is simultaneously identified with, and distanced from, the collectivity he represents.

Chaudhuri's idiosyncratic style and diction, over which he professes self-consciousness as 'an author whose English was not learnt from Englishmen', also reflects multiple cultural positions (p. xii). His language is described by Abrioux as 'heavily Victorian in that the choice of words and syntax tends to be stilted, pompous and learned', a point echoed by Ranasinha, who comments that the *Autobiography's* 'ornate English is distinctly formal, late Victorian', marked by the colloquialisms of upper-class British argot.⁴⁷ Chaudhuri's discourse slips startlingly between pseudo-academic and informal registers:

my mental dexterity became versatile [...] I came to be called "Jack of all trades, master of none" by those who did not like me and my ways. To them I appeared like a squid or

⁴⁵ Niven, p. 176.

⁴⁶ Chetan Karnani, *Nirad C. Chaudhuri* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 31.

⁴⁷ Abrioux, p. 27; Ruvani Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), p. 75.

octopus of the world of knowledge. But they forgot that even a squid was not all tentacles and suckers, and my intellectual nucleus was certainly more solid than the body of the unlovely cephalopod. (p. 393)

Reading his style as a failed attempt at cultural 'self-translation', Ranasinha paraphrases Sara Suleri's analysis of V.S. Naipaul to suggest that if it is the 'anguish of affiliation' which 'dictates the grimly perfect grammar' of the *Autobiography*, it is, ironically, this 'apparent polish' which betrays the author's distance from the metropolitan culture to which he aspires.⁴⁸

In view of Chaudhuri's challenges to generic convention, however, these issues of voice might be interpreted very differently. In the opening sentences, the narrator unravels a seemingly unproblematic reference to Kishorganj as a 'country town', drawing attention to the relationships between culture, language and literary form:

Kishorganj, my birthplace, I have called a country town, but this description, I am afraid, will call up wholly wrong associations. The place had nothing of the English country town about it, if I am to judge by the illustrations I have seen and the descriptions I have read, these being my only sources of knowledge about England [...] (p. 1)

K. Chellappan argues that this passage sets the tone for a narrative which defines India 'negatively, in terms of what it is not', as an Anglophile autobiographer identifies with the colonising culture in an attempt to transcend the contradictions of his hybrid heritage.⁴⁹ Amit Chaudhuri, however, offers an alternative reading, suggesting that in addressing the linguistic and cultural gap between 'Kishorganj' and the 'country town', the narrator 'dismantl[es] the canonical English and literary resonances of the phrase in order to convey a lived but unacknowledged reality'. Like his 'country town', Chaudhuri's 'English' is revealed as a language which is 'in-between, a hybrid, a colonial construct'. In interpreting India for a Western audience, Amit Chaudhuri observes, the autobiographer is simultaneously examining his own relationship to English culture,

⁴⁸ Ranasinha, p. 76.

⁴⁹ K. Chellappan, 'The Discovery of India and the Self in Three Autobiographies', in *The Colonial and the Neo-Colonial Encounters in Commonwealth Literature*, ed. by H.H. Anniah Gowda (Mysore: University Printing Press, 1983), pp. 95-106 (p. 98).

‘both defining himself against it, and also addressing a part of himself, in that the west is profoundly a part of the intellectual formation of the modern Indian’.⁵⁰ Referring to the notorious ‘Minute’ in which Macaulay called for the formation of ‘a class of interpreters’ who would be ‘Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes’, Homi K. Bhabha identifies colonial mimicry as the outcome of a ‘flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English’. Bhabha discusses the subversive potential of the ‘area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double’.⁵¹ In keeping with his challenges to Western literary convention at the level of genre, Chaudhuri’s autobiographical voice might be seen to inhabit this liminal area, as its idiosyncrasies threaten to estrange an implied English reader from the language, culture and identity they comfortably presume to be their sole preserve.

While Chaudhuri’s narrative blurs the categories of autobiography, historiography and ethnography, *In the Castle of My Skin* is positioned on the borders of autobiography and fiction. Charles R. Larson attributes the text’s canonical status within postcolonial literature to its successful articulation of both ‘personal history and private history, the individual and the collective identity’, an achievement underwritten by a ‘radically experimental’ structure which is premised on a ‘merging [of] the autobiography and novel forms’.⁵² In his introduction to the 1983 Schocken edition of *In the Castle of My Skin*, Lamming echoes Chaudhuri’s and Laye’s remarks on how their autobiographies necessarily became representations of broader communities, as he recalls how, ‘[i]n the desolate, frozen heart of London, at the age of twenty-three, I tried to reconstruct the world of my childhood and early adolescence. It was also the world of a whole Caribbean reality’. Under the imperative of representing this community, he constructed a narrative whose ‘methods denote a break from conventional practice’. An emphasis on the ‘collective character’ of the village, over and above a ‘central individual consciousness’, carried implications for narrative form and voice:

⁵⁰ Amit Chaudhuri, ‘Recovered Histories: Poles of Recovery from Dutt to Chaudhuri’, *Interventions*, 4, 1 (2002), 89-105 (p. 102).

⁵¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 124-5, p. 123. Original emphasis.

⁵² Charles R. Larson, *The Novel in the Third World* (Washington DC: Inscape, 1976), p.104, p.106, p. 90.

In this method of narration, where community, and not person, is the central character, things are never so tidy as critics would like. There is often no discernible plot, no coherent line of events with a clear, causal connection. Nor is there a central, individual consciousness where we focus attention [...] Instead, there are several centers of attention which work simultaneously and acquire their coherence from the collective character of the Village.⁵³

If *In the Castle of My Skin* de-privileges the singular autobiographical subject as a sole focaliser of events, the autobiographical pact is further undermined by the ambiguous relationship the subject/narrator bears to Lamming's authorial 'signature'. As in Kincaid's work, naming works both to invite, and resist a straightforward autobiographical reading: while the identification of the protagonist as 'G.' implies both continuity and difference between subject and author, the name of 'Creighton' village echoes, yet is not identical to, that of the author's birthplace, Carrington's Village. Commenting on the naming of Creighton, Lamming states that 'I wanted to give the village that symbolic quality', as he sought to create a narrative relevant not only to Barbados but 'to all of the other islands'.⁵⁴ With the fictionalisation of proper names, conventions of autobiographical verisimilitude are subordinated to the Caribbean writer's 'public task', as Lamming implies that adherence to the autobiographical pact would insist on a specificity which limits the narrative's 'symbolic', collective meaning.

In her extensive work on Lamming, Paquet's interpretation of the text's contentious autobiographical status shifts in relationship to developments in autobiography theory. In her 1982 study, *The Novels of George Lamming*, she unequivocally concludes that as *In the Castle of My Skin* employs novelistic narrative strategies in the service of conveying a communal Caribbean history, it is 'unsatisfactory as autobiography'.⁵⁵ In more recent analyses, however, she views the text as not only an autobiographical, but meta-autobiographical work, whose generic hybridity reflects the search for an appropriate form for representing postcolonial Caribbean identities:

⁵³ George Lamming, Introduction, reprinted in *In The Castle of My Skin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. xxxv-xlvi (pp. xxv-xxxviii).

⁵⁴ George Lamming, 'Texas Dialogues', in *Conversations: George Lamming*, ed. by Richard Drayton and Andaiye (London: Karia Press, 1992), pp. 57-76 (p. 61).

⁵⁵ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *The Novels of George Lamming* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 14.

Lamming's choice of genre signals reservations about autobiography as the appropriate vehicle for reconstructing the vanished world of childhood and adolescence from a position in exilic space. The autobiographical novel as opposed to autobiography suggests a conflict between the cultivated subjectivity of straight autobiography and "the world of a whole Caribbean reality," between the author as subject of the narrative and the author as creator of that narrative.⁵⁶

The text's dispersal of narrative across multiple voices and centres of consciousness, Paquet argues, foregrounds the very mechanisms by which autobiographical identities are formed, as a 'splitting or doubling of the authorial persona into lyrical voice and collective chorus makes autobiographical discourse the subject matter and content of the text'.⁵⁷

As in *The Dark Child*, an initial division is established between the child subject, located within his natal community, and an adult narrator in metropolitan, exilic space. *In the Castle of My Skin* begins with a retrospective, first-person account of an early memory centring on the family home, invoking generic conventions of the autobiography of childhood. The events of G.'s ninth birthday, marked by torrential rains and the flooding of the village, are initially viewed through the eyes of a young subject who mourns the 'watery waste of my ninth important day' (p. 1). Focalisation, however, swiftly transfers to the consciousness of a reminiscing adult, with the observation that '[a]s if in serious imitation of the waters that raced outside, our lives – meaning our fears and their corresponding ideals – seemed to escape down an imaginary drain that was our future' (p. 2). While an interplay between the discrepant perspectives of a child subject and adult narrator is a conventional feature of the autobiography of childhood, Lamming also moves beyond G.'s voice, introducing an omniscient, third-person narrative strand whose purpose is to contextualise the story within a wider history of colonisation:

⁵⁶ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Foreword, *In The Castle of My Skin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. ix-xxxiii (p. x).

⁵⁷ Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography*, p. 130.

An estate where fields of sugar cane had once crept like an open secret across the land had been converted into a village that absorbed some three thousand people. An English landowner, Mr Creighton, had died, and the estate fell to his son through whom it passed to another son who in his turn died, surrendering it to yet another. Generations had lived and died in this remote corner of a small British colony, the oldest and least adulterated of British colonies: Barbados or Little England as it was called in the local school texts.
(p. 17)

It is through such perspectival shifts that the narrative links G.'s experiences of childhood and coming-of-age to an account of the village's betrayal and dispossession. Patricia Ismond notes that while Kincaid's *Annie John* addresses issues of Caribbean identity within the insular, familial setting of a precocious child's small world, Lamming's account of Caribbean childhood engages similar concerns through the portrait of a wider plantation community.⁵⁸ As the maturing protagonist negotiates a crisis of identity, colonial bonds are called into question by the strikes and riots of the late 1930s and the wartime crisis of Empire, only to be replicated in the rise of an indigenous elite personified by the aptly-named Slime, schoolteacher and aspiring landlord.

References to the mythology of Barbados as an exemplary colony underline the story's 'symbolic' weight as a paradigmatic narrative of postcolonial experience more generally. In chapter three's account of the Empire Day celebrations, Lamming sets out the narrative of filiation which has legitimated colonial rule:

Three hundred years, more than the memory could hold, Big England had met and held Little England and Little England like a sensible child accepted. Three hundred years, and never in all that time did any other nation dare interfere with these two. Barbados or Little England was the oldest and purest of England's children, and may it always be so.
(p. 29)

This official version of the colonial encounter, in which '[n]obody in Barbados was ever a slave', is juxtaposed with the silenced history of the Middle Passage, as the omniscient

⁵⁸ Patricia Ismond, 'Jamaica Kincaid: "First They Must Be Children"', *WLWE*, 28, 2 (1988), 336-341 (P. 337).

narrator likens the image of choreographed 'squads' of schoolboys, 'packed close', to 'the spectacle [...] of an enormous ship whose cargo had been packed in boxes and set on the deck' (p. 49, p. 28). Chinosole points to chapter three as an example of how *In the Castle of My Skin* serves to 'revolutionize our concept of the autobiographical self', as G.'s individual consciousness 'is dispersed by diverse collective voices'.⁵⁹ Moving between an omniscient voice and the perspectives of the schoolboys and headmaster, the polyphonic account of Empire Day illuminates the complex ways in which a colonial narrative ventriloquised by the inspector and teachers propagates a false consciousness of history and identity. The narrative shifts from the boys' innocent debate on how the King's face has been stamped on the souvenir pennies they have each received, metaphorically suggesting the imprinting of colonial subjectivity, to their confusion over Queen Victoria's historical role in 'freeing' a population supposedly never enslaved, to the private humiliation of the headteacher cuckolded by Slime, a harbinger of the village's later betrayal from within. Chinosole argues that this multistranded narrative structure serves not only to clarify the historical and political contexts of G.'s childhood, but to place the text in relationship to a black, communal, oral narrative tradition, presenting a 'strategic' challenge to dominant, Western assumptions about 'the meaning and expression of the autobiographical textual self'.⁶⁰ If the reproduction of a monolithic colonial narrative of identity, perpetuated by Empire Day, imprints a false consciousness which renders the village susceptible to exploitation, Lamming's text embodies an alternative, emancipatory mode of narrating Caribbean identities, in whose complex, polyphonic structure self and community are inextricably linked.

ii) 'As though my roots had been snapped from the centre of what I knew best': Ancestry, place and community

In each of the texts under discussion, the interwoven account of a personal past and a communal history is framed by the adult narrator's dislocation from the world of his

⁵⁹ Chinosole, *The African Diaspora and Autobiographics: Skeins of Self and Skin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 83.

⁶⁰ Chinosole, p. 72.

childhood. *In the Castle of My Skin* concludes with G.'s 'farewell to the land' (p. 295), *The Dark Child* with the protagonist boarding an aeroplane and clutching a map of the Paris metro as '[t]he earth, the land of Guinea, began to drop rapidly away' (p. 187). In *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Chaudhuri's assertion that 'I have not uprooted myself from the native soil' is complicated by partition, a rupture which locates his birthplace outside the boundaries of India, troubling the notion of an autochthonous national identity (p. 553). In the previous chapter I discussed how, in Anand's, Falola's and Soyinka's narratives, the journey to an ancestral village serves to consolidate the subject's sense of identity. I now examine how the trope of filiation to an ancestral community anchored in a 'native soil' may be problematic for postcolonial life-writers, an issue which represents a point of correspondence between Chaudhuri's, Lamming's and Laye's texts.

Paul R. Bernard argues that in *The Dark Child*, the exiled autobiographer charts his relationship to a collective African identity through the 'structuring of locale', the protagonist's trajectory of alienation mapping onto the narrative's movement from 'communal' spaces of traditional African identity to urbanised settings associated with Western, individualist values, such as the capital Conakry and the implied location of Paris. His birthplace Kouroussa, Bernard notes, is a 'focal point between traditional setting and modern locale', which 'contains the seeds for the protagonist's potential integration into the community or his separation from it'.⁶¹ Described as 'déjà une ville', Kouroussa encompasses not only Laye's traditionally-organised childhood home, but the colonial school and railway.⁶² Representing colonialism's impact on the West African landscape, the Conakry-Niger railway passes perilously close to the family compound, as sparks from the trains set fire to the reed fence and threaten to send 'the whole concession [...] up in smoke' (p. 21). As in Falola's text, the young protagonist's fascination by the railway line foreshadows the dislocation wrought by his schooling. In the original French, Olney observes, this connection is more emphatically made, Laye's patterning of

⁶¹ Paul R. Bernard, 'Individuality and Collectivity: A Duality in Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir*', *The French Review*, LII, 2 (1978), 313-324, (p. 315).

⁶² Laye, *L'Enfant*, p. 39. The sense of an inevitable, encroaching urbanisation is lost in Kirkup's translation, 'actually a city' (p. 44).

references to the *chemin de l'école* and *chemin de fer* linking the colonial impositions of the school and railway as analogous vehicles of exile.⁶³

The first two chapters address the domain of Laye's father within the ordered, bounded world of the compound. Both parental characters, in *The Dark Child*, bear representative functions. A figure of authority among the community of blacksmiths and 'the head man in our concession', the father is a craftsman who is 'uncompromising in his respect for ritual observance' (p. 24, p. 37). He is both an archetypal Malinké patriarch and a representative of the transformative power of artistic creation; Sonia Lee observes that the metalsmith, a figure described by Léopold Sédar Senghor as 'the polytechnician of magic and art', occupies a privileged position in many West African cultures.⁶⁴ In chapter two, the narrator recalls witnessing the 'noble' ritual of gold smelting, in which his father drew on the collective knowledge of his 'race' of craftsmen, mediating between matter and 'the genies of fire, of wind, of gold' to forge a solid object of value and beauty (p. 36). Through the *griot's* song, the child is able to comprehend this paternal inheritance:

The go-between installed himself in the workshop, tuned up his *cora*, which is our harp, and began to sing my father's praises. This was always a great event for me. I heard recalled the lofty deeds of my father's ancestors and their names from the earliest times. As the couplets were reeled off it was like watching the growth of a great genealogical tree that spread its branches far and wide and flourished its boughs and twigs before my mind's eye. (p. 32)

Fredric Michelman notes that in Kirkup's text, issues of translation somewhat diminish the resonance of this pivotal episode. While the translation of *bijou* as 'trinket' plays down the value of the ceremony's product, the term 'go-between' effaces the *griot's* culturally specific role in a communal process of artistic creation (pp. 31-32).⁶⁵ If these points of vocabulary convey a 'trivial' tone at odds with Laye's reference to an 'almost religious' process, Michelman suggests that even more importantly, the translator's

⁶³ Olney, *Tell Me Africa*, p. 139.

⁶⁴ Sonia Lee, *Camara Laye* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), p. 23.

⁶⁵ Laye, *L'Enfant*, p. 25.

decision to pare down repetitions of words and phrases may impinge on the text's expression of a Malinké cultural identity at the level of form (p. 35). Just as Laye refers to his father's 'incantations' and the fixed, ritual forms of the *griot*'s songs, Michelman observes that his account of the gold smelting bears an 'incantatory cast', the repetitive, rhythmic patterning of Laye's prose recalling Senghor's assertion that 'incantation' is 'the seal of *négritude*' (p. 35).⁶⁶ Laye invokes this claim of Senghor's in 'The Soul of Africa in Guinea', as he cites the 'rhythm' of his father's artistic creations as a formal expression of the collective 'African soul'.⁶⁷ In *The Dark Child*, the subject's decision to 'attend school' rather than 'remain in the workshop' has effected a rupture of this inheritance (p. 27):

What words did my father utter? I do not know. At least I am not certain what they were. No one ever told me. But could they have been anything but incantations? On these occasions was he not invoking the genies of fire and gold, of fire and wind [...] Yes. Almost certainly he was invoking these genies [...] (p. 35)

Michelman suggests that even as the conjectural voice foregrounds the autobiographer's tenuous relationship to his ancestral culture, the rhythmic, repetitious quality of Laye's narrative asserts a claim of continuing kinship.

Located in fertile agricultural land beside the Niger River, Laye's maternal ancestral village is nostalgically portrayed as an idyllic, cohesive society which exemplifies the virtues of communally organised African culture. In Tindican, the narrator states, 'I used to notice a dignity everywhere which I have rarely found in cities. One did not act without duly considering such action, even though it were an entirely personal affair. The rights of others were highly respected' (pp. 62-63). In this autochthonous community the land is viewed as an animate entity, whose 'genii' are 'supplanted' to in the harvest rituals (p. 55). Laye's account of the harvest emphasises both the village's communal consciousness, into which individual identities are subsumed, and a confluence between this collective body and the natural environment:

⁶⁶ Fredric Michelman, 'From *L'Enfant Noir* to *The Dark Child*: The Drumbeat of Words Silenced', in *Toward Defining the African Aesthetic*, ed. by Lemuel Johnson (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1982), pp. 105-111 (pp. 106-107).

⁶⁷ Laye, 'The Soul of Africa', p. 162.

When they had reached the first field, the men lined up at the edge, naked to the loins, their sickles ready. My uncle Lansana or some other farmer – for the harvest threw people together and everyone helped everyone else – would signal that the work was to begin. Immediately, the black torsos would bend over the great golden field, and the sickles begin to cut. Now it was not only the morning breeze which made the field tremble, but also the men working. (p. 57)

Robert Philipson observes that in recollecting Tindican as a rural utopia, Laye's autobiographical narrative invokes the convention of figuring the childhood world as a prelapsarian idyll. Yet if the narrator's 'primary literary conceit' is the representation of 'his *Guinée natale* [as] a paradise lost', Philipson suggests that in placing 'emphasis on the community' rather than the individual, *The Dark Child* significantly modifies this trope, mourning the loss of a 'childhood idyll' whose communality is distinctively 'African – as opposed to Rousseauesque'.⁶⁸

Bernard observes that the mother, Daman, 'functions as a unique or particular character' in Laye's text while 'representing simultaneously the broader category of traditional African values'.⁶⁹ In the dedicatory poem 'To My Mother', Laye hails her both as 'Dâmon of the great race of blacksmiths' and as a generic 'Dark woman, African woman', echoing Senghor's poem 'Femme Noire', in which the male narrator addresses an African homeland personified as a nurturing female body.⁷⁰ In verses Kirkup's translation omits, Laye figures the African mother as an embodiment of the mother country or continent: 'Femme des champs, femme des rivières, femme du grand fleuve'; 'toi qui la première m'ouvris les yeux aux prodiges de la terre'.⁷¹ As a specific character in the narrative, Daman is characterised by her enforcement of social conventions, as a woman who 'saw to it that everything was done according to her own rules; and those rules were strict' (p.68). Outlining his mother's 'authoritarian attitudes', the narrator challenges the cultural assumptions of a Western reader who might assume 'the role of

⁶⁸ Philipson, p. 76.

⁶⁹ Bernard, p. 317.

⁷⁰ Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Femme Noire', *Les Corrigés.com*
<http://www.lescorriges.com/acces/commentaire_leopold_femme_noire.php> [accessed 12 July 2008]

⁷¹ Laye, *L'Enfant*, dedication (no pagination).

the African woman' to be 'a ridiculously humble one', as he states that '[t]he woman's role in our country is one of fundamental independence, of great inner pride' (p. 69).

If the mother and father are equally significant figures in the narrator's negotiation of his relationship to a collective African identity, Laye's text establishes strongly gendered oppositions between a paternal preserve of knowledge, culture and creativity, and a maternal domain of domesticity which is less progressive, governed by rigid convention. Pauline Ada Uwakweh identifies the *The Dark Child* as a classic example of the masculine African bildungsroman, in which the young, male protagonist's progress in the public sphere of education is set against the static 'backdrop' of the traditional, private world symbolised by the mother.⁷² The father endorses his son's emigration in the hope he will contribute to Guinea's postcolonial transformation, affirming that: 'Yes, I want you to go to France. I want that now, just as much as you do. Soon we'll be needing men like you here' (p. 182). As King notes, the father's 'perspective has moved beyond family and tribe to the nation', as he envisages a reinvented, postcolonial 'spirit of the race'.⁷³ As an unbending guardian of tradition, the mother is less adaptable, implacably opposing the departure she perceives as a severance of familial and communal bonds:

Your place is here ... What *are* they thinking about at the school? Do they imagine I'm going to live my whole life apart from my son? Die with him far away? Have they no mothers, those people? They can't have. They wouldn't have gone so far away from home if they had. (p. 184)

Exile is described as a painful rending from the body of the motherland, a process of 'being torn apart' which prompts the narrative's composition (p. 187). Yet if the mother's village provides the central symbol of collective African identity in *The Dark Child*, the male autobiographer is more closely aligned with a paternal inheritance. In his account of

⁷² Pauline Ada Uwakweh, 'Carving a Niche: Visions of Gendered Childhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, in *Childhood in African Literature*, ed. by Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marjorie Jones (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 1998), pp. 9-21 (p. 10).

⁷³ King, *Camara Laye*, p. 33.

exile from a Guinean motherland, Laye seeks to claim a position within the 'father's house' of ancestral culture, reasserting his filial identity as an 'African child'.

In the Castle of My Skin also charts a young subject's movement towards a precarious position 'on the circumference of two worlds'. As his education prepares him to leave the village and the island, G. perceives that 'my roots had been snapped from the centre of what I knew best' (p. 212). Where Laye's autobiography appeals to an identity immemorially anchored in the soil of an African motherland, for the Caribbean writer, the concept of a rooted genealogy is problematic as a basis for imagining community. Addressing a 1965 conference, Lamming comments that in this region, colonialism's legacy was 'a population composed entirely of emigrants! That is: people, slave or otherwise, who had no indigenous link, no ancestral claim on the soil which was to become their new home'.⁷⁴ In his 1983 introduction, he observes that:

All this would have to be incorporated into any imaginative record of the total society. Could the outlines of a national consciousness be charted and affirmed out of all this disparateness? And if that consciousness could be affirmed, what were its true ancestral roots, its most authentic cultural base?⁷⁵

In *The Dark Child*, Laye's utopian portraits of his childhood world evoke the wholeness of a community from which the adult narrator has become estranged. Commencing with an image of flux, *In the Castle of My Skin* evokes no such originary stability. Arguing that in Lamming's text 'the narration of childhood, far from being the recovery of an "agrarian" ideal, becomes a return to the history that represses selfhood', Simon Gikandi points out that its 'inaugural moment of narration [...] is one of loss, a loss of identity and ontological bearings', initiating:

a narrative process that reveals the anxieties of selfhood and community surrounding the colonial subject [...] If a birthday is the cultural code for the integrity of self and the possibility of fulfilling desire, then Lamming's narrator has become witness to a symbolic dissolution of his own selfhood [...] The terms for narrating a genealogical

⁷⁴ Lamming, 'The West Indian People', *New World Quarterly*, 2, 1 (1966), 63-74 (p. 66).

⁷⁵ Lamming, Introduction, p. xxxvii.

moment have been reversed, the boy's place within the social framework that is disintegrating under the forces of nature is put into question, and his relationship to inherited meanings is subverted.⁷⁶

The rising waters symbolise a dissolution of both selfhood and community, as G. remarks that 'the season of flood could change everything. The floods could level the stature and even conceal the identity of the village. With the turn of my ninth year it had happened again' (p. 3). The recurrence of the floods, and the erasure of a birthday described as 'my ninth celebration of the consistent lack of an occasion for celebration', establish the sense of a cyclical rather than progressive temporality (p. 1). This suspension of identity is manifested in the lacunae which disrupt the protagonist's memory and ancestry:

what did I remember? My father who had only fathered the idea of me had left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered me. And beyond that my memory was a blank. It sank with its cargo of episodes like a crew preferring scuttle to the consequences of survival. (p. 3)

The image of family memories as the lost cargo of a wrecked ship recalls the trauma of the Middle Passage, a broader rupture of genealogy for which G.'s absent father is a synecdoche. As his mother, Miss Foster and Bob's mother discuss the desertion of their menfolk, 'rehearsing, each in turn, the tale of dereliction told a thousand times during the past week', G. observes that 'they were three pieces in a pattern which remained constant. The flow of its history was undisturbed by any difference in the pieces' (p. 16). Just as the floods do not alter but only 'conceal' the village's 'identity', which is presumed to be perennial, the idea of a repeated 'pattern' governing relationships between the community's men and women suggests a blockage of Caribbean historicity.

Larson discusses how the earlier chapters evoke this sense of static 'continuity' through parallels between the atemporal consciousness of childhood, and the villagers'

⁷⁶ Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 75-76.

sense of a community linked to the land and the landlord by indissoluble bonds. The 'boyhood world is experienced in the present continuous', as Trumper comments that:⁷⁷

'Tis always like this at home. The way we is here. My mother over yonder in that corner, an' my father down there in that corner, an' me somewhere else [...A]n' for the moment you feel nothing ever change. Everything's all right, 'tis the same yesterday an' today an' tomorrow an' forever as they says in the Bible. (p. 112)

Concurring, Boy Blue states that at home 'I get the feelin' that I always this size, an' all I try to remember, I can't remember myself bigger or smaller than I is now' (p. 112). The boys understand their individual subjectivities not in terms of historical emplotment and future development, but as suspended within a unchanging collectivity: '[e]verybody in the village sort of belong. Is like a tree. It can't kind of take up the roots by itself; we all sort of live together [...] An' 'tis the same in the other villages [...] I don't ever get the feelin' whatever I say that anythin' could change' (p. 136).

Just as the boys are poised on the cusp of adolescence and individuation, however, the community's sense of rooted stability is revealed as illusory. The landlord's house is initially perceived to 'hold a quality of benevolent protection'; in the aftermath of the labour strikes, when the possibility of the community's eviction is first raised, Creighton's inhabitants are unable to 'conceive for a moment the land as being other than the village, and on careful reflection the threat of notice to a whole village seemed ridiculous. It would have been a threat to the landlord himself' (p. 21, p. 90). Larson comments that the only traditional patriarchal relationship in the text is the feudal connection symbolised by Creighton's 'castle' gazing down on the settlement which is named for him.⁷⁸ Fostering an illusion that the village is a timeless community, the colonial discourse of filiation naturalises Big England's 'parental' embrace, occluding a history of dislocation and oppression. When recollecting his childhood, Lamming remarks in his 1983 introduction, 'I shudder to think how a country, so foreign to our own instincts, could have achieved the miracle of being called Mother'.⁷⁹ The imposition

⁷⁷ Larson, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Larson, pp. 97-98.

⁷⁹ Lamming, Introduction, p. xxxviii.

of a false genealogical narrative thwarts the development of black solidarity; when his customers voice their gratitude for the 'high pitch' education system Big England has bestowed on her diminutive colony, the dissenting shoemaker retorts that 'if you tell half of them that work in those places [schools] that they have something to do with Africa they'd piss straight in your face' (p. 96).

As a colonial rhetoric of filiation has blocked the emergence of a historical and communal consciousness in the Caribbean, the concepts of the motherland and the 'father's house' of cultural patrimony each become problematic as frameworks for imagining collective identity. Highlighting Lamming's 'telling' departure from autobiographical fact in erasing the role a stepfather played in his childhood, Paquet suggests that the text's 'absence of fathers' represents a 'broader theme of cultural orphanage that is the legacy of colonial history' in the Caribbean.⁸⁰ Creighton's oldest inhabitants, Pa and Ma, are identified by G. as archetypal parents of the community: while they 'weren't related to us by blood', they 'were Pa and Ma nevertheless' (p. 6).

Representations of ancestry, in *In the Castle of My Skin*, are shaped by a masculinist gender politics comparable to Laye's. As Paquet notes, Lamming's Creighton is a deeply 'gendered space', in which women are associated with a 'conservatism' which frustrates the movement towards a genuinely postcolonial consciousness.⁸¹ While G.'s mother prioritises her son's education, telling him that '[t]he mind was the man, [...] and if you had a mind you would be what you wanted to be and not what the world would have you', she laments his resistance to authority (p. 212). When his rebelliousness was mentioned on school reports, the narrator remembers, his mother 'wept to think that everything had been wasted' (p. 255). On the eve of his departure for Trinidad, she presents G. with a copy of the Gospels and a list of rules and prohibitions (p. 271). Prefiguring the mother's parting words in *Annie John*, her 'unbearable' admonishment that 'You never miss the water till the well run dry,/ You never miss a mother till she close her eye', hints at a manipulative, stifling aspect of the maternal embrace, constraining the emergence of the child's autonomous subjectivity (p. 256). Like the mother in *The Dark Child*, she disapproves of the boy's emigration to a 'strange country',

⁸⁰ Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography*, p. 123.

⁸¹ Paquet, Foreword, p. xiv.

the journey which will ultimately enable G. to comprehend his postcolonial identity (p. 270). As David Williams argues, Ma is a similarly conservative figure, characterised by her stoicism and adherence to tradition, expressed in a religious faith that is 'indivisible from her loyalty to a feudal structure which she regards as ordained by God'.⁸² When Pa asks his wife's opinion on the conflict between Slime and the landlord Creighton, she replies: 'I not going to fly in God's face 'cause He knows best, an' what he think right ain't in my power to know' (p. 71).

Pa, by contrast, is defined by a dynamic, interrogative intelligence, providing a model for G.'s own use of 'inquiry' to supplement an incomplete cultural 'memory'. In chapter ten, Nana Wilson-Tagoë observes, Pa becomes a 'bearer of mythical history' as his 'shamanistic' dream 'affirms the revelatory and illuminating possibilities of the collective unconscious and challenges the historical void in which Slime's movement defines its freedom'.⁸³ Invoking a black, communal identity, Pa's speech articulates a racial memory of the African past and the Middle Passage, in which '[t]he silver of exchange sail cross the sea and my people scatter like clouds in the sky'. 'The only certainty these islands inherit', he observes, is Columbus's original 'mistake', this 'sailor's' accidental arrival beginning a cyclical pattern which has since 'gone on and on from father to son 'mongst the rich and the poor' (pp. 202-203). Pa's visionary analysis of the Caribbean's traumatic history, and the redemptive possibilities of collective consciousness, is the 'ancestor' of Lamming's own narrative; in the text's concluding paragraphs Pa supplies the starting point for the story of self and community the adult G. will write in exile, as he identifies the floods as 'the beginnin' o' so much in this place' (p. 295).

Issues of ancestry, place and community are equally prominent in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, as Chaudhuri asserts that it is 'the basic principle of this book that environment shall have precedence over its product' (Book I, prefatory note, no pagination). Book I focuses on the societies which constituted 'the early environment of my life', the narrator's portraits of Kishorganj, Banagram, the patrilineal seat of 'the clan and blood', and Kalikutch, 'the village of my mother's folk', illustrating

⁸² David Williams, Introduction, cited edition of *In the Castle of My Skin*, pp. v-xv (p. xi).

⁸³ Nana Wilson-Tagoë, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 81.

his profoundly ambivalent relationship to the broader community he represents (p. 1, p. 55). The tributary of the Brahmaputra which bisects Kishorganj is both 'full of life', a source of sustenance and sensual pleasure, and a 'decayed river' in its 'impoverished old age', whose dark pools harbour leeches and fish reputed to 'attack[...] human beings in shoals' (pp. 2-4). Beauty and vitality coexist with menace and decay in this natural environment, and, following the text's 'basic principle', in the society which is its 'product'. Just as the town's two banks betray a 'divided' character, the ordered, progressive space of the childhood home, which Chaudhuri's 'reformist' parents modelled on European norms under the modernising influence of the Bengal Renaissance, contrasts with a brutal, chaotic aspect of society laid bare by the father's practice in criminal law (p. 31). Kishorganj, Chaudhuri states, 'had its share of murders': unfortunate neighbours were variously 'maimed', 'killed in bed while asleep or assassinated while out after dark' (p. 51). The young Nirad is regaled with stories of 'abductions, rape, robberies, riots, and arson', even glimpsing the 'corpses of murdered men' while 'blood-smearing men sat nonchalantly in the office hut of my father'. In a stark inversion of Laye's image of choreographed sickles as a symbol of the communal organisation of rural society, Chaudhuri recalls the bloodied sickles which were shown to his father as evidence in cases of violent dispute over the harvest (pp. 50-51).

In common with Laye's Kouroussa, the town of Kishorganj, 'raised up' by the British as a regional headquarters, is a meeting-point of indigenous and colonial cultures, its roofs a patchwork of 'thatch' and 'white corrugated iron' (p. 1). In Chaudhuri's, as in Laye's text, the account of an ancestral village serves to clarify the narrator's attitude towards a communal mode of identity native to the region in which he was born. At Banagram, Chaudhuri states, 'the presence of the ancestors was quite masterfully felt' (p. 59). In contrast to Laye's Tindican, Banagram is definitively 'not an idyll of lyrical nostalgia'; Chaudhuri's reference to the 'hold which our ancestral village had on us' denotes an oppressive, rather than sustaining force (p. 56).⁸⁴ He recalls how '[a]s soon as we arrived at Banagram we became aware of blood', the siblings obediently reciting the 'catechism' of their 'genealogy' until 'the human beings whom we saw appeared to be no

⁸⁴ William Walsh, *A Manifold Voice: Studies in Commonwealth Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 30.

longer human beings but fruits hanging from the tiered and spreading branches of a tree' (p. 59). The image of the family tree, and the stasis of its suspended 'fruits', recalls Trumper's simile of the 'tree' for Creighton village as it implies the indivisibility of individual identities from the larger community. Alluding to Wordsworth, Chaudhuri suggests that these communal values frustrated both social progress and the development of individual identities, as children were taught that 'the past and the future belonged to the ancestral village' (p. 57):

The example of the elders made the children think of themselves as trailing clouds of glory come from the village which was their home. It was a remarkable tribute to the power of the old tradition that through it even the children's feeling for the place where they were born, in which they were steeped, and which seemed all in all to them, was swamped at times, and accompanied always, by the loyalty to the absent village. (p. 58)

The forces of 'decay' which inhabit Chaudhuri's childhood environment are seen to stem from this traditional culture, rooted in the landscape itself. Banagram, he states, epitomised the 'degradation of the old patriarchal Bengali life', which had fallen into 'repulsive degeneration' (p. 88). As in Lamming's and Laye's texts, the male autobiographer's critique of a static traditionalism is sharply gendered, as the most malign aspects of village life are the 'dark and terrifying' practices of the women, whose 'revolting' superstitions, witchcraft and feuds are rooted deep in their 'primeval, subconscious being' (p. 87).

In rejecting his ancestral community, Chaudhuri identifies with the liberal parents who, feeling an 'inner revulsion' towards 'the empty shell of the past', paid Banagram 'the homage it claimed' only as a 'matter of duty and form' (p. 84, p. 88). He describes how 'our family grew up as a true family – composed of the father, the mother, and the children', departing from the oppressive norm of the 'joint' family, which was 'more like a tribal camp than a family' in its 'pure collectivism' (p. 161). The Chaudhuri household was structured by 'ideas propagated by the new cultural movement, mainly based on the formula of a synthesis of the cultural values of the East and West, which passes under the name of the Indian Renaissance' (p. 212). Chaudhuri argues that beyond its nuclear structure, his family was distinguished from others in Kishorganj by its 'single quality of

being disciplined' (p. 181). While his mother was 'an uncompromising puritan to whom nothing was more revolting than superstition' (p. 154), the father 'intuitively imbibed the humanistic spirit' of his times, endeavouring 'to make it the spiritual heritage of his children' (p. 171). The autobiographer's family becomes a synecdoche for the wider movement of the Bengal Renaissance, as:

in our personal development and in our gradual absorption of this culture, we recapitulated national history as embryos are supposed to recapitulate the evolution of the species. We were initiated into the values stage by stage in the same order as they made their appearance in Bengali society. (p. 213)

Chaudhuri characterises himself as one of the last inheritors of this culture, born in the very 'stage of its ripeness which just precedes decline' (p. 212). The father's 'pioneering spirit' was instrumental in his acquisition of these values, as he carefully supervised his childrens' study and recreation, bequeathing his own interest in 'linguistic culture' as he 'drilled' young Nirad in the English and Bengali languages (p. 175, p. 173, p. 171):

It was the impulse of self-realization taking the form of philoprogenitiveness, the individualistic urge transformed into and merging in the racial. My father was driven by a passion for creating a new type of human being, a new breed, so that he might rise above his environment, have his revenge on it, not individually and episodically, but generically and for all time. (p. 183)

In portraying himself as a product of the Bengal Renaissance, the 'vanished or vanishing Atlantis' his narrative laments, Chaudhuri also reasserts his filial relationship to the father whose scheme for transcending the 'hold' of the ancestral community was generational.

Just as the Renaissance 'began to break up' in the years of Nirad's adolescence, however, the father's attempt to mould a familial legacy was unsuccessful. Chaudhuri remarks that he died 'disappointed in us in many ways', as '[m]y all too obvious failure on the physical plane was no less keen a sorrow for him than my ill-success in worldly advancement' (p. 183, p. 181). The subject's 'failure' is attributed to 'that ancient malice to which I was heir', as young Nirad, his modernising nuclear family, and the ideals of

the wider Renaissance all succumb to a contradictory environment's power to determine its 'product' (p. 344). The mother is internally riven by this troubled inheritance, her personality radically split between progressive beliefs and a volatility manifested in 'grasping emotional demands' and a tendency to treat her children 'as pieces of herself' (pp. 192-193). She suffers from hysteria, a 'psychologically well-organized, insane state running parallel to her normal life', whose origin she ascribes to a traumatic experience in Banagram (pp. 195-196). The autobiographer concedes that in his own disposition towards 'egoism' and nervous illness, it was his mother he 'most resembled' (p. 193). Her condition eventually prompts the family's move to Calcutta, at which point, Chaudhuri states,

the relation between me and the environment in which I lived underwent a revolution. Kishorganj, Banagram, and Kalikutch are interwoven with my being; so is the England of my imagination; they formed and shaped me; but when once torn up from my natural habitat I became liberated from the habitat altogether; my environment and I began to fall apart, and in the end the environment became wholly external [...] (p. 303)

The subject's alienation from the national 'environment' is linked to the historical waning of the Renaissance, as nationalism gathers pace following Curzon's 1905 proposal for the partition of Bengal. The collapse of the Kishorganj house in an earthquake is presented as a precursor to 'the coming of the passive resistance movement led by Mahatma Gandhi', as Chaudhuri advances his contentious historical thesis (p. 384):

The true autochthon of India has the one immutable role of wearing out, outraging and degrading everything great and good that comes into the country from abroad, and Hinduism, as we have known it during historical times, has always been an admixture of foreign goodness and indigenous debasement. (pp. 238-239)

Claiming that 'modern and idealistic forms of Indian nationalism' were eroded by 'atavistic' autochthonous forces, he asserts that despite Gandhi's laudable ideals, the nationalist movement inevitably 'capitulated' to the 'retrograde' influences of 'the ghastly Indo-Gangetic plain and its degenerate inhabitants' (pp. 518-519). Discussing the

'symbolic reverberations of the earthquake episode' in the *Autobiography*, Margery Sabin points to the significance of Nirad's search, among the ruins of his childhood home, for the copy of *The Woman in White* he was reading – like Chaudhuri's own narrative, a 'story of tainted inheritance, confused identity, and impotent anxiety in the face of ancient malice'.⁸⁵ In Chaudhuri's life-narrative, the subject's vexed relationship to his natal community is bound up with a problematic thesis of Indian identity in whose controversial formulation the very concepts of 'civilisation' and 'environment' are antithetical.

iii) 'Though I was near them, part of them, I was never entirely one of them': Individual or collective representation?

This concluding section examines the precise relationships between individual and collective representation in the three texts under discussion. The very title *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* implies that Chaudhuri's life-narrative, conceived on the eve of Indian independence, bears a national, representative resonance, yet Abrioux observes that:

unlike many other accounts of childhood in Commonwealth literature, Chaudhuri's childhood is not an allegory of the development of his country but rather the inverse. It represents the path not taken, or the split and inevitable alienation of the exceptional child from an environment which was to become increasingly hostile because of its inherent natural, social, political and cultural contradictions.⁸⁶

In this text, individual experience is representative of a national destiny only in its trajectory of 'decline', as the protagonist moves inexorably towards the 'crash' which follows his disastrous MA examinations (p. 543). The youth's 'dull, degrading and

⁸⁵ Margery Sabin, *Dissenters and Mavericks: Writings about India in English, 1765-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 135.

⁸⁶ Abrioux, p. 28.

feeble' existence unfolds against the backdrop of a 'national life [...] devoid of colour and charged with tedium', his disintegration mirroring that of the nation (p. 424):

gradually and slowly I woke up to the fact that I was witnessing the decay of a social order [..N]ot simply the decline of the British Empire in India (which in those days would have been welcomed by me), but of the civilization of modern India, that is to say, the civilization created by Indians in the nineteenth century under the impact of Western influences. (pp. 551-552)

Sabin points to the concept of 'synthesis and integration' as a defining principle of Chaudhuri's model of identity, as he mourns 'the decay of the concept of synthesis' embodied in the Renaissance, and argues that nationalism has equated to an imitative 'Westernization' (p. 534, p. 540). His 'aspiration toward cultural synthesis', she notes, is attributed 'more to his Bengali heritage than to Western teaching', as he characterises the Renaissance not as a colonial value-system grafted on to a Bengali landscape, but as a culture of 'fusion' which was actively 'created by Indians' (p. 552).⁸⁷

Chaudhuri's dismissal of a national identity he associates with antagonism and division should be viewed in the context of partition, a major subtext of his narrative. For an autobiographer whose Hindu family was ancestrally rooted in East Bengal, independence represents an antithetical coming-of-age, into internal conflict and fragmentation. Commenting on a 1905 cartoon on the proposed partition of Bengal 'which showed Lord Curzon sawing a live woman', Chaudhuri observes that decades later, a nationalist press 'egged on packs of craven dotards and barbarized youngsters in favour of another partition' (p. 259). In the sense that independence locates his childhood home outside the boundaries of the nation, he occupies a more truly exilic position than either Lamming or Laye. Suggesting a comparison with Rushdie's remembered Bombay in *Midnight's Children*, Sabin argues that the *Autobiography* is 'in part an elegy to Chaudhuri's lost childhood place'.⁸⁸ Referring to 'the intoxication of recalling my early life and the memories of East Bengal which I had not seen for twenty years', Chaudhuri underlines the fact that this world could only be accessed through memory, as it was

⁸⁷ Sabin, p. 122.

⁸⁸ Sabin, p. 122.

‘destroyed totally by the partition of Bengal in 1947’; if he had returned to Kishorganj ‘[t]he changes would have shocked me and introduced unpleasant dissonances in my writing’.⁸⁹

As Chaudhuri describes how ‘a barrier of intellectual isolation’ came to separate him from his ‘countrymen and contemporaries’, the *Autobiography* both records and performs an individual subject’s process of ‘partitioning-off’ from the wider community (p. 414).⁹⁰ In this respect, the text bears a vexed relationship to a genre of twentieth-century Indian life-narratives concerned with the formation of both selfhood and national identity, including Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* and Nehru’s *An Autobiography*. As Khilnani discusses, Indian nationalist leaders fashioned ‘public selves’ through the form of the ‘didactic autobiography’ which ‘fused personal adventures with the odyssey of the nation’.⁹¹ Javed Majeed has argued that while many texts in this genre ‘construct homogeneous selves that can be easily integrated into emerging nationalisms’, Gandhi’s and Nehru’s autobiographical writings are concerned with shaping distinctive, individual subjectivities even as they address national identity.⁹² Chaudhuri, too, Ranasinha observes, draws ‘parallels between the discovery of India and the discovery of self’, yet his narrative is motivated by the ‘opposite impulse’ to Gandhi’s and Nehru’s, as its central ‘discovery’ serves to separate the autobiographer’s identity from that of the nation.⁹³ In the preface, Chaudhuri’s declaration that he intended to write a ‘national’ rather than a personal history contrasts with Nehru’s claim, in the preface to *An Autobiography*, that ‘[m]y attempt was to trace, as far as I could, my own mental development, and not to write a survey of recent Indian history’.⁹⁴ The two narratives follow inverse trajectories to arrive at similarly opposed conclusions: while Nehru’s discovery is that ‘I have been one of a mass, moving with it’, Chaudhuri’s is the recognition that in the act of writing, he has achieved personal ‘emancipation’ from the

⁸⁹ Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand*, pp. 869-870.

⁹⁰ Abrioux, p. 25.

⁹¹ Khilnani, p. 7.

⁹² Javed Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1-4.

⁹³ Ranasinha, pp. 86-87.

⁹⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, abridged by C.D. Narasimhaiah (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. xxix.

collective Indian history he records (p. 608).⁹⁵ In *Thy Hand, Great Anarch*, he reaffirms that the *Autobiography* 'set me free from the enclosure that my country and society had become for me'.⁹⁶

Chaudhuri's differentiation of his subjectivity from the national body reflects the problematic issue of narrative authority, his precarious position as an 'unknown Indian' differing sharply from that of public figures such as Gandhi and Nehru. As with Mittelholzer's *A Swarthy Boy*, the *Autobiography*'s drive to claim an autonomous individuality over and above a representative status might be interpreted as a response to a colonial order which would deny the identity of the non-Western subject. While Gandhi chooses to write in Gujarati, and Nehru states that 'if I thought of an audience, it was one of my own countrymen and countrywomen', Chaudhuri interpellates a Western reader. Amit Chaudhuri suggests that the 'unknown' in his title is thus 'partly ironical, a slap in the face of a society he felt had largely ignored him'.⁹⁷ Chaudhuri fleshes out the matter of his 'obscure' status in a 'methodological note':

I have a feeling that I have been raising smiles by my seemingly airy references to the great movements of human thought in narrating the life story of such obscure persons as I am and my parents were. This critical amusement would be deserved if these references had been brought in with the object of shedding an artificial greatness on our existence. But there may be an alternative point of view. (p. 209)

This 'alternative' perspective, he goes on to explain, acknowledges that even the 'humblest' subject bears an 'affiliation to the great movements of history', and, moreover, may be society's truest representative, as 'the humbler we are the more completely are we made up of the material deposit by historical movements' (p. 210). Yet even as he strategically claims this representative authority, Chaudhuri maintains that his 'personal development has in no wise [sic] been typical of a modern Indian of the twentieth century. It is certainly exceptional, and may even be unique' (p. x). His exceptionality is seen to reside in the tendency towards 'detachment' which has

⁹⁵ Nehru, p. 247.

⁹⁶ Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand*, p. 925.

⁹⁷ Nehru, p. xxix; Amit Chaudhuri, p. 101.

‘sharpened my perceptive faculties’, qualifying him as an interpreter of the wider nation: ‘I understood the life around me better, not from love, which everybody acknowledges to be a great teacher, but from estrangement’ (p. 303).

In this way, as Haydn Williams states, the autobiographer’s emancipation from the ‘nightmare’ of postcolonial history is achieved through the very medium of historiography.⁹⁸ Chaudhuri declares that on a ‘personal’ level, the narrative’s clarification of a ‘historical thesis has emancipated me from a malaise that has haunted me throughout my life’ (p. 607):

I have at last unravelled the genesis and growth of my maladjustment. The process was simply this: that while I was being carried along by the momentum of our history, most of my countrymen were being dragged backwards by its inertia. We had been travelling in opposite directions, and are still doing so. I can now see both the motions as from an independent point in space. I have found liberation from a nightmare.

This is something – this emancipation. These are indeed the days of emancipation for *all* in India. But there is an essential difference between the emancipation of one man and that of the rest of the four hundred million. They are freedmen, I am a free man [...] (p. 608, original emphasis)

The text is described as ‘a declaration of faith for myself, because after passing the age of fifty I am faced with the compulsion to write off all the years I have lived and begin life anew’ (p. ix). In this performative act, historical narration becomes a means of giving form to an individual identity which was poised on the brink of disintegration; Chaudhuri declares that ‘I have only to look within myself and contemplate my life to discover India; my intellect has indeed at last emancipated itself from my country, but taking stock of all the rest I can say without the least suggestion of arrogance: *L’Inde, c’est moi*’ (p. 553). Through his autobiographical account of ‘estrangement’, he simultaneously claims a representative authority and a unique subjectivity, positioning himself at once within and beyond the borders of the nation.

⁹⁸ Haydn Williams, ‘The Plight of the Aryans and the Nightmare of History: Nirad Chaudhuri’s Alternative View’, *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, 24 (1987), 190-207 (p. 195).

Many critics have interpreted *The Dark Child* as a text which is primarily concerned with charting a communal identity: Lee, for example, argues that in contrast to canonical, Western autobiographies of childhood, this 'book of remembrance is not an introspection into childhood in order to discover oneself. The hero of the book is in fact not "the black child" but rather Africa and its values'.⁹⁹ Laye's narrator, however, bears a deeply problematic relationship to the collective African identity he aims to 'discover'. Bernard points out that in *The Dark Child*, the split between 'child-protagonist and adult-narrator' maps on to a 'dual sense of direction or movement': while the child subject's trajectory is one of alienation from his community, through acculturation and expatriation, the exiled adult narrator seeks a symbolic reintegration. In this way, the narrative portrays both 'communal solidarity and individual separation'.¹⁰⁰

The subject's 'destiny' is foregrounded from the very beginning, as the portraits of the father's forge and the village of Tindican underline his inevitable separation from the ancestral community. At Tindican, his uncle remarks that '[i]t isn't your job to cut rice. I don't think it ever will be' (p. 59), prompting the child to reflect that 'my life did not lie here ... and I had no life in my father's forge [...] "School ... school ..." I thought' (p. 60). In Laye's description of the harvest, pronominal shifts underline this tension between identification and alienation, as references to 'our march' and '[h]ow happy we were in those days' are balanced by passages which distance not only the reminiscing adult, but the participating child, from the communal body he observes:

The long line of reapers hurled itself at the field and hewed it down. Wasn't that enough? Wasn't it enough that the rice bowed before these black bodies? They sang and they reaped. Singing in chorus, they reaped, voices and gestures in harmony. They were together! – united by the same task, the same song. It was as if the same soul bound them.

Was it pleasure, and not the combat against fatigue and heat, that urged them on, singing? Obviously. The same pleasure filled their eyes with that lovingness which had struck me, delightfully and a little regretfully, for though I was near them, part of them, I was not entirely one of them: I was a schoolboy on a visit; how gladly I would have forgotten that fact. (pp. 61-62)

⁹⁹ Lee, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ Bernard, p. 315, p. 314.

Like the child subject, the adult narrator is both 'part of' and estranged from the collective identity he represents.

The Dark Child is a narrative which divides into two distinct halves, images of African community in the earlier chapters contrasting with representations of the more individualistic culture of Conakry and the colonial college in the latter part of the text. Chapters seven and eight, addressing the Konden Diara ceremony and circumcision, mark this shift in emphasis. King argues that in Laye's account of the rites of passage, 'stress is laid rather on the group than on the individual's experience', representing initiation not only as a specific event in the subject's life, but as a repeated pattern in Malinké society. The description of the Konden Diara ceremony evokes a sense of 'the continuity of the individual's life as part of a community' in the way King suggests, as the use of collective pronouns and the present tense positions the narrator as a representative voice:¹⁰¹

We begin to have a vague understanding of the ceremony of the lions after we have taken part in it many times. But even then, we are careful to share our knowledge only with those companions who have had the same experience. And the real secret lies hidden until the day when we are initiated into our life as men. (p. 106)

To this extent, King suggests, *The Dark Child* 'is only an autobiography in the sense that "the self is at the same time the others"'.¹⁰² Olney's reading also focuses on the primacy of collective representation in the initiation chapters, as he discusses the African conception of identity expressed in Laye's reference to the circumcision ceremony as a 'second birth, our real birth' (p. 114). As the narrator recalls the ceremonial shots which announced, after his circumcision, that 'one more man, one more Malinké, had been born' (p. 123), Olney argues that Laye's text represents a distinctively African understanding of the subject as a 'social and psychological synecdoche' of the wider society, an 'embodiment of a communal soul'.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ King, *Camara Laye*, p. 28.

¹⁰² King, *Camara Laye*, p. 28.

¹⁰³ Olney, *Tell Me Africa*, p. 127.

While Olney's and King's observations are convincing, they are also partial, as Laye's account of initiation raises questions over the subject's successful 'rebirth' as 'one more Malinké'. Olney notes that in the chapters dealing with the rites of passage, the 'movement towards union [...] is also paradoxically a movement toward separation', as the youth's 'birth' into a communal body is contingent on the differentiation of his identity from his family, particularly his mother.¹⁰⁴ Yet while this maturational 'separation' is part of the pattern of traditional Malinké society, the protagonist's identity is increasingly shaped not only by an African, but a Western framework, representing what Sylvia Wynter describes as a 'second, invisible rite of initiation' in Laye's text.¹⁰⁵ As he prepared for circumcision, the narrator states, 'I approached this transition to manhood apprehensively. The thought of it greatly disturbed me' (p. 112). This unease reflects not only a sense of the 'gravity' of this 'most important event in life: to be exact, the beginning of a new life', but also an anxious awareness that his Malinké initiation may fail, his Western education rendering him unable to fully enter the 'second life that is our true existence' (p. 112, p. 106). In his discussion of the 'colonial bildungsroman' in francophone African literature, Ralph A. Austen notes that such narratives 'often distinguish the path laid out by European education' from the indigenous route of initiation rituals and religious schooling 'which would have allowed the hero to attain the kind of adulthood experienced by the generations before him'.¹⁰⁶ Laye recalls that as he and his cohort were taught ceremonial chants by the elders, they were 'attentive as if we had been at school, entirely attentive and docile'. The very choice of simile, however, implies that Malinké rites may be overwritten by the competing narrative of initiation into Western culture through colonial education (p. 102). Bernard concludes that as '[t]he sense of unity underlying the description of the rites of passage permits the protagonist's distinctiveness to surface', Laye's narrative is one of 'paradoxical development', in which initiation can only cement the postcolonial subject's alienation.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Olney, *Tell Me Africa*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁵ Sylvia Wynter, 'History, Ideology and the Reinvention of the Past in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Laye's *The Dark Child*', *Minority Voices*, 2, 1 (1978), 43-61 (p. 51).

¹⁰⁶ Ralph A. Austen, 'Amadou Hampaté Ba: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial African Voice: *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*', *Research in African Literatures*, 31, 1 (2000), 1-17 (p. 2).

¹⁰⁷ Bernard, p. 321.

Complicating a reading of his autobiography as a quintessentially 'African', communal text, Laye's claim to a personal 'destiny' of isolation might be seen to hint at the Romantic, Western model of a narrative authority rooted in individualism. Highlighting this 'ambiguity' in Laye's conception of the writer's relationship to society, King refers to his observation, in interview, that while European culture perceives the artist as a 'very grand being', an isolated figure with his 'head in the clouds', in Guinea an artist is considered 'the smallest creature', his individuality subjugated to the collective identity whose expression he mediates. She concludes that across his *oeuvre*, Laye 'combines an African perception of the role of the artist as priest of the community with a European view, inspired by Romanticism, of the artist as visionary'.¹⁰⁸ This tendency is illustrated in the contradictory relationship between the autobiographer and his remembered homeland in *The Dark Child*. In common with Chaudhuri's *Autobiography*, Laye's text illustrates the function of autobiography as a performative act which promises to stabilise precarious postcolonial identities. While Chaudhuri's narrative emphatically differentiates the individual from the collective, the momentum of Laye's autobiography is primarily towards fusion, writing the dislocated subject back into his ancestral culture while reaffirming the identity of that community in the face of colonial oppression. Yet the text preserves an element of individualism, as his unique personal 'destiny' of exile represents a foundation of the autobiographer's subjectivity, and a precondition for the narrative's composition.

As Lamming argues that the Caribbean writer's primary remit is the 'public task' of forging a communal identity out of 'disparateness', his autobiographical text also mediates between individual and collective representation. In an essay addressing the 'isolated self' in Caribbean literature, Lloyd Brown observes that in a society premised on fragmentation, 'the experience of isolation' may be viewed as 'inherently suspect or tragic', indicative of a subjectivity alienated by 'racial apathy and colonial self-hatred'. In many Caribbean texts, Brown argues, the subject paradoxically arrives at 'a total selfhood only through the experience of a group consciousness – only when he rejects a

¹⁰⁸ King, *Camara Laye*, p.115.

destructively individual isolation'.¹⁰⁹ This pattern shapes *In the Castle of My Skin*; in parallel to Laye's text, the young protagonist's trajectory of alienation is balanced by a narrative momentum towards identification with a re-imagined Caribbean community.

In parallel to the subjects of Chaudhuri's and Laye's autobiographies, G.'s is a problematic coming-of-age, his individuation culminating in alienation rather than the attainment of a mature subjectivity. At the outset of the narrative, the child's sense of self is subsumed within the larger identity of the village, as the damage of the floods is seen to reflect the erasure of G.'s birthday. By chapter eleven, however, the adolescent perceives that the village 'had receded [...] from my active consciousness' (p. 216). While 'the village and the High School went their separate ways, each like a slow disease', G. is aware that the world of his childhood is also 'changing': 'I had a feeling sometimes that the village might get up and walk out of itself' (p. 216). The labour riots promise a redistribution of power, and the war 'the last of the British Empire', yet this possibility of liberation is betrayed, the replacement of Creighton by Slime representing a failure of community and a replication of the exploitative colonial bond (p. 212). In this way, the young subject's isolation reflects internal conflicts which frustrate the formation of a collective Caribbean identity. As Paquet comments, G. 'sees himself as part of the community but does not see or feel the community as part of himself', this 'deeply felt alienation from community' conveyed by the diary entries in which he reveals an 'ontological fear of self-revelation':

When I reach Trinidad where no one knows me I may be able to strike identity with the other person. But it was never possible here. I am always feeling terrified of being known; not because they really know you, but simply because their claim to this knowledge is a concealed attempt to destroy you. That is what knowing means. As soon as they know you they will kill you [...] Sometimes I think the same thing will be true in Trinidad. The likenesses will meet and make merry, but they won't know you. They won't know the you that's hidden in the castle of your skin. (p. 253)

¹⁰⁹ Lloyd Brown, 'The Isolated Self in West Indian Literature', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 23, 2/3 (1977), 54-65 (p. 54).

Paquet observes that despite his sense of a private consciousness, the adolescent paradoxically 'lacks the interiority necessary to conceptualise lived experience except as repetitive fragments in a distintegrating diary'.¹¹⁰ In the way Brown suggests, this image of an 'isolate' self represents not sovereignty but colonial alienation, G.'s willed siege within his 'castle' both literalising and pathologising the conventional Western model of the autobiographical 'inner self'.

The title motif draws attention to the role of a discourse of race in perpetuating the alienation which has forestalled the development of collective Caribbean identity. As in Mittelholzer's *A Swarthy Boy*, the colonial construction of 'skin' fragments both the Caribbean subject and the wider community from within; as Bob's father comments, 'no man like to know he black' (p. 96). Lamming's narrator echoes Fanon's analysis of the 'internalization', or 'epidermalization', of a colonial script of black 'inferiority'.¹¹¹

The image of the enemy, and the enemy was My People. My people are low-down nigger people. My people don't like to see their people get on. The language of the overseer. The language of the civil servant. The myth had eaten through their consciousness like moths through the pages of ageing documents. (pp. 18-19)

G.'s reunion with Trumper reveals the possibility of a radically different understanding of 'my people'. Returning from a transformative voyage to America, where he has 'found race', Trumper predicts that G.'s forthcoming journey away from the island will likewise be 'a good change' (p. 279). Seeking to understand Trumper's references to 'my people', G. perceives that his friend's 'allegiance' is not to the village but to 'something bigger' (p. 287). His own description of the feeling of being 'alone in a world all by yourself, and although there were hundreds of people moving round you, it made no difference', is met by Trumper's confident assertion that '[a] man who know his people won't ever feel like that' (pp. 292-293).

In his essay 'The Negro Writer and His World', Lamming suggests that the 'Negro Writer' bears a dual responsibility of individual and collective representation. While a personal, 'private world' is the writer's 'one priceless possession', it is

¹¹⁰ Paquet, Foreword, pp. xiii-xiv.

¹¹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p 11.

'modified, even made possible, by the world in which he moves among other men'. Once more echoing Fanon, Lamming argues that in the particular case of the black writer, individual identity and 'social relations' are equally important areas of inquiry, the collective imperative to testify to social 'injustice' matched by the pressing need to 'embark upon a definition of himself as a man in the world of men'.¹¹² The title *In the Castle of My Skin* is suggestive of this mutual redefinition of individual and collective black identities. Lamming discusses how he chose to 'appropriate' Derek Walcott's address to the coloniser, in the line 'You in the castle of your skin, I among the swineherd', in order to 'restore the castle where it belonged'. He relates the childhood experience of witnessing his godfather Papa Grandison, the model for Pa in the narrative, being evicted from 'the Rock', the smallholding that was his 'Castle'. In Lamming's later memory, this 'experience of the Rock' became 'identified with all Barbados', as he recognised that the old man's identity had resided not in his demolished property, but in 'the richness of his skin [...] and the wisdom it concealed from those who were too Innocent to know':

Papa's Rock had been taken, his Castle ignored; but Papa would always remain. That journey was a lesson in exile and permanence; that night was a colonial example of alienation. It must have been the origin of that farewell which Papa and I bade each other in the book which was built on his Rock.¹¹³

Lamming's identification of this autobiographical memory as the core of his narrative conflicts with his later argument, in the 1983 introduction, that *In the Castle of My Skin* eschews the structuring principle of a central authorial consciousness. In the 1983 commentary, Gikandi suggests, this retrospective emphasis on the text's 'communal' construction is 'too neat', as the fragmentation of narrative structure 'does not diminish the important role the boy G. plays both as a narrator and character' in Lamming's text. Gikandi argues that precisely because the very notion of 'the black self' has been negated in the colonial Caribbean, for Lamming the construction of the individual subject is a

¹¹² George Lamming, 'The Negro Writer and His World', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 5, 2 (1958), 112-115 (p. 109, pp. 113-115).

¹¹³ Lamming, 'Journey to An Expectation', in *The Pleasures of Exile* (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1984), pp. 211-229 (pp. 226-228).

necessary 'prelude to situating the self in a larger community of meanings'.¹¹⁴ Simultaneously evoking the young protagonist's isolated consciousness, the racial discourse which fractures Caribbean identity, and a reclamation of the 'skin' which has historically served as a marker of alienation, the title crystallises the complex issues of individual and collective identity addressed in the text.

Conclusion

Chaudhuri's, Lamming's and Laye's texts complicate assumptions that the autobiography of childhood focuses primarily on an 'isolate' individual consciousness. Laye's work, King observes, reflects a mid-century postcolonial 'moment when the tensions of traditional and modern cultures produced a heightened sensibility and when the definition of self seemed also to be the definition of the tribe, the country, or even Africa itself'.¹¹⁵ In *The Dark Child*, individual and collective identities are reciprocally constructed, the autobiographer's personal testimony offering an armature for the reconstruction of traditional Malinké culture while his reclamation of this collective identity promises, conversely, to stabilise a subjectivity fractured by exile. In its gaps and inconsistencies, however, Laye's narrative voice reveals the limits of this 'autoethnographic' premise.

In the Castle of My Skin responds to the task of reconceptualising subjectivity and community in order to construct a genuinely postcolonial Caribbean consciousness. In his ambiguously 'autobiographical' text, Lamming deploys novelistic textual strategies which disperse narrative focalisation and voice across multiple centres of consciousness. This polyphonic structure connects the text to a communal, oral mode of narration rooted in African tradition, a folk culture which is embodied in the ancestral figure of Pa, as Lamming, in common with Laye, constructs a strongly gendered model of postcolonial identity.

Of the three texts, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* voices the most ambivalent account of a subject's relationship to community. In contrast to the dual

¹¹⁴ Gikandi, pp. 74-75.

¹¹⁵ King, *Camara Laye*, p. 125.

momentum of Lamming's and Laye's narratives, in Chaudhuri's text the young subject's alienation is replicated in the momentum of the narrative itself, as the adult narrator claims autonomy from the nation he represents (pp. 303-304). In this splitting of the subject from the 'general mass', the *Autobiography* is illustrative of Holden's observation that postcolonial autobiographers may not necessarily emphasise, or valorise, communal identification over individual selfhood (p. x).

Conclusion

In his seminar with Gullede, Soyinka is asked to comment on the prevalence of autobiography in contemporary African literature. Observing that life-writing 'plays a large part in world literature' more generally, he suggests that this reflects the genre's potential for writers negotiating the 'transition' from colonial to postcolonial consciousness. While the Western writer 'occupies one life only, only one from beginning to end', Soyinka asserts,

The writer in a colonial society [...] occupies two lives, or he goes through two radically different stages. The first one is his entire colonial experience. The second is coming out of it. Coming out of it, being able now to look back and examine certain things which he used to be able to take for granted, he is far more critical than let us say the British writer, the French writer, the American writer who stays within the same socio-political experience from birth to death. So there is perhaps a need for autobiography when this transition is made [..T]hat is probably why the autobiographical element is greater or more notable, and when the colonial or ex-colonial writer wants to express or to really record this divide in his experience he makes it more frankly autobiographical because he is trying to recapture something which is so totally different [...] Almost in a kind of sharply dichotomized way rather than even evolutionary [...]¹

For Soyinka, who had previously vowed he would 'never write an autobiography', the urge to 'capture' a transitional period in Nigerian history could only be articulated through the form of the autobiography of childhood, as the text which became *Aké* began with an attempt to reconstruct his 'childhood consciousness' and 'then opened out into other things'.² Predicated on the problematic relationship between a reminiscing narrator and the previous self of childhood, a subject at once part of and estranged from the adult autobiographer, the autobiography of childhood and youth is a form which foregrounds

¹Gullede, p. 519.

²Gullede, p. 520.

divisions within subjectivity. In respect of the texts I have addressed, in which these divisions map on to conflicts of cultural and political identity in the wake of colonialism, the autobiography of childhood would appear to be a mode of life-writing ideally suited to mediating postcolonial 'transitions' of the kind Soyinka describes.

Reaching this conclusion, my argument in this thesis has travelled a significant distance from dominant perspectives on the genre. In Coe's model, which continues to be uncritically reproduced by most commentators, autobiographies of childhood retreat from public, social concerns as they seek to express an 'inner, symbolic truth' that is the very 'essence' of the private self.³ The substance of these texts is seen to be mythical or 'poetic' rather than historical or political. While the autobiography of childhood is viewed as a key to the uniqueness of an 'inner' core of selfhood remote from the adulterating influence of society, it is also, for Coe, a window into the collective unconscious of the autobiographer's particular culture, expressing characteristic 'myths of childhood'. Extending recent observations made by critics such as Whitlock, my thesis has set out, through close readings of twelve postcolonial autobiographies of childhood, to problematise Coe's claim that the genre's territory is a realm of essential individual and cultural identity, discrete from historical and political conflicts. I have discussed how his argument is rooted in specific, dominant Western assumptions about both the autobiographical form and the identity of childhood. Both sets of assumptions have been called into question by recent criticism; while Cunningham, Steedman and other historians consider how the notion of 'the child' as a universal, politically innocent identity is deeply rooted within discursive formations of the post-Enlightenment West, autobiography critics have discussed how the liberal humanist notion of an isolate, sovereign self conceals its own implication in a history of colonialism. Yet there has so far been very little cross-fertilisation between these areas of inquiry. The present study has begun to remedy this problem, examining some of the ways in which critical perspectives on the autobiography of childhood require modification in the light of postcolonial life-writing, a domain in which much is at stake around conceptions of both childhood and autobiography.

³ Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, p. 2.

Castañeda discusses how, in a variety of ‘global’ contexts, the child figure has played ‘a unique and constitutive role in the (adult) making of worlds, particularly the worlds of human nature and human culture’. She suggests that the figure’s ‘availability – and so too its value as a cultural resource’, lies in an overarching understanding of the child ‘as a potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being: an entity in the making’; it is this ‘unique capacity’ which has allowed the child figure to be ‘made and remade in particular sites’.⁴ Her argument echoes Ashcroft’s and Wallace’s parallel analyses of how the child provides a defining trope of colonial discourse, yet also, as the embodiment ‘of an unstable and unpredictable potentiality’, an armature for the construction of postcolonial identities.⁵ My thesis has explored some of the ways in which the idea of childhood is ‘made and remade’ as a figure for postcolonial identity across a range of twentieth-century autobiographical narratives. Summarising these issues, I will now conclude by considering the implications of three major themes emerging from my discussion in the previous chapters.

Non-Western childhoods, postcolonial identities

As Castañeda observes, a key issue for critics investigating representations of childhood is the problem of how ‘to convey a sense of the power generated in and through the child and its uses, without reproducing the problematically universalizing or global claims that are so frequently made through this very category’. Similarly to Castañeda, I have sought, in the present study, to attend to ‘the specificity of the child’s appearances in time and place’.⁶ While my argument has explored significant points of comparison across the corpus of primary texts, I have also been careful to address the particular resonances of childhood in the specific postcolonial contexts from which the autobiographies emerge, these differences calling into question Coe’s assumption that on a basic level ‘the experience of childhood is identical the world over, and in all ages’.⁷ In my readings of

⁴ Castañeda, pp. 1-2.

⁵ Ashcroft, p. 200.

⁶ Castañeda, p. 5.

⁷ Coe, ‘Portrait’, p. 128.

primary texts, I have identified a range of distinctively postcolonial models of childhood – both those which are indigenous to non-Western cultures, and those produced in response to the colonial encounter.

In Said's *Out of Place*, childhood is deployed as a figure for the condition of colonisation, as the appellation 'boy', in Pilley's denunciation of Edward, prompts the young subject's recognition of his 'inferior status' as an 'Arab'. Kincaid's *Annie John*, as Ferguson observes, even more explicitly 'politicizes the concept of the well-behaved child'.⁸ As Wallace has argued, Kincaid finds in the figure of the child both an 'explanatory' and an 'emancipatory' potential: while Annie's subjection to prescribed codes of good behaviour is representative of the broader mechanisms of control which sustain a colonial system, her disobedience suggests a resistance to this established order, and potential for the development of a postcolonial Caribbean consciousness.⁹

Soyinka's and Falola's texts each invoke a non-Western model of childhood, rooted in a West African, Yoruba culture in which the uninitiated child is understood as a transitional being, potentially mobile across the boundaries which structure the adult world. In both *Aké* and *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, the account of a child subject's transgressive mobility enables an adult autobiographer to map the colonial order which was imposed on the African world of his childhood, and also, as in Kincaid's text, to chart the contours of an emergent postcolonial subjectivity. In *Aké*, Wole's affinity with characters such as Sanya and Bukola who pass between the terrestrial world and the chthonic realm, a liminal repository of 'creative and destructive essences', is formalised by the ceremony in which he is dedicated to Ogun.

In *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt*, Falola discusses how he became labelled an *emere*, a spirit child whose wilful mobility threatens the established order of the society into which he is born. On one level, the text's ethnographic account of the concept of *emere* contradicts an implied Western reader's assumption that childhood is an identity and experience constant across cultures. At the same time, Falola draws on the *emere* narrative, premised on the notion of identities in flux, as one which might account for colonialism's destabilising influence on the Yoruba city of Ibadan. While it is a

⁸ Ferguson, p. 48.

⁹ Wallace, p. 183.

transgressive journey on the colonial railway which defines Toyin as an *emere*, in Falola's text the trope undergoes a further permutation, suggesting the potential emergence of a postcolonial identity which would replace the neo-colonial order he critiques.

In *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, Forna's attempt to comprehend her ruptured childhood and Sierra Leone's subsequent war highlights the gulf between the African child subject and the expatriate adult narrator, and a problematic discrepancy between conventional images of childhood innocence and the active role of children in this postcolonial conflict. As the Hamelin motif underlines a connection between the loss of childhood and the collapse of social order, Forna's account of 'innocence lost' links the recent history of the civil war to her personal memories of childhood at the time of decolonisation, a period whose optimism was catastrophically betrayed.

The trope of the childhood idyll

Recurrent across diverse autobiographies of childhood and youth, including many of those addressed in the present study, the trope of remembering childhood as a paradise lost has been extensively discussed by critics of the genre. According to both Coe and Egan, the nostalgic recollection of childhood as an Edenic idyll is a device consistent across disparate cultures, representing a defining 'myth of childhood'. From this perspective, the trope is held to convey the universality of the experience of childhood, and of its loss as the maturing subject crosses the threshold of adulthood and enters the domain of history.¹⁰ If, as Pascal states, the narrative of childhood is 'the purest form of autobiography', then the trope of a fall from childhood innocence is seen, by critics such as Coe and Egan, as an elegiac reflection on the loss of the purest form of identity, one remote from the political travails of the adult world.¹¹ Whitlock, however, argues that this representation of childhood as 'a mythic, autonomous world, apart from history' may be a convention unavailable to postcolonial life-writers, in whose texts childhood is more

¹⁰ Egan, pp. 68-69.

¹¹ Pascal, p. 85.

likely to be constructed as an arena of historical and political conflict than 'a pre-adolescent idyll', a claim my own findings corroborate.¹²

Paul Sharrad asserts that as 'childhood is usually the time most closely associated with the traditional, unspoilt and pre-colonial era', images of childhood in postcolonial literature are 'often idyllic'.¹³ If, as Sharrad argues, childhood is commonly deployed by postcolonial writers as the symbol of an authentic, whole, pre-colonial identity, then the trope of the loss of paradise might be used, in postcolonial autobiographies of childhood, as a figure for the depredations of colonialism. This possibility, however, is problematised by most of the texts discussed in my study. *The Dark Child* comes closest to equating the autobiographer's loss of a childhood idyll with colonialism's erosion of an 'authentic' indigenous world. As F. Abiola Irele observes, Laye's nostalgic recollection of an idyllic African society bears a 'polemical import' in its 'refutation of the thesis of a *mission civilisatrice* of the French colonial enterprise'.¹⁴ Yet the child protagonist is, from the very beginning, marked off from the community whose virtues the exiled narrator extols. The narrative voice indicates the pervasive influence of colonialism on the world of Laye's childhood, and the impossibility of reclaiming an innocent, pre-colonial culture.

In Karmi's *In Search of Fatima*, the notion of expulsion from paradise takes on a specific cultural resonance, as the trope has served, in collective Palestinian memory, as a framework for comprehending the trauma of the *nakbah*. In this text, the autobiographical convention of remembering childhood as a paradise lost becomes politicised, mapping on to the interrupted narrative of Palestinian national history as the narrator states that the *nakbah* 'marked the end of my childhood'. In common with Laye, however, Karmi ultimately problematises the idea of reclaiming an identity prior to the incursion of history and politics. Here, as in many of the other texts under discussion, the autobiographer's childhood paradise was always already lost.

Childhood, in this respect, is reinvented as a symbol of ignorance as much as innocence, as adult narrators reflect on previous conditions, whether personal or

¹² Whitlock, p. 181.

¹³ Paul Sharrad, 'Memory, childhood and exile: self-representation in post-colonial writing', *World Englishes*, 9, 2 (1990), 137-153 (p. 140).

¹⁴ F. Abiola Irele, 'In Search of Camara Laye', *Research in African Literatures*, 37, 1 (2006), 110-127 (p. 115).

collective, of political naïvete. Gikandi observes that in Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, the reconstruction of childhood does not represent the recovery of a pure, essential identity, but, on the contrary, 'a return to the history that represses selfhood'.¹⁵ In the course of Lamming's narrative, the notion of organic community is revealed as the artefact of a false consciousness which has served to perpetuate a colonial order in the Caribbean. For Khoo Thwe, similarly, the 'childhood paradise of living securely in the midst of the tribe' is retrospectively recognised as a politically disabling illusion.

Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* offers perhaps the most ambivalent account of the loss of a childhood world. Stating that 'in this autobiography I shall have no phase of pure growth to set against a phase of unrelieved decay', the narrator points to his departure from the generic convention of remembering a childhood idyll (p. 150). As Chaudhuri seeks to comprehend a hybrid postcolonial identity he perceives to be riven by internal divisions, the tendency towards 'decay' is, problematically, attributed to the indigenous component of his inheritance. In common with Karmi, however, Chaudhuri also mourns the loss of a childhood home in the aftermath of postcolonial conflict, as the East Bengal he recreates was destroyed with partition.

Chaudhuri's observation that his narrative necessarily differs from canonical, European texts foregrounds the issue of how generic conventions of the autobiography of childhood may be reconfigured by postcolonial life-writers. Contradicting Egan's claim that the use of the 'myth of Eden as a metaphor for childhood' is universal, Kincaid's, Khoo Thwe's and Soyinka's references to this myth each foreground its roots in an imposed Western, colonial culture. In *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Khoo Thwe links his notion of a 'childhood paradise' to the missionary education which instilled a sense of his uncivilised inadequacy as a 'primitive' tribal subject. In *Aké*, the imposed Christian narrative of Eden is incorporated, and adapted, within a syncretic Yoruba culture, as the precocious child assigns the biblical apple an African identity. In *Annie John*, the child's punishment for defacing the textbook picture of Columbus is an order to transcribe 'Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton' (p. 82); Annie's identification with

¹⁵ Gikandi, pp. 75-76.

Lucifer reflects her resistance to the colonial imposition of a Western master narrative of identity (p. 94).

These reconfigurations of the trope of the loss of paradise, across texts emerging from a range of experiences of colonialism, illustrate the need for attention to the specific contexts of autobiographies of childhood, rather than generalising arguments which approach 'the child' as a figure constant across times and cultures. The life-narratives I address bear out W.H. New's assertion that childhood in postcolonial literature may be represented 'not as an innocent and unmarked utopia but as a site of turmoil and vexed heritage'.¹⁶

Discourses of filiation

New's suggestion that postcolonial writers may reflect on childhood as a site of 'vexed heritage' refers to the instrumental role of the child figure in colonial discourse, as the representation of empire as a global family is a device which has served to legitimise the subordination, and command the filial loyalty, of colonised subjects. Discussing the way in which the 'family trope' provides a justificatory underpinning for modern European imperial nationalism, Anne McClintock observes that in the nineteenth-century image of the 'Family Tree of Man', 'evolutionary progress was represented as a series of anatomically distinct family types, organized into a linear progression, from the "childhood" of "primitive" races to the enlightened "adulthood" of European imperial nationalism'.¹⁷ Throughout the four chapters of my study, I have addressed the ways in which this overdetermining narrative of colonial filiation impacts on representations of parent-child relationships in postcolonial life-writing.

Keith Shear notes that '[i]n depicting childhood, autobiographers are particularly conscious of the constraints placed on individual initiative and of the formative power of

¹⁶ W.H. New, 'The Pirates in the Looking-Glass: Some Contemporary "Childhood Fictions"', in *Small Worlds: Transcultural Visions of Childhood*, ed. by Rocío G. Davis and Rosalia Baena (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra S.A., 2001), pp. 19-36 (p. 25)

¹⁷ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 357, p. 359.

external agents'.¹⁸ In many of the texts I discuss, accounts of parental 'constraints' on the child's emergent subjectivity also serve as commentaries on the colonial relationship and its implications for postcolonial autobiographical identity. Mittelholzer's *A Swarthy Boy*, in which the mixed-race Caribbean narrator recalls his childhood rejection by a 'negrophobe' father, is an obvious example. In common with Chaudhuri's *Autobiography*, *A Swarthy Boy* occupies an ambiguous borderland between modes of colonial and postcolonial self-definition; in both cases the narrator's investigation of a non-Western cultural and racial inheritance, conceptualised as an 'other within', is negotiated through a troubling vocabulary of 'blood' and heredity. Chaudhuri seeks to claim the hybrid culture of the Bengal Renaissance, one which synthesises elements of European culture, as a distinctively 'Indian' birthright. Mittelholzer, however, identifies solely with the European component of his inheritance, his life-narrative reproducing a colonial discourse of filiation as it charts the young subject's gradual escape from the 'mire' of a Guyanese childhood, into a Europeanised adulthood.

Anand's and Lamming's texts offer two very different perspectives on the postcolonial autobiographer's relationship to a colonial 'parent' culture in India and the Caribbean respectively. *In the Castle of My Skin* seeks to demolish the colonial rhetoric of filiation which forms the basis of Mittelholzer's conception of Caribbean autobiographical identity, breaking the illusory bond by which 'a country, so foreign to our own instincts, could have achieved the miracle of being called Mother'.¹⁹ In contrast to Chaudhuri's emphasis on a culture of fusion, the world of Krishan's childhood in *Seven Summers* is one of stark polarities, the division between the sahibs' bungalows and the native quarters of the cantonment replicated within Krishan's home as his anglophile father and anti-colonial mother enter into conflict over escalating resistance to British rule. The child's maturation entails a transition from adulation of his father and the sahibs he serves, to identification with the indigenous 'peasant' culture of the mother's village, and a loss of respect for authoritarian colonists. While Anand's and Chaudhuri's narratives of childhood address the same historical period, differences between their models of postcolonial Indian identity reflect the specific regional cultures in which the

¹⁸ Keith Shear, 'Depictions of Childhood in South African Autobiography, with Particular Reference to the 1920s', *English in Africa*, 16, 1 (1989), 39-69 (p. 43).

¹⁹ Lamming, Introduction, p. xxxviii.

two authors grew up, as well as the intervening events of independence and partition. While *Seven Summers* was written prior to 1947, the *Autobiography* was begun in this pivotal year, framed by knowledge of the violent divisions engendered by independence.

In both Chaudhuri's and Said's texts, an adult narrator recalls his deeply problematic relationship to a father whose methods shape the child subject's sense of identity. Anxieties of filiation are at the heart of the *Autobiography*, as Chaudhuri addresses the patriarch whose grand scheme for the formation of his childrens' identities, a generational strategy for transcending the contradictions of the Indian environment, ended in 'failure'. In *Out of Place*, the father's program of 'reform' also has its origins in postcolonial conflict, as Wadie Said's attempt to police his son's physical and intellectual development is interpreted as a response to the family's precarious cultural identity.

Irrespective of the success or failure of their schemes, these patriarchs are figures who respond actively to the contingencies of postcolonial history. In several of the male-authored texts I discuss, maternal relationships are contrastingly represented in terms of conservatism and constraint, reflecting issues of gender in the formation of these postcolonial autobiographical identities. In Lamming's and Laye's texts, mothers are associated with a static model of community which, while its loss may be nostalgically mourned, cannot provide a progressive basis for the formation of a postcolonial identity. Kincaid's relationship of the mother-daughter bond, in *Annie John*, is much more complex. In its tyrannical intensity, Annie Senior's supervision of her daughter's growth is analogous to Antigua's bond with the colonial 'motherland'. At the same time, however, Kincaid's exploration of the profound interconnections between Annie's personal identity, and that of the mother to whom she is inextricably linked, suggests a radically different framework for the interpretation of Caribbean, female subjectivities, one which requires a modification of the autobiographical form.

Concluding remarks

In the twelve life-narratives I examine, child subjects are constructed as figures of postcolonial transition as they pursue truant journeys, inhabit malleable or resistant

bodies in the process of change, critique established social and political orders through their naïve yet insistent inquiries, and exist simultaneously within and outside wider communities. In negotiating problematic relationships with these previous selves of childhood, adult narrators address cultural and political shifts in the wake of colonialism, and their implications for structures of autobiographical form and identity. In approaching this area of life-writing, one which has so far received little concentrated attention, the method of close textual analysis has been useful in enabling some theoretical and conceptual points to be drawn from the texts themselves. In this way, I have sought both to highlight, and avoid replicating, one of the major pitfalls of existing work on postcolonial autobiographies of childhood: the prescriptive application of Eurocentric critical models. Through a comparative analysis of narratives drawn from a range of twentieth-century postcolonial contexts, my thesis contributes to an emergent dialogue between the fields of autobiography and postcolonial studies. In focusing specifically on representations of childhood and youth, I have sought to open the way for analysis of a component of identity – childhood – which has often been neglected and essentialised in both autobiography and postcolonial criticism. In this emphasis, my project also intersects with a body of interdisciplinary research on constructions of childhood, and is intended to demonstrate the value of further cross-cultural research in this field, which has so far focused almost exclusively on Western culture. A comparative study intended to provide an initial exploration of key issues in a previously neglected field of analysis, the thesis raises the possibility of subsequent research in various areas. More detailed investigation of non-Western conceptions of childhood, and their influence on forms of postcolonial life-writing, would be particularly worthwhile; in its focus on cultural difference, such work would ultimately probe the validity of the present study's comparative premise. Given the gender imbalance noted in the authorship of postcolonial autobiographies of childhood and youth, subsequent investigations might consider whether women's memories of childhood are represented within different modes of life-writing, and, once more, critically examine the validity of comparing 'childhoods' across gender. Issues of autobiographical theory raised by the analysis of representations of childhood could be productively developed in further discussions, building on the present study's detailed critique of Coe's model.

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