Ch. 8

Suzanne Scafe

Black Women Subjects in Auto/biographical Discourse

The uses and function of autobiography as witnessing, testimony, or as autoethnography, continue to present as urgent, questions of authority, ethics, legitimacy and truth. These are the issues that have become the central preoccupation of autobiographical theory and criticism. The privileging of these autobiographical forms by writers marginalised in Anglo-European traditions of literature and criticism has provided an opportunity for writers and critics to invigorate a form that has looked increasingly ‘disreputable and self-indulgent,’[[1]](#endnote-1) and to extend autobiography’s limits, while not abandoning its commitment to an authorial presence that is generically defined. The autobiographical self, while central to the narratives discussed in this chapter, occupies multiple subject positions: at the borders and in the margins of dominant discourses of race, gender, and nationality, but also at the centre of a growing body of self-representation that seeks to replace the ‘white male story’ [[2]](#endnote-2) with the whole story of lives made hitherto invisible. The diversity and instability of the selves that black British women’s autobiography constructs, serve as a caution against an insistence on the authority of marginalized voices that in the process reproduce, ‘the imperializing tendencies of the old Cartesian self.’ [[3]](#endnote-3) Necessary safeguards need to be erected against both the articulation of either an exceptional exemplar, or an over-determining ‘we’.

As Kate Douglas has noted, critical examinations of autobiography and autobiographical forms provide a perfect location from which issues of generic identity, authority and authorship, as well as complex questions of voice and subjectivity - who is speaking, and from where - continue to be negotiated.[[4]](#endnote-4) In addition, as a site where the public and private interconnect, autobiography provides a space in literary criticism for the exploration of issues of narrative responsibility and the ethics of disclosure. These intra- and extra-textual entanglements are the contexts within which identities - gendered, cultural, social and political - are interrogated, disturbed and reconfigured. Within the space of this short, exploratory chapter, my focus is, therefore, necessarily narrow, as it is impossible to address in detail the complexities of black/Black, British, gendered identities, and so I follow the tendency in contemporary literary criticism use ‘black’ to denote authors and protagonists of African heritage.[[5]](#endnote-5) I have also structured a discussion of selected texts around their representation of experiences of trauma that perhaps inevitably, as I demonstrate, characterise contemporary autobiographical self-articulation. Drawing on recent postcolonial reconfigurations of witnessing, testimony, and trauma theory, this chapter examines how selected texts reconstitute conventional definitions of trauma narratives.

Roger Luckhurst’s influential essay ‘Traumaculture’ (2003) begins with an assertion of trauma’s pervasiveness. He argues that ‘a new kind of articulation of subjectivity emerged in the 1990s organised around the concept of trauma ... brought into being in the advanced capitalist economies of the West’.[[6]](#endnote-6) The success of the memoir genre, he continues, ‘was a result of its reorganisation around...traumatic exceptionality’. That exceptional quality paradoxically ‘became the new norm’ as memoir, particularly ‘parent memoirs’[[7]](#endnote-7) structuring identity around particular traumatic events, or around ambivalent or negative familial connections, surged in popularity in conjunction with the emergence of traumaculture. His use of the term memoir reflects what Thomas Couser identifies as a somewhat erroneous tendency to characterise an ‘inferior’ or ‘shallow’ kind of autobiography as memoir [[8]](#endnote-8) and certainly Luckhurst does imply that it is in those shallow forms that traumaculture is displayed.

While also reflecting on the late twentieth-century ‘memoir boom... whose defining subject has been trauma’, Leigh Gilmore, in her less sceptical treatment of trauma’s popularity as the subject of memoir, argues that examples of such texts offer an opportunity to theorise autobiography outside generic limits:

Although those who can tell their stories benefit from the therapeutic balm of words, the path to this achievement is strewn with obstacles. To navigate it, some writers move away from autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography’s central questions.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The selection of texts for her work on trauma and testimony reflects a broad, sometimes provocative interpretation of trauma, one that moves away from its identity as ‘an image of a single, devastating blow or an acute stab that breaks the protective shield of the psyche,’[[10]](#endnote-10) and includes, for example, the ongoing effects of colonialism and racism. In that respect, her position can be aligned with postcolonial literary critics such as Stef Craps (2014) and Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2014) whose work extends Luckhurst’s critique of trauma theory with its emphasis on the individual, in place of a theoretical critique of the institutional and political structures that frame an individual’s interpretation of experience. Trauma, rather than being a single blow, is more often experienced as on-going feelings of disempowerment and oppression that are the result of institutional and global inequalities. While Craps maintains that ‘trauma theory is not irredeemably infused with Eurocentric bias,’[[11]](#endnote-11) Kabir contests the Freudian, Eurocentric model of trauma with its emphasis on ‘telling the story’ as a means of ‘suturing the psychic wounds caused by the traumatic event[s] , which manifest themselves in aporias and latencies in memorial recall’. In Freudian analysis, telling the story enables a progression from melancholia to mourning and finally closure.[[12]](#endnote-12) Kabir proposes instead a focus on witnessing that privileges anti-narrative forms such as traditional ‘lyric iterations’, somatic responses that ‘return the body to the space of trauma [as] an act of reclamation’ and even forms of immersive ‘social realism’.[[13]](#endnote-13) The new directions indicated here by Craps and Kabir offer a potentially rewarding way of reading black women’s autobiographical experiences of trauma and their inflection by the quotidian experiences of racism, colonialism, and structural inequality. Rather than conforming to the prescriptive norms of a ‘modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia’[[14]](#endnote-14) these texts can be defined as “fragmentary realism”, a form that neither abandons a commitment to self-presence nor attempts to cover the gaps and silences of traumatic experience.

Aminatta Forna’s auto/biography, *The Devil that Danced on Water: a* *Daughter’s Memoir* (2003) is structured around her own attempts to reconstruct the person her father was, and to remember her own experience of him as a young girl. On the closing page of the memoir she writes of the affective interconnection that had prompted her to write, ‘His story. My story. Our story. The first ten years of my life and the last ten years of his.’[[15]](#endnote-15) Book One begins and ends with the last day that she saw her father, before his final imprisonment and execution in Sierra Leone by Siaka Stevens’s post-independence government, in which Mohamed Forna had been Finance Minister. He had also been, according to the memoir, one of the most popular politicians of that time. The memories the text constructs are meticulously authenticated by accounts from other figures in Forna’s life: her elderly aunts, who recapture the story of her father’s early life; her mother Maureen, who provides her own memories of the children’s father as well as stories of herself as the young, fun-loving, yet pragmatic, Scottish wife of a serious, politically committed doctor, returning from medical school in Aberdeen, to contribute to the task of post-independence nation building. While the narrative suggests that Maureen was neither interested in politics nor in the effects of cultural difference, it is Maureen who, in later years, augments the shards of childhood memory that are, Forna writes, ‘like the discarded differently coloured squares of mosaic - meaningless fragments.’[[16]](#endnote-16) Book Two of this auto/biography focuses on documenting the last stages of her father’s life through others’ memories as well as through newspaper articles and the 1,007 page court report of her father’s trial. Here the narrative takes on the form of linear, reportage. It reconstructs the efforts of the mature Forna, now an investigative journalist, double-checking her sources, tracking down witnesses, recording their testimonies, listening to their denials and, more bizarrely, to the justifications for their complicity in the false accusations and trial of ‘Mohamed Forna and Fourteen Others.’[[17]](#endnote-17) Forna’s return in this section of the text can be defined in Kabir’s terms, as a bodily return to the site of trauma. As such, it is an act of reclamation.

There is much in Forna’s text that suggests that the first ten years of her life were punctuated by experiences of trauma. Those years are certainly characterised by a sense of dislocation and instability. Towards the end of Book One, she writes, ‘In six years I had lived in eight homes...My new and ninth home was a house in Tengbe Farkai.’[[18]](#endnote-18) The list she gives at this point in the narrative does not include the apartments the children lived in with their stepmother in London, the young Aminatta’s first boarding school, and the home in Sierra Leone to which she returned when she was ten. The young Aminatta meets the isolation, constant movement, and breakdown in attachment with either a determined and unquestioning resilience, or with a strategic forgetting, and a commitment to self-preservation. Having moved with her mother from Scotland to Nigeria, to live in relative luxury with her mother’s new husband, she is abruptly taken back to Sierra Leone by her father. When her father arrives, she recalls: ‘The joy of seeing my father and the sight of my mother’s tears overwhelmed me.’[[19]](#endnote-19) Reluctant to dwell on this moment of rupture but also reconnection, and its potential as a moment of traumatic loss, she continues:

I was a chameleon child, capable of adapting myself quickly into new surroundings. The whirligig of my childhood had made me unquestioning and passive in the face of change; parents, families, houses, countries, schools revolved around me, while I stood still centre stage.[[20]](#endnote-20)

‘Centre stage’ is used here as a metaphor for the young Aminatta’s clear sense of self as a young girl: her determination to live in the moment; to attach and to lose attachments as and when required. It is impossible Forna’s narrative seems to suggest, to represent those dislocations, experienced in the context of relative privilege, as traumatic. That would be to diminish both her father's execution, the brutalities routinely conducted during that post-independence period, and the dramatic horrors of the Sierra Leonean civil war, with its legacy of still traumatised child-soldiers, amputees, rape victims, and the hundreds and thousands who witnessed both. It is clear from this text that Forna sees that her responsibility is to the others, including her father, who were the victims of a series of violent, abusive regimes.

In her work on autobiography and childhood Douglas argues that, ‘autobiography is a genre that values “good subjects” - where displays of resilience and recovery are evident throughout the autobiographical project’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Certainly Forna’s text constructs ‘good’ autobiographical subjects. Her father is represented as dignified, heroic – a man of unshakeable integrity. Her mother too, is a survivor and an optimist. After her father, (to whom the book is dedicated), Forna acknowledges her stepmother who, despite some fairly negative treatment in the narrative, is acknowledged for ‘the courage she has displayed and has inspired in me’.[[22]](#endnote-22) These ‘good subjects’ testify and attempt to intervene in the chaos caused by successive regimes. Forna herself attempts to make sense of the disintegration in the social fabric of Sierra Leone in the period since 1974. In so doing, however, she refuses both the aporia *and* the teleological drive towards closure that characterises trauma narratives. In the narrative’s early sections, she includes a description of *shuku*, tightly woven baskets that were famous for their ‘intricate weave, the bands of turquoise and mauve that made up the design’.[[23]](#endnote-23) These were made by the basket weavers of Mamunta, the home of Forna’s great, great-grandfather’s slave-wife, Ya Beyas. For Ya Beyas the baskets came to signify the loss of her freedom, the hope that she would be freed, the memory of her family and all that was familiar, as well as the memory of her capture. The intricate, tightly woven prose of Forna’s text effects the weave of the *shuku*. Scenes of careless, childhood excitement intersect with scenes of casual racism and profound feelings of alienation. Historical accounts of the period since independence, and before, are intermixed with vivid, fictionalised, narrative segments that bring the mother’s exuberance to life. The discovery that the body of her father, and the seven executed with him were doused with acid, and thrown into an unmarked grave, and the descriptions of the atrocities committed by the RUF are interwoven with shimmering descriptions of the Sierra Leonean sunset, or its intensely, vivid flora. The narrative mirrors the individuals’ feelings of dislocation through these sometimes startling juxtapositions: these are also used to suggest the resilience of its characters through, in some instances, a willed ignorance: Life has to continue, and those who survive continue to invest in the hope for a better future. Through the interweaving of the mundane, the beautiful, and the horrific, Forna also, however, suggests that atrocities occur and continue through the determination of individuals to survive and to do so through willed ignorance:

People say they didn’t notice, never saw what was happening to their neighbours, knew nothing of the arrests, the burning houses, the children shot at dawn...People were rendered blind, deaf and dumb and they plead ignorance, How could they have stood up against what they didn’t even know was happening? [[24]](#endnote-24)

In the1970s, there were rigged elections, corruption and mis-governance. The violence routinely meted out against opponents of Stevens’s government foreshadowed the violence that characterised the civil war where, ‘...voters were frightened away from the polls by youths in red T-shirts armed with machetes and acid, who arrived and left in high speed convoys’.[[25]](#endnote-25) The amputations by militias armed with machetes leave a terrible scar on the Sierra Leone to which Forna returns. Of a young woman she visits and who has just given birth, she writes, ‘One foot had been sheared off below the shin, the other sliced diagonally across the ankle bone’. Having tried to walk, the skin at the bottom of her legs had hardened, ‘They looked like the feet of an elephant’. [[26]](#endnote-26) Although the weight of violence leaves her wondering about the ethics of a return to ‘a people whose own suffering was so raw’,[[27]](#endnote-27) her quest commits her to an act of witnessing that is also an intervention into the effects in the present, of a violent, traumatic past.

One of the brightest yet most enigmatic strands of Forna’s *shuku* narrative centres around the image of the devil that in its repetition functions as a lyrical iteration, an example of non-teleological forms that permeate otherwise conventional narratives. The first devil image is the ‘dust devil’ in the text’s opening paragraph.[[28]](#endnote-28) Its menacing presence is used to signify the ominous events that follow, on the day that Mohamed Forna is taken away from his home for the last time. It appears again as a bottle top devil, and as the devil dancing on water. In each scene, the child sees the phenomenon in its magical disguise. She is completely absorbed in the moment. The setting that Forna narrates as a context for the tale of the devil that danced on water is as fabulous as the story itself:

Over the edge of rocks the violent rush of water pitched into a serene, drifting river, edged by boulders, skirted by kingfishers and herons. Here and there pale green weeds below the surface caught the sunlight and the water gleamed phosphorescent.[[29]](#endnote-29)

As the young Aminatta listens to the story, she imagines the devil, ‘pirouetting, graceful as could be on his one proud foot’.[[30]](#endnote-30) The adults around her feed her imagination while chuckling knowingly, yet Aminatta determines that she will see that magical figure one day. This scene, coming just after her father makes the decision to go into politics, marks for the family, the beginning of the end of their ordinary lives, and the end of Aminatta’s childhood. The narrative’s closing image suggests that the memoir is in fact also ‘auto/biography’, (defined by critics as a relational life narrative [[31]](#endnote-31)), ‘I remember her now, as I write, the little girl who was once me... who believed that there was a place somewhere on this earth... where a devil came down at dusk to dance alone on the water.’[[32]](#endnote-32) These iterations are, as the concluding words suggest, signs of a lost childhood sensibility, situating Forna not just as a witness of others’ suffering, but also as a victim of a traumatic past.

Following Susan Stanford Friedman's identification of women’s autobiography as necessarily relational, several critics have elaborated on the relational character of autobiography. [[33]](#endnote-33) Paul John Eakin extends this concept to all autobiography.[[34]](#endnote-34) Black British women’s autobiographies have frequently been enclosed within a biography of a parent: the identities these texts produce are self-consciously dialogic, often involving a recovery and figurative ‘embrace’ of a lost or absent parent.[[35]](#endnote-35) In Jacqueline Walker’s *Pilgrim State* (2008), or the McKenzie sisters’ *In Search of Mr McKenzie*: *Two Sisters’ Quest for an Unknown Father* (1991), the trauma of separation is articulated in the context of racism, as well as gender inequality. For Doreen Lawrence’s *And Still I Rise* (2006), in which the mother’s identity is defined by the absence created by her son’s racist murder, the autobiography performs an intervention into a ‘wounding political, social, or economic system’ that pathologises its individual victims. Such texts ‘question the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse ... problems that are essentially political or economic.’ [[36]](#endnote-36) They make use of fragments of other forms of representations: letters, court documents, and other official texts, as well as newspaper reports, to address and intervene in issues of social inequality.

Although the McKenzie sisters’ text narrates the search to recover a lost parent, unlike Mohamed Forna, their father remains at the end of their quest, a vague, unsubstantiated presence. He had died when the authors, Thelma Perkins and Isha McKenzie Mavinga were six years and four months old respectively. Despite their quest and the successes achieved, the uncontextualised and fragmentary character of the documents included in the sisters’ narrative such as the photographs of their father, an extract from a newspaper article he authored, and letters written by him to the children's homes in which they were placed, merely reinforce his absence.[[37]](#endnote-37) The text begins with an extract from a letter written by their father, Ernest McKenzie, to The Barbican Mission for the Jews, the first home to which Thelma, at just a few months old, was sent along with her older brother and sister:

The following are the facts. My wife is a Jewess, and I am a Negro. The two races are classified as inferior by Hitler, and my race is so classified by all other peoples in the world, including the English ... I find that the home is on the verge of breaking through pressure put on my wife and her family members who are bitterly prejudiced against my complexion.[[38]](#endnote-38)

In this letter McKenzie is proud and articulate, with a sense of history and an awareness of injustice. This is the figure the sisters want to memorialise, but unlike Forna’s narrative, there is an absence of personal, familial memories that corroborate the fleeting impressions these documents create. In contrast, Jacqueline Walker’s auto/biography recreates vivid scenes of a precarious but happy childhood. The documents that the narrative includes, though not entirely woven into the fabric of the auto/biographical text, confirm the fictionalised scenes representing Walker’s mother’s love for, and desire to keep her children.[[39]](#endnote-39) Her story of the separations from her mother, are corroborated by memories shared with her brother. In addition, the stories of the past are enclosed within her memories of her mother’s stories and their conversations – a strategy also used by Yvonne Brewster in *The Undertaker’s Daughter* (2004).[[40]](#endnote-40) Whereas Brewster’s auto/biography describes a woman who is still alive and strong-memoried, Walker’s narrative uses fictive strategies to embroider her own childhood recollections. These recollections perfectly fit Eakin’s use of the concept of ‘memory talk’, defined as memories that begin to be articulated with the acquisition of speech, and which are then augmented in talk that reproduces those memories. They are ‘the establishment of a store of memories that are sharable and ultimately reviewable by the individual’, forming ‘a personal history that has its own value, independent of the general memory function.’[[41]](#endnote-41) For Eakin, the process of accumulating this ‘store of memories’ gives to the autobiographical life, a narrative arc within which other smaller narratives are enclosed: they are continually confirmed by more stories, more talk. The self of memory that emerges in autobiographical texts is social, and inextricably bound to processes of narration. Without that social, storied framework within which the self emerges as subject to, and as the subject of narration, the autobiographical text falls back on fictively naturalised memory, which, as Eakin argues, ‘preserves the past intact allowing for the original experience to be repeated in present consciousness.’[[42]](#endnote-42) Of course memory that is naturalised using fictional conventions, that represents an individual's version of the past as if it were an unassailable truth emerging from infallible memory, raises questions of authority and legitimacy. Such examples of auto/biography tend to be the kind of memoir to which Luckhurst refers, exemplified by Constance Briscoe’s work, discussed in this chapter’s conclusion.

In his discussion of Bernardine Evaristo’s and Diana Evans’s fiction, and Caryl Phillips’s *In the Falling Snow*, John McLeod argues that the use of ‘mixed race’ protagonists in contemporary black British writing, allows for a conception of Britain as a ‘mixed location in itself and for all’.[[43]](#endnote-43) The ‘mixed’ identities of the autobiographical subjects I refer to, inhabit the inhospitable margins that produce fractured or hard won subjectivities, and/or as in the case of Charlotte Williams’s *Sugar and Slate* (2006), Jackie Kay’s *Red Dust Road* (2010), and Michelle Scally-Clarke’s *I Am* (2001), exploit the potential for an in-between identity to create spaces of possibility used to inform hybrid identities. In autobiographical terms, these texts are both relational in the dialogic constructions of their autobiographical subjects, and reflective of what Françoise Lionnet defines as textual *métissage* in her discussion of postcolonial women's autobiography. These narratives use ‘linguistic and rhetorical structures that allow their plural selves to speak from within the straightjackets of borrowed discourses.’[[44]](#endnote-44) In the Preface to *Sugar and Slate* Williams writes that her autobiography is a document of ‘my searching as a second generation black Briton’.[[45]](#endnote-45) The search includes several journeys, both physical and psychological as she seeks to ‘bind that great triangle of Africa and the Caribbean and Britain.’[[46]](#endnote-46) Her textual *métissage* comprises several strands: the stories her white Welsh mother told her about her Welsh families; references to black Welsh history; extracts from her father, Dennis Williams’s novels, and references to his distinctive paintings. As with Jackie Kay’s *Red Dust Road*, these deftly woven strands present Britain as a historically mixed location, one that is increasingly hospitable to the idea that ‘to be mixed race is not to be half of anything; mixed but not mixed up.’[[47]](#endnote-47) Kay’s paternal-parental quest narrative is constructed from a complex web of memory and forgetting, fiction, fantasy, fact, and experience. Her Nigerian father’s continued loss to Jackie is glossed with humour, and with a series of textual gestures that affirm a hybrid self that includes, but does not depend on, the father Jonathan. Although he refuses a second meeting, she meets her brother, one of his sons, for the first time and remembers, ‘My world feels like it has expanded accordion-fashion and music is coming out blaring through the stadium speakers, a high-life mixture of Celtic and African music.’[[48]](#endnote-48) As with Williams’s text, the culturally diverse strands effect an almost perfect braid.

The identity that performance poet Michelle Scally-Clarke seeks to claim, is also one that is ‘mixed but not mixed up’. But that search is fraught and hurt-filled: subjectivity in this narrative is hard won, emerging from the difficult, sometimes dangerous spaces of a fractured, uneven text. Extracts from her Adoption Files provide evidence of parental neglect and near life-threatening abuse, as well as inadequate institutional intervention. In the second of these extracts, before Michelle was one, her foster mother ‘discovers a lump on Michelle’s chest’ and ‘peculiar dents’ on her head.[[49]](#endnote-49) For most of her early years, social workers and foster parents suspect that she is deaf, though she is not, or that she is ‘subnormal’. She is in fact inadequately cared for. In a reminder of the everyday racism that governed the care of children in the 1970s, her files report: ‘...an immigration specialist ...said that she is quite sure Michelle is not part West Indian, but is in fact Asiatic’.[[50]](#endnote-50) Her journey is first towards her ‘black self’ but, she is able to conclude, in a changing Britain, ‘I am a proud Black woman of dual benefits and heritage. I present my self with thanks. I call on the whole of myself.’[[51]](#endnote-51) Her text and the others described in this section do not merely describe a process of self-reclamation, but perform counter-discursive acts of resistance against the racist ideologies that inform those systems intended to provide care for the vulnerable. As well as constructing a self produced in dialogue, Clarke's textual self prompts, according to her father’s Preface, the production of new understandings and alternative narratives of the past: ‘…*I Am*… has prompted many family discussions...It has caused us to revisit old episodes and understand them better now. It has reminded us that each family member has their own *I Am* as yet unwritten.’[[52]](#endnote-52) Her father’s comments recognise the fraught terrain on which concepts of autobiographical ‘truth’, voice, and authenticity are performed. He acknowledges that more important than the production of a literal authenticity is the text’s achievement of a symbolic truth about a journey from victimhood to survival.

Autobiographical forms that attract the most attention and that frequently become the object of theoretical and critical reformulation are those whose autobiographers do in fact place their trust in the concept of an invariant memory. The process of recall that underpins autobiographical discourse of this kind presents events and experiences as the truth of memory. It is perhaps the absence of self-reflexivity in these texts that contributes to their popularity, feeding as they do, an increasing desire for a mediated reality that is aggravated or even incentivised by publishing houses. Several forms of autobiography sit within this truth-telling paradigm: collaborative autobiographies, *testimonio*,[[53]](#endnote-53) witnessing, or other forms of auto-ethnography where the ‘I’ is used to signify a culturally othered ‘we’, and the ‘misery memoir’ - as the form produced by trauma culture’s emergence has become to be known. In the concluding section I will focus on two examples of truth-telling autobiography, the collaborative and the so-called misery memoir as a way of reflecting on what is at stake in the reading and writing of autobiographical forms that are situated at the margins of a dominant culture. At the centre of these ethical dilemmas is the relationship between the ‘story’, the ‘life’, and the authority to tell it. Mark A. Saunders discusses how some of the problems generated by ethnographic texts often also involve a cross-cultural encounter, or one that involves a literate writer, and a non-literate, or semi-literate subject. In those cases the narrative itself relies on ‘preconventionalized models of selfhood’ that mask ‘the silences, the fissures ... disjuncture and the moments of upheaval the method of composition necessarily creates.’[[54]](#endnote-54) The writer in those examples does more than simply reproduce the life. She constructs a ‘rhetorical self’ that conforms to cultural, political, and generic expectations.[[55]](#endnote-55) The narrated life is a life transformed. Thus, as Couser notes, the answer to the question, ‘“Whose life it, anyway?”’ may not be as simple as it seems, since the rights to a life always revolve around questions of economic and cultural power. Whereas in ‘celebratory autobiography... the subject outranks the writer’, in ethnographic autobiography the writer very often outranks the subject.[[56]](#endnote-56) In many cases however, as with the production of Doreen Lawrence’s autobiography, the status of both subject and writer, who is an OBE recipient and Britain’s first and youngest black woman publisher, are so close as to provide neither party with an hierarchical advantage.

Lawrence has said of her autobiography, *And Still I Rise* (2006) that it was a project she was persuaded to undertake, as a result of repeated requests from those involved in the Stephen Lawrence campaign, and also presumably, from several publishers, scenting a perfect marketing opportunity. Described by Peter Preston in *The Observer* as ‘part polemic, part autobiography’,[[57]](#endnote-57) the second half of the narrative focuses on the struggles, the disappointments, and the intricacies of the court cases that sought to bring Stephen’s murderers to trial, and the work of the now internationally famous and politically transformational Stephen Lawrence campaign. Little of the subject is revealed in either section. The public persona, repeatedly described in the subsequent media coverage of her son’s murder and its aftermath, as dignified and self-contained, remains intact. Little of the autobiography’s collaborative origins are revealed, and indeed, the near-absence of the subject might be attributed to, or at least have been exacerbated by, the publicly reported controversy over the rights and suitability of the writer in a collaborative relationship. The decision of Lawrence’s publishers, Faber, to replace Margaret Busby with a white, male house editor is further evidence that the tensions produced by the process of collaborative autobiography centre around issues of ownership, not least the ownership exercised by publishing houses. In addition, as with much collaborative autobiography, ‘monological prose belies the very labor-intensive dialogical process by which it was produced’,[[58]](#endnote-58) with the result that the personal conflicts and struggles the narrative seeks to portray, are flattened by its even, professional tone. At the heart of the controversy then, is less the professional and intellectual reputation of the writer, in the first instance Margaret Busby, or the integrity of the subject, but rather the status of narrative in relation to the life it represents. Whose life? Whose story? Truth, in the case of *And Still I Rise*, continues to exist outside the space of the autobiographical text. Very little that had not already been said in Lawrence’s media appearances, is revealed in the autobiography. In fact the text reiterates Lawrence’s reluctance to disclose anything of herself – except to close family, and a few friends.

In contrast, misery memoir – a genre that purports to tell all – continues to be both popular and contested. Truth, rather than narrative authority, is at stake in the production and reception of these texts. It is therefore unsurprising that, as with Briscoe’s bestselling *Ugly* (2006) with sales figures of up to 600,000, and *Beyond* *Ugly* (2008), the controversy generated by this type of narrative is often more compelling than the work itself. While it is important not to overestimate the significance of this text in black literary production, particularly since Briscoe’s racial or cultural identity is not the point around which either her identity in the narrative, or the narrative itself is organised, discussions about authenticity in black women’s autobiography can be articulated in relation to the ‘truth’ claims of this narrative type. The story of Briscoe’s rise and fall, which has been played out in the full glare of the British media, has the characteristics of Greek tragedy. The tone of both texts is bitter and vengeful, both perhaps affective evidence of authenticity. Revenge also seems to have been the cause of the author’s current imprisonment for intending to pervert the course of justice. Although the circumstances in which Briscoe has been convicted are unrelated to the original defamation claim made against her by her mother, it cannot be but a sign of family dysfunction that her frail, eighty-year-old mother attended every day of her daughter’s trial and returned for the sentence, after which she was reported as saying, ‘I’ve been waiting for the day to come... She should have been in the dock a long time before now.’[[59]](#endnote-59) In fact, of course after the publication of *Ugly*, Constance, along with eighteen members of her immediate family were ‘in the dock’, or at least in court: Constance to contest the defamation claim; sisters, brothers, and stepsisters as witnesses for the mother. What emerged in that case, (the partial transcript of the case is published as a postscript to the second edition of *Ugly* 2009), is that the family had been known to Social Services for several years. At least one other sister – who testified against Constance and in support of the mother – was placed in care as a result of her mother’s actions. Carmen Briscoe-Mitchell lost the case against her daughter Constance. In words that must surely haunt her now, Constance reflects, in her account of that trial, ‘Why would I make all this up? If I lost this case my whole career in the law would be over. You cannot practise as a lawyer if you are a proven liar?’[[60]](#endnote-60)

The claim and counter-claim in the wake of Briscoe’s autobiographies would suggest that narrated truths of who said what, and when, are almost impossible to prove, except in the more celebrated cases of an author’s fabricated identity. In addition, the traumatic contexts within which these lives are narrated, as well as the need for stories to shape and make sense of a life, necessarily involve the blurring of boundaries between truth and fiction. In Scally-Clarke’s narrative, the autobiographical subject is reaching for a truth about experience, rather than truths about individual and specific events. The purpose of Briscoe’s auto/biograhies as Douglas argues, is ‘to set her adult self up against the child self - to offer a comparison between the different selves and the different mothers’, including herself as mother, and ‘thus to authenticate her experience and herself.’[[61]](#endnote-61) Although Douglas’s argument is limited (based on the first edition of the first text), as events have shown, processes of authentication cannot be fixed by a text, one which simply and inevitably produces, as Smith and Watson argue, a self in performance.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Auto/biography forces an interrogation of the role and function of narrative in the construction of identity. As this chapter demonstrates, Black British women’s autobiography can also be used to interrogate assumptions about how identities are produced, regulated, and distributed in narrative. Trauma, increasingly the subject around which many auto/biographical forms are organised, and the subject’s return to the site of trauma, enables a reinstatement of her textual self, and signals a refusal of victimhood. The forms of realism, including a fragmentary realism, used in these texts forces an engagement with institutional, national, and global structures of inequality and oppression.

1. Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, *Modern Language Notes,* 94:5, (1979): 919-30, 920. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sidonie Smith, ‘Self, Subject, and Resistance: Marginalities and Twentieth-Century Autobiographical Practice’, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 9:1, (1990): 11-24, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*.,16. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey (eds.). *Black British Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) focusing on African heritage writers, and R. Victoria Arana (ed.) *“Black” British Aesthetics Today* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), where ‘black’ in inverted commas is used to denote African-heritage and Asian writers. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Roger Luckhurst, ‘Traumaculture’, *New Formations*, 50, (2003): 28-47, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*., 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: an Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Stef Craps, ‘Beyond Eurocentricism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age’ in *The Future of Trauma Theory:* *Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism* ed. Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant, Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2014), 45-62, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ananya Jahanara Kabir, ‘Affect, Body, Place: Trauma Theory in the World’ in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism,* 63-76, 65*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*., 68-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Craps, ‘Beyond Eurocentrcism’, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Aminatta Forna, *The Devil that Danced on Water: A Daughter’s Memoir of her Father, Her Family, Her Country and a Continent* (London: Flamingo, Harper Collins, 2003), 403. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*.,164. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*., 315. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid*.,184. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid*.,150. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid*.,153. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Douglas, *Contesting Childhood*, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Forna, *The Devil*, vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Forna, *The Devil*, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*., 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*., 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*., 386-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *Ibid*., 387. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid*., 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid*., 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. *Ibid*., 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Thomas Couser, ‘Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing’, *Style*, 32:2, (1998): 334-50, 338; Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory*, *Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 273-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Forna, *The Devil,* 403. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Women’s' Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice’ in *Women,* *Autobiography, Theory: a Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 72-82, 72-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Paul John Eakin, ‘Relational Selves, Relational Lives: the Story of the Story’ in *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern, (*Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998*).* [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Suzanne Scafe, ‘The Embracing “I”: Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Black Women's Auto/biography’, Special Issue, ed. Deirdre Osborne, ‘Black British Women’s Writing’, *Women: a Cultural Review*, 20:3, (2009): 287-298. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Craps ‘Beyond Eurocentricism’, 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Suzanne Scafe ‘“Let Me Tell You How it Really Was”: Authority, Legitimacy and Fictive Structures of Reality in Contemporary Black Women's Autobiography’, *Changing English*, 17:2, (2010): 132-133. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Isha McKenzie Mavainga and Thelma Perkins, *In Search of Mr. McKenzie* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Jacqueline Walker, *Pilgrim State* (London: Sceptre, 2008) [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. On Brewster's text: Scafe, ‘The Embracing “I”’, 289-222 & 295-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Katherine Nelson quoted in Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press, 1999),109. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibid*.,107. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. John McLeod, ‘Extra Dimensions, New Routines’, *Wasafir*i, 25:4, (2010): 45-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Francoise Lionnet ‘The Politics and Aesthetics of *Métissage*’ in *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 325-336, 329. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2002), n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. *Ibid*.,191. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. *Ibid*.,191. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road* (London: Picador, 2010), 275. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Michelle Scally-Clarke, *I Am* (Glasshoughton, Yorkshire: Route, 2001), 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *Ibid*.,19. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid*.,177. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. *Ibid*., 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. John Beverley, *Testimonio: on the Politics of Truth* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Mark A. Sanders, ‘Theorizing the Collaborative Self: the Dynamics of Contour and Content in the Dictated Autobiography’, *New Literary History*, 25:2 (1994): 445-58, 455-456. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *Ibid.,* 452. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Couser, ‘Making, Taking and Faking Lives’, 342. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2006/jun/25/society1 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Sanders, ‘Theorizing the Collaborative Self’, 456. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/01/constance-briscoe-ugly-chris-huhne-vicky-pryce [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Constance Briscoe, *Ugly* [2nd edition], (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2009), 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Douglas, *Contesting Childhood*, 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ‘The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions’, *Biography*, 24:1, (2001): 1-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)