USE OF THESES

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Patterns of Shame in Some Australian Autobiographies, 1960 to 1995

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University

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Statement

I, Rosamund Jane Dalziell, declare that this thesis has never before been submitted, either in part or in whole, to this or any other university for the purpose of a higher degree. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis is an original piece of research and, except where otherwise acknowledged, all conclusions are my own.

(Signed) R.J. Dalziell
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Abstract

Patterns of Shame in Some Australian Autobiographies, 1960 to 1995

This thesis argues that an understanding of the emotion of shame can contribute substantially to the literary interpretation of a broad range of Australian autobiographies published between 1960 and 1995. From a detailed analysis of more than a dozen autobiographical texts, I conclude that shame is also a powerful force within Australian culture, although its presence has been largely unrecognised.

The introduction to this thesis explains why an understanding of shame is useful in interpreting autobiographical texts, and discusses the relevance of shame to contemporary Australian autobiographies. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical foundations for a study of shame in Australian autobiography, drawing on historical and contemporary critical approaches to shame in a variety of academic disciplines. Chapters 2 to 5 analyse a number of Australian autobiographical texts, under the headings of shame and Australian cultural identity, shame and illegitimacy, shame and race, and shame and the Jewish immigrant experience. Chapter 2 discusses the shaming of Australian culture by the myth of British superiority as represented in Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s autobiography, *Solid Bluestone Foundations: and Other Memories of a Melbourne Girlhood 1908-1928*, with reference also to works by Martin Boyd. Chapter 3 considers three autobiographies concerned with shame and illegitimacy, *The Boy Adeodatus: Portrait of a Lucky Young Bastard* by Bernard Smith, *A Mother’s Disgrace* by Robert Dessaix, and *Daddy We Hardly Knew You* by Germaine Greer. The autobiographies by Aboriginal writers in chapter 4 provide the basis for a close examination of the relationship between shame and racism in Australia. The writers discussed in detail are Ruby Langford Ginibi, Sally Morgan, Charles Perkins, Ella Simon, Margaret Tucker and Glenyse Ward. In chapter 5, autobiographies by three Australians of European Jewish descent, Morris Lurie, Amirah Inglis and Andrew Riemer, illustrate the operation of shame in the immigrant experience, with particular insights into the relationship between shame, anti-Semitism and Holocaust survival.
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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that an understanding of the emotion of shame can contribute substantially to the interpretation of a broad range of Australian autobiographies published between 1960 and 1995. It is my assertion that distinctive patterns of shame can be identified in contemporary Australian autobiographies. The presence of these patterns leads me to conclude that shame is also a powerful force within Australian culture, although its presence remains largely unrecognised. This dissertation is the first study of the importance of shame in Australian culture as well as the first book-length analysis of shame in autobiography.

The characteristics of shame

Shame is an unpleasant and painful emotion. An experience of being ashamed is generally one to be avoided at best or at worst forgotten in the hope that the witnesses to this event will have short memories. Bernard Williams offers a useful working definition of shame: ‘The basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition’ (Williams 1993, p. 78). The possibility that others have not forgotten our shame may lead us to dread family gatherings, boycott school reunions or move away from our home town. Secrecy and concealment are the by-products of shame and those who know of the shame that we still carry retain some kind of power over us.

Nevertheless, an experience of being ashamed may lead to an amendment of life intended to prevent the possibility of a similar shaming event recurring. We may become more adept at avoiding social faux pas or unacceptable transgressions. In more extreme circumstances we may change our milieu to one where we are not shamed for our characteristics or practices. One of the most effective ways to divest oneself of shame is simply to reach maturity, as being ashamed is an integral part of the experience of being a child. Shaming, as part of the armoury of the socially powerful to ensure conformity, is deployed in the upbringing and education of children.

The contribution of shaming practices to social cohesion may be oppressive, shoring up the power imbalances of discriminatory communities, but on the other hand, may also have a positive function in ensuring the maintenance of social bonds. As Retzinger points out, the concept of shame is more complex than the feeling of being ashamed: ‘One can be in a state of shame without being ashamed; having a sense of shame is different from being ashamed or being in a state of shame’ (forthcoming, p. 14). Retzinger argues that ‘having a
sense of shame is to be a moral person' and that 'Having a sense of shame is crucial in the ability to regulate social distance', that is, in striking a balance between isolation and engulfment in relationship to others (p. 15).

Being in a shame state is different again. An individual in a shame state may not actually feel ashamed, as the shame experience may be disguised in many different ways. The disguised or low-visibility variant of shame is identified in the research of H. B. Lewis (1971) as by-passed shame.

The hiddenness of shame

Given that shame is associated with secrecy, concealment and forgetting, the recurrent representation of experiences of shame in autobiographies must give rise to the question as to why autobiographical narratives so frequently include episodes of self disclosure in which the self is shamed in some way. From Rousseau’s theft of the ribbon (in his Confessions 1781) to Hal Porter’s failure to return Miss Hart’s money (in The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony 1963), woven into the fabric of most autobiographies are accounts of personal errors and failures, of deception and lying, of humiliating punishments by parents or schoolteachers, of other children’s mockery and scorn for some perceived difference, of embarrassing sexual experiences in adolescence, or shame about parents, self, status, race or ethnicity, class or gender. Episodes of this kind are so common that the textual representation of shame appears to be fundamental to the autobiographical process.

The emotion of shame is related to ‘unspeakability’, a recurrent term in contemporary literary criticism concerned with the recovery of suppressed discourses related to issues of class, race and gender. However, because shame is itself typically difficult to speak about, it has been seldom specifically discussed in this context. A kind of circularity is involved in discourse about shame, because talking or writing about shame can be embarrassing, and embarrassment is one of the family of affects related to shame. Even in psychotherapeutic discourse, shame may be avoided because of the discomfort experienced by therapists in encountering shame in a client: close analysis of the avoidance techniques of therapists led H. B. Lewis to introduce the term ‘by-passed shame’ referred to above (1971, p. 493). Freud makes comparatively few references to shame, which may be partly why it has become characterised as ‘the neglected emotion’. In the index to the standard edition of Freud’s complete works, 36 entries occur under the heading ‘shame’, compared with 129 under the related heading ‘guilt’ (1957-74, vol. 24, pp. 292 & 378). From Erikson in 1950 to Kaufman and Raphael in 1991, shame has been described as insufficiently studied, long ignored and misunderstood. Anthropology has also
drawn distinctions between shame cultures and guilt cultures (Benedict 1946) with the suggestion that shame is somehow 'pre-modern' and 'anachronistic', as Moore points out (1993, p. 8).

Nevertheless, the unspeakable emotion of shame is increasingly being spoken about, reflected in a rapid growth in the number of studies of shame published mainly in the last five years, in disciplines other than literature. Lasch (1995) expresses some impatience with the view that shame is a neglected field of study, describing it as 'the latest site of intensive excavation by theorists and clinicians' (p. 198). The recent turn to the study of the emotions has contributed to an increased interest in shame. Bernard Williams' important study, *Shame and Necessity* (1993), drew on Gabriele Taylor's earlier study in moral philosophy (1985). In psychology the works of Potter-Efron (1989), Kaufman and Raphael (1991), Michael Lewis (1992) and Nathanson (1992) have enlarged the understanding of shame within that discipline. Social scientist John Braithwaite's model of re-integrative and dis-integrative shaming is having an ever widening impact on reforms to the criminal justice system (Braithwaite 1989), supported by the work of Moore (1993). The work of Thomas Scheff in sociology (e.g. 1988, 1994) and Suzanne Retzinger (1991, forthcoming) in psychology, together with their work as joint authors (1991), has contributed significantly to raising academic awareness of shame. In theology, shame has received attention from Clark (1990), Fowler (1993) and Capps (1993). The popular influence of John Bradshaw (1988) and the 'recovery movement' should not be underestimated. James Fowler writes of 'a flood of recent literature on shame' (1993, p. 816). A forthcoming publication, *Shame and the Modern Self*, a collection of interdisciplinary essays (eds D. Parker, R. J. Dalziell & I. Wright), reflects a growing interest in the academic study of shame in Australia.

**Shame and autobiography**

Autobiography inevitably involves elements of self-concealment which frequently indicate the presence of shame. An 'Australian Pioneer', Robert Barton, acknowledging that autobiographical texts include both exposure and concealment of the self, introduces his *Reminiscences* (1917, p. vii) with the following apposite if undistinguished verses by one Will Carleton:

For people's lives,  
full well we know,  
Two sets of things recall,  
The one of which we always tell,  
The other not at all.
In this way, Barton admits his intention to withhold what he chooses from his autobiographical text. Conventions about what may appropriately be mentioned in an autobiography as opposed to what is too shameful are shaped by wider social forces. The historical transformations in European social conceptions of shame have been charted in Norbert Elias’s innovative study, *The Civilising Process* (1978). In Australian autobiographies of the past three decades, similar transformations can be observed. For example, sexual development in puberty, once taboo, is *de rigueur* in post-Freudian autobiographies. Similarly, an abortion, once illegal as well as a source of shame, may now be mentioned: examples may be found in the autobiographical *Wild Card*, by Dorothy Hewett (1990) and *Searching for Charmian*, by Suzanne Chick (1994). Divorce, illegitimacy, contraception, menstruation, homosexuality and frank accounts of heterosexual encounters are acceptable. But boundaries still exist. An admission of lying in public life in Graham Richardson’s *Whatever it Takes*, proved to be less acceptable to the reading public than the autobiographer had anticipated (Richardson 1994). Jack Waterford describes Richardson as ‘shameless’ (Waterford 1996, p. 48). Anti-Semitism remains a literary issue of extreme sensitivity. Revelations by Mary Lord (1993) about Hal Porter’s paedophilia have the potential to undermine the canonical status of *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963).

What is omitted from an autobiographical text may also reflect an alternative aspect of shame, that which safeguards the privacy of living family members or associates, or observes (a mainly male) convention of omitting any reference to spouse or family in a vocationally oriented text. Examples of this practice include A. R. Chisholm’s *Men Were My Milestones* (1958) and to some extent, W. K. Hancock’s *Country and Calling* (1954) and Bernard Smith’s *The Boy Adeodatus* (1984).

Shame may be indicated in an autobiography by narrative ‘cracks and fissures’ such as a conspicuous omission from the text of what a reader of autobiography might reasonably expect to be included, for example, the absence from the narrative of a detailed representation of one parent, or of a significant stage in life. Where an autobiographical text represents a childhood in a haze of idyllic nostalgia, the critic must be tempted to apply Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’. An autobiographer may deflect or avoid confronting shame by attempting to erase traces of shaming experience from the textual construction of the self. A significant ‘aporia’ or gap in the narrative is often an indication of shame, traces of which are generally present in the text despite the omission. To follow such traces may lead to valuable insights into the text as a whole.
Unlike the shaming experiences of life, which by their very nature cannot be controlled, the act of writing is self-directing, even when recording apparently shameful experiences or material. Writing can record, confess, conceal, deflect, correct, or misrepresent. An autobiography may also be a means of fighting back, either by shaming the shamer, by setting the record straight or by getting in first in order to deflect potentially public shaming. As Charmian Clift puts it, ‘the pot-pourri of memory is spiced with resentment as well as regret’ (1995, p. 22). A writer may choose to shame a shamer out of revenge: Patrick White’s representation of his mother in Flaws in the Glass (1981) is one such example. Alternatively, an autobiographer may attempt to understand and forgive the shamer, as Manning Clark attempts in the portrayal of his parents (Clark 1989, 1991). Furthermore, an autobiographer may attempt to forgive him- or herself, by a sympathetic re-telling of ‘shameful’ experiences which are viewed from the benign standpoint of a mature narrating self.

Cringing and strutting

The now clichéd term ‘cultural cringe’ has made shame central to Australian identity. The term which originated in A. A. Phillips’ Meanjin essay of 1950 (Phillips 1958) was reaffirmed as recently as 1994 in Australian Civilisation, a collection of essays edited by Richard Nile, who includes essays entitled ‘Cringer’, by Elaine Thompson, and ‘Strutters’ by Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Thompson’s conventional discussion of the extent and effect of the ‘cultural cringe’ as identified by A. A. Phillips, notes ‘a deep-seated perversity’, a ‘self-hatred that defies reason’, in the critical practice of artists and writers who assessed Australian cultural achievements against an artificially constructed ‘overseas’ standard deriving from Britain and Europe (Nile 1994, p. 187). Wallace-Crabbe takes the debate further by suggesting that the ‘cringe’, in moving from ‘explanatory term’ to cliché, has become ‘a blunt tool’. Wallace-Crabbe chooses to focus on what shame theorists such as Kohut term ‘grandiosity’, the ‘overemphasis and skiting’ which are ways of ‘staking ... a bold claim for our belated culture in the teeth of great powers – both living powers and the heavy legions of the dead’ (Wallace-Crabbe in Nile 1994, p. 207). Wallace-Crabbe identifies an ‘anxiety in the psyche’ that leads to a ‘compulsion to overstate the case, to make too large a claim, to swagger, to strut’ (p. 208). ‘Strutting’ is consistent with Kohut’s psychotherapeutic explanation of a link between grandiosity and shame within an individual (1978), a theory discussed in more detail in chapter 1.

Self-deprecation and grandiosity are both effects of shame. The first effect evaluates the self as less than it is, the second overvalues it. Both these aspects
of shame are evident in many autobiographies. A published autobiography presents ‘the self on show’, to borrow from Peter Steele’s subtitle to *The Autobiographical Passion* (1989). In order to capture the reader’s interest, the autobiographical self must be represented as larger and more interesting than life. On the other hand, to prevent the reader being repelled by the blatant egotism of the autobiographer’s self-display, the self may also be represented as inadequate, ashamed and in some respects a failure. The representation of shaming experiences can be a narrative strategy for disarming critics who might seek to cut down to size those who have the audacity to write an autobiography. The autobiographer thus arranges for the narrated self to be perceived by the reader as an ‘ordinary person’ who shares the common human experiences of fallibility, uncertainty and the fear, or even the recollection, of appearing ridiculous.

**Shame and self-evaluation**

Shame was first designated by Charles Darwin as an emotion of self-attention (Darwin 1979). Gabriele Taylor (1985) extends this definition, suggesting that shame should be understood as an emotion of self-assessment. Based on Taylor’s understanding of shame, it can then be argued that an autobiography in which shaming experiences are represented may constitute a text of self-assessment. Although the autobiographical act is commonly regarded as supremely egotistical, self-depreciation in autobiographical narratives, modifying the dynamics of self-display, is also consistent with the confessional origins of the genre. An awareness of shame, captured in the text, can be helpful in assisting an autobiographer to assess strengths and weaknesses, and in avoiding a tyrannical narcissism.

But the pervasiveness of shame in the self complicates the matter further. Egotism may penetrate a confessional autobiography, but in the process of self-evaluation shame may also get out of hand.

Michael Walzer’s discussion of the process of ‘self-castigation’ sheds light on the tendency for shame to surface in self-evaluation. In *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (1994), Walzer concludes that a self that is capable of understanding the two kinds of moral argument with which he is concerned, maximalist and local (thick) or minimalist and universal (thin), must be a ‘divided self’, capable of self-criticism, a process of ‘internal reflection and debate’ among the various roles and identities of which the self is composed (p. 86). Walzer notes that:
self-criticism is commonly thought an exemplary activity: we approve of this activity both in others and in ourselves: 'I look at myself critically, and then I look approvingly at myself looking at myself critically. Perhaps my criticism deflates me; but then the spectacle of myself as critic puffs me up again' (p. 87).

Walzer is writing about the intersections between moral and political philosophy, but his remarks have a bearing on the self-exposure commonly found in autobiography.

In the course of his discussion of self-criticism, Walzer lights upon the phenomenon of shame, although he does not identify it as such. In reflecting on the self-appraisal that often stems from the process of self-criticism, he continues:

If this is right, why is self-criticism so often painful? A certain amount of pain is necessary ... to justify the approval: if criticism didn’t hurt, it wouldn’t be exemplary. But self-criticism sometimes produces what we might think of as surplus pain - not merely embarrassment, chagrin, regret, or remorse, but a paralyzing sense of inadequacy, endless guilt and self-loathing, which reach far beyond the requirements of the critical enterprise (p. 87).

Walzer makes the point that this reaction of self-loathing is generally out of all proportion to the shortcomings identified. He continues:

The average self probably ‘needs’ only limited criticism, finite pain. But perhaps the enterprise, once launched, has a momentum of its own. The harder I look, the worse I appear. Social critics get tired, burned out, choked by their own anger, but self-critics simply improve with practice. Or perhaps the self-critic is taken unawares. Slowly he strips away his protective clothing, thinking all the while that what lies underneath isn’t half bad, and then finds himself staring in horror at his own hideous nakedness. The pain comes from the surprise (p. 88).

Walzer suggests that the cure for this hyper-critical condition may reside in psychoanalysis, where analysis is thought of as ‘a kind of metacritique, requiring an extended criticism of the critical “I” and a partial vindication of the castigated self’ (p. 88). Walzer attributes this experience to the ‘superego’s judgemental fury’ (p. 88), and although suggesting that therapeutic intervention may be helpful, also notes that:

the superego, even if we reject its most far-reaching claims, is still the internal representative of moral value (and of the demands of role and identity) and I cannot live in civilized society, I cannot live in the company of others, without its ministrations (pp. 88-9).

Walzer’s discussion has a bearing on patterns of shame in autobiography. Autobiography, perhaps at first a tentative process of self-examination in a narrative, may unleash the shaming power of the superego in all its ferocity leading to intense self-castigation, or it may let slip glimpses of the self’s experience of this emotion in the recalled past. Autobiography also explores the links between the individual and society, and the historical and social processes
by which these links were formed. Like psychoanalysis, autobiography can also become a kind of metacritique to reassess the claims of the superego, and to reject those claims that are considered by the mature narrating self to be excessive or no longer valid.

**Shame and literary criticism**

Now that shame is beginning to claim the attention of moral philosophers such as Gabriele Taylor, Michael Walzer, Bernard Williams and John Kekes, this so-called neglected emotion could also be expected to interest literary critics because it requires as a necessary condition the gaze of the other, comparable to the complex relationships between author and narrative, author and reader. The critical and shaming gaze, which is external to the self when first experienced in early childhood (Erikson 1950), may be transformed in maturity into an internalised reflexive self-scrutiny, which operates as a dynamic in these textual relationships. Autobiography as a genre is particularly well suited to a critical enterprise seeking to foreground the emotion of shame because of the distinctive relationship between author and narrating subject.

Nevertheless, shame has received scant attention either from literary critics generally or specifically in autobiographical criticism. John Barbour devotes one chapter of *The Conscience of the Autobiographer* (1992) to a discussion of shame in the writings of Mary McCarthy, and Donald Capps (1993) examines questions of shame and guilt in an article on St Augustine's *Confessions*. Most contemporary critical discussion of shame in literature has been concerned with Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* (e.g. Suleri 1992).

**Shame and individual development**

Shame is of particular interest to the critic of autobiography because a focus of most autobiographical texts is childhood, and as already noted, shame is an integral part of the experience of being a child. Although much of the literature on shame has designated this emotion as negative and appropriate to shed or discard, recent thinkers have suggested that an individual who does not develop a sense of shame lacks the necessary self-awareness and capacity for self-restraint that living in society with others requires (e.g. Kekes 1993, Braithwaite 1989). Retzinger describes the function of 'healthy shame' as maintaining the social bond between individuals and among groups (forthcoming, p. 1).

As mentioned above, Darwin designates shame an emotion of self-attention, and Erikson and others have argued that the development of a sense of shame
is associated with the dawn of self-consciousness in the personality, preceding the development of moral consciousness. Although this emotion helps to set limits to behaviour, where shame-based reactions to others are excessive, shame can cripple or even dissolve a confident sense of self so that the individual’s theory of how he or she is or should be regarded by others is likely to be unrealistically negative, as Michael Lewis (1992) has demonstrated. On the other hand, successful negotiation of the developmental stages of the maturing self will minimise the inhibiting or destructive effects of residual shame in adult life (Freud 1962; Erikson 1950; Kohut 1978).

Shame and power

The study of shame in autobiography is also of interest in its relationship to the exercise of power as represented in the shaping of the narrated self. The autobiographies selected for study illustrate ways in which those who are confident of the appropriate limits to behaviour and who have the power to enforce them may use techniques of shaming to ensure that others conform. This kind of power relationship, exemplified by Foucault’s concept of surveillance in Discipline and Punish (1977), may occur wherever power is exercised, whether within the family, the institution or the state. Where the structures and exercise of power are manifestly unjust, the process of shaming is likely to produce destructive effects on less powerful individuals and groups (see for example, Braithwaite 1989; Miller 1987). Sexism, racism, colonialism and other forms of political and social oppression are examples of destructive shaming, where the very embodied being of the less powerful is shamed.

In resisting destructive shaming where the practice has become integrated into social or institutional structures, autobiographies have an important role to play. Rorty’s discussion of human rights from an anti-foundationalist position accords a prominent role to story-telling in eroding human rights abuse by foregrounding the common humanity of ‘the other’. According to Rorty, in his contribution to the 1993 Oxford Amnesty Lectures, ‘Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality’: ‘We pragmatists argue from the fact that the emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories’ (Shute & Hurley 1993, pp. 118-9). Rorty argues that change in the way a dominant group regards an oppressed minority is more likely to occur in response to a story that illustrates the common humanity of the oppressed than in response to moral understanding. In Rorty’s view, those who commit atrocities ‘do not think of themselves as violating human rights’ because they do not think of those they abuse as fellow human beings but as ‘pseudohumans’ (p. 112). Rorty illustrates
this state of mind as follows: 'We and those like us are paradigm cases of humanity, but those too different from us in behaviour or custom are, at best, borderline cases' (p. 113). If abuse of human rights is possible because one group does not acknowledge that the group they oppress consists of other humans, autobiographies in which the humanity and suffering of the oppressed is powerfully communicated must fall indisputably into Rorty’s category of story, although the adjectives ‘sad and sentimental’ appear to trivialise either the stories or the moral superficiality of the audience. Shame operates as a mechanism for impeding the telling of such stories, but where the stories are in fact told, patterns of shame will be evident in the narratives.

Challenging modernity

A hermeneutics of shame in criticism of autobiography offers a challenge to modernity, the latter characterised by Terry Eagleton (drawing on Nietzsche’s *Thoughts Out of Season*) as ‘a Nietzschean “active forgetting” of history: the healthy spontaneous amnesia of the animal who has willfully repressed its own sordid determinations and so is free’ (Eagleton, in Lodge 1988, p. 389). According to Nietzsche, ‘the animal lives unhistorically: it hides nothing and coincides at all moments with that which it is’ (in Lodge 1988, p. 389n). The emotion of shame is related to concealment and to the secrets and pain of the past. It arises from a disjunction, a lack of coincidence between what the self assumes or wishes itself to be and what another, either external or internalised, perceives it to be. With an understanding of the operation of shame comes the realisation that it is impossible to live unhistorically. The eruption of shame in the self, with its roots in a personal past, may take the individual by surprise, as Walzer puts it, and a Nietzschean ‘willed amnesia’ that is never disrupted by shame, is neither ‘healthy’, spontaneous nor even possible for most individuals.

To this conception of modernity, Eagleton opposes:

> Walter Benjamin’s “revolutionary nostalgia”: the power of active remembrance as a ritual summoning and invocation of the traditions of the oppressed in violent constellation with the political present (Lodge 1988, p. 389).

Autobiographies containing representations of shame that derive from oppression challenge the ahistoricising processes of modernity by speaking the unspeakable, confronting shame, breaking shame-enforced silence about oppression. Eagleton also finds in Benjamin’s ‘tradition’ a challenge to postmodernism, describing Lyotard as ‘deeply opposed to any such historical consciousness, with his reactionary celebrations of narrative as an eternal present rather than a revolutionary recollection of the unjustly quelled’ (Eagleton, in Lodge 1988, p. 389).
From shame to testimony

This thesis pursues Benjamin’s concept of ‘revolutionary nostalgia’ by developing and applying a literary theory of testimony to certain autobiographies, arguing that it is more appropriate to construe an autobiographer’s articulation of experiences of shame deriving from political and social oppression as testimony than as simply fictive, that is, nothing more than a linguistic performance of a multivalent self. This is not to advocate an ingenuous acceptance of autobiographical texts that proclaim themselves to be true, simply because they do so. A critical sensitivity to the shaping influence of genre, intertextuality and cultural influences, the deceptions and falterings of memory, the impulses and evasions of the psyche and the complexities of language itself, are all of the utmost importance in the interpretation of an autobiographical text, as Eakin’s *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985) has demonstrated. Time and memory play tricks with truth, as Charmian Clift also observed in her essay ‘The Time of Your Life’:

> Time has a particular trick, and a very clever one, of threshing and winnowing experience. As years pass the inconclusiveness of actual formulation is husked off and blown away like chaff on the wind. All that memory retains is a hoard of separate grain (Clift 1995, p. 22).

Clift also notes: ‘Memory sifts out the facts according to individual requirements’ (p. 22). Whether the sifting is highly self-conscious or partially unconscious, an awareness of the prevailing social and personal circumstances of the autobiographer at the time of writing may provide critical insights into the winnowing process. The critic is not called upon to adopt distinctively different approaches for autobiographical texts that proclaim themselves true, such as Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987) and Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988), as opposed to self-consciously postmodern texts which give clues to narrative deceptions, such as Robert Dessaix’s *A Mother’s Disgrace* (1994), because the winnowing process occurs in all autobiographical writing. Nevertheless, to regard all autobiographical texts as elaborate linguistic fictions or lies is, I suggest, to do them a great injustice.

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Laub explores some of these issues. He discusses a woman’s eye-witness account of the uprising at Auschwitz where, historians agreed, one chimney was blown up (chapter 2, Felman & Laub 1992). The woman described a scene in which not one but four chimneys went up in flames, and as Laub explains, the historians present were inclined to discount this testimony as inaccurate, in order to avoid
being discredited by revisionist historians. Laub however, listening to this testimony as a psychoanalyst, believed that:

it was through my listening to her that I in turn came to understand not merely her subjective truth, but the very historicity of the event, in an entirely new dimension.

She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination ... And she came to testify to the unbelievability, precisely, of what she had eye-witnessed – this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz (p. 62).

The psychoanalyst notes the transformation in the woman’s narrative style from ‘self-effacing, almost talking in whispers’ to one with ‘a sudden intensity, passion and colour’ as she recounts the uprising (p. 59). He acknowledges and responds to the subjective truth of her testimony, in which an historical event is embedded, although appreciating that the woman’s recall of that event is coloured by her own imperfect knowledge of what had occurred.

It may be equally misguided for a reader to dismiss the autobiographical testimony of an Aboriginal writer to a massacre for which no European records exist, either in terms of its subjective truth or its potential historicity.

Felman, Laub’s co-author, postulates a link between the giving of testimony and healing, asking: ‘Is the testimony ... a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing?’ (1992, p. 9). By healing, I understand Felman to mean not only a restoration of the damaged self but a contribution to the recovery of a community disrupted by the consequences of past oppression on some of its members.

In testimony, narrative and reader response are related. In the formulation of a theory of testimony in autobiography, Camus’ novel La Chute (1956) is an influential text. In this work, the reader is drawn into the narrative by the narrating protagonist’s use of the second person throughout the text. The narrator relates his failure to respond to the suicide of an unknown woman who jumped from a bridge as he was passing by. In his account of this event, he simply moved on, neither going to her aid nor even becoming a witness to her death. Like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, he now tells and retells this story, so that each fictional interlocutor, and through this interlocutor, the reader, becomes a witness both to his failure and to the original event of the woman’s suicide. Felman identifies in Camus’ novels La Peste and La Chute textual references to the Holocaust and to the failure of European intellectuals to respond to this event, a failure she terms ‘methodical deafness’. An autobiography may, to a lesser or greater extent, constitute a testimony to various kinds of suffering, and the reader is thereby placed in the situation of
Camus' interlocutor, shamed into becoming a potential witness. The predicament for the failed witness, the historical passerby, is that his or her 'own life also loses its continuity, its ground and its balance' (Felman & Laub 1992, p. 199).

In the same work Felman quotes Elie Wiesel's claim: 'If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet ... our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony' (1992, pp. 5-6). Felman proceeds to inquire as to what 'has brought the discourse of testimony to the fore of the contemporary cultural narrative, way beyond the implications of its limited, restricted usage in the legal context?' (p. 6).

Yet testimony is still far from being a widely recognised literary genre. Although the term was extensively used in Quaker women's autobiographical writing of the seventeenth century (see Foxton 1994), it is increasingly being used by oral historians but seldom discussed by literary critics. An exception is Beverley's paper in Sidonie Smith's De/Colonising the Subject (1992), which will be discussed in chapter 4, with brief reference also to Foxton's work Hear the Word of the Lord: Quaker Women's Writing 1650-1700 (1994). In Testimony: A Philosophical Study, Coady describes testimony as 'a prominent and unexplored epistemological landscape' (1992, p. vii). White, drawing on Langer (1991) employs the term testimony for both oral and written autobiographical accounts by survivors of the Holocaust (White, forthcoming).

Shame is related to silence and the suppression of narratives of suffering: testimony involves the discovery of a voice in the production of a testimonial narrative. Felman and Laub developed their conception of testimony in the crucible of Holocaust studies. In the foreword to Testimony: Crises in Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History they write:

On the basis of a close analysis of concrete examples of historical and autobiographical accounts, the process of testimony indeed sheds new light, both on the psychoanalytical relation between speech and survival, and on the historical processes of the Holocaust itself, whose uniquely devastating aspect is here interpreted for the first time as a radical historical crisis of witnessing (1992, p. xvii).

In this thesis I draw upon a literary understanding of the process of testimony to interpret contemporary autobiographical narratives, particularly those by Aboriginal writers. To analyse these texts in accordance with a literary theory that was most interested in tracing fictions of the self in autobiography not only seemed unilluminating but also to exemplify Felman's 'methodical deafness' by turning a deaf critical ear to narrative and narrator. Other autobiographical texts, including those written by autobiographers of illegitimate birth or of immigrant background, also seemed impoverished by this approach.
The testifying autobiographer in breaking a ‘shameful’ silence may cast the reader as an empathic ‘other’, whose benign regard or understanding dissipates shame. Laub writes:

The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognise their realness, annihilates the story (Felman & Laub 1992, p. 68).

**Autobiography as confession: healing the shamed self**

The contemporary Australian autobiographies selected for this study trace some of the distinctive movements of shame that shape the autobiographical self, while frequently exploring the intersection of personal and social issues. The retreats and expansions of the self, the clashes of ‘the expansive Promethean and the conservative reactionary’ are related to patterns of shame (Den Hartog 1987, pp. 3-7). Unbridled shame may be expressed in the form of the grandiose swagger, but on the other hand, an excess of shame may not only inhibit an expansion of the self but may even lead to anomie, a psychic disintegration of the self. Complex autobiographical patterns of shame may include the expression of shame-based rage and invective, but the confrontation of shame may also create textual space for healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, acceptance or even celebration of difference. In so doing, autobiographies may contribute to breaking down barriers of shame between individuals and groups in the context of a reading community.

American autobiographer Jill Johnson links contemporary autobiography, somewhat rhetorically, to the international political climate of concern for human rights in the second half of the twentieth century. Johnson writes:

Change is at the heart of the new autobiography ... As we write ourselves into existence, the class, race and sexual political structures of society inevitably change. The notion of who has rights, whose voice can be heard, whose individuality is worthy, comes under revision. Ideally, all will be heard and respected. The shame of difference will evaporate (J. Johnson 1993, p. 33).

The political import of autobiographies is also affirmed by contributors to Smith’s *De/Colonising the Subject*, including Carol Boyce Davies who writes: ‘If we agree with Gloria Anzaldúa that boundaries are sites of contestations, then life stories are boundary-breaking texts’ (Smith & Watson 1992, p. 17).

For ‘the shame of difference to evaporate’, as Johnson predicts, a ‘new autobiography’ is likely to be constructed as a ‘confession’ of shame generated by experiences of oppression based on perceived difference. ‘Confession’ in this context would be construed as a ‘declaration of faith’, even of martyrdom, rather than in the sense of ‘acknowledgement of offence’ (or transgression).
Like the martyr to a cause, the ‘new autobiographer’ directs attention to the marks of shame upon self and story that derive from unjust oppression and suffering. In this form of autobiography, confession constitutes a form of testimony.

Foucault on the other hand construes confession as simply ‘a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship’ (1990, pp. 61-62), and his critique is addressed in some detail in chapter 1.

However important the social implications of an autobiographical act may be, an autobiography may nevertheless primarily constitute an attempt to resolve the painful effects of residual shame within the self, rather than society. This resolution may be orchestrated by means of a complex intra-psychic dialogue conducted under the regard of an anticipated readership. Shame is a powerful and painful emotion which is seldom recollected in tranquillity and for autobiographers concerned with ‘the puzzles of childhood’, complex experiences of shame are involved. An autobiographer may cast the reader as the benign and accepting gaze that heals shame, while employing a variety of strategies to avoid breaking the sympathetic bond and disrupting this gaze.

**Autobiography as performance**

The performative dimension of the autobiographical act also requires reassessment in the context of a theory of testimony. A popular interpretation is that an autobiography is a textual act of self-display, an act of narcissism that the reader accepts, provided that it is entertaining. This is most evident in autobiographies by entertainers such as Barry Humphries in *More Please* (1992), Oriel Gray in *Exit Left* (1985) and in the autobiographies of Clive James. It is also evident in the coda to Lurie’s *Whole Life* (1987) in which he places himself in fantasy upon a stage in front of his parents, as well as in amateur theatricals within narratives as divergent as those of Kathleen Fitzpatrick (1983) and Hal Porter (1963). Within a framework of shame theory performative autobiography may be interpreted as a form of self-expansion, a becoming visible, redressing the balance of the shamed self who desires invisibility. Where self-display is out of touch with what is acceptable to the reader, it becomes grandiosity, an excessive self-display indicating an inappropriate self-evaluation and an insensitivity to the tolerance of one’s audience.

However, the self on show may not necessarily constitute a performing self seeking admiration but rather ‘a self on trial’. The evaluation of the self by others involves, not simply the possibility of an artistic failure, a theatrical flop, but a negative judgement of the self by others, introducing the possibility of
shame. This is the nature of the autobiographical risk. Some autobiographers risk more than others. For example, Fitzpatrick (1983) and Boyd (1965) risk very little in their elliptical discussions of sexual experience, whereas White (1981) and Dessaix (1994) risk prejudice and censure in revealing their homosexuality. Testimony is ‘a performative speech act’ (Felman, p. 5), but more is at stake than audience approval. The self that is judged is not only an individual, albeit narratively constructed, but also the representative of a suffering or shamed community.

Shame, suffering and survival

This study examines autobiographies in which shame is related both to hidden suffering and masked oppression, and is shown to be operating at both the individual level and in society so as to maintain the status quo. The destructive function of shame at the individual level is illustrated by Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), in which the narrated self suffers in secret from the shaming treatment meted out to her by her deranged uncle and aunt, and accepts their negative assessment of her character. Institutional factors shore up the position of the oppressors: the adults’ legal status as guardians guarantees their power over the child as a minor. The child has no alternative resources available. The shamed self is deprived of the opportunity to develop the healthy self-regard that would provide her with the strength to resist her oppressive circumstances, either psychically or practically. Similarly, minority groups within a society may be controlled by shaming treatment from a politically dominant group. This form of abuse of power has been addressed by contemporary critical concerns with class, race and gender, but the relationship of shame to oppression as refracted in literary texts has not been systematically studied hitherto. Moreover, a critical focus on shame extends the debate beyond these three categories.

A number of Australian autobiographers foreground the actuality of their survival as selves in their texts. Aboriginal autobiographers frequently refer to the achievement of survival as a race. Less obvious is the consciousness of survival in autobiographies by those born out of wedlock, the illegitimate autobiographers included in this study, for whom abortion and contraception are important preoccupations. Testimony is a form of resistance to those political or social forces that militate against the survival of the self by harnessing the power of shame. According to Felman: ‘one must survive in order to bear witness, and one must bear witness in order to affirm one’s survival, one’s own crossing of the line of death’. In quoting from Terrence Des
Près, Felman draws out this interrelationship: ‘Survival and bearing witness become reciprocal acts’ (Felman & Laub 1992, p. 117).

Scope of this study

The theoretical foundations for a study of shame in Australian autobiography are established in chapter 1, which discusses critical approaches to shame in a number of academic disciplines. Conceptions of shame and guilt are addressed and the importance of shame in Australian culture is broadly indicated, setting the direction for the argument of the following chapters in which a range of Australian autobiographical texts is analysed. These texts form the basis for an examination of shame and Australian cultural identity, shame and illegitimacy, shame and race, and shame and the Jewish immigrant experience. Chapter 2, the study of autobiographies representing the shaming of Australian culture by the myth of British superiority, identifies shame as an important dynamic in Australian society, contesting the received wisdom that Australia, like other western countries, is a guilt culture rather than a shame culture. Illegitimacy is an area that touches on class, gender and race issues, but has broader ramifications for identity and social transformation, as illustrated by the ‘illegitimate’ autobiographies discussed in chapter 3. The autobiographies by Aboriginal writers in chapter 4 provide the basis for a close examination of the relationship between shame and racism in Australia. I suggest that there is a connection between the legal fictions of filius nullius and terra nullius, both of which reflect ideologies of nothingness which mask the operations of power and oppression. In the final chapter, three autobiographies by Australian autobiographers of European Jewish descent offer a distinctive perspective on the operation of shame in the immigrant experience, with particular insights into the relationship between shame, anti-Semitism and Holocaust survival.