

The Politics of Remembering and Writing About Black Childhood

BY JOHN LEWIS ADAMS

African-American literary scholar Nellie Y. McKay defined “childhood in autobiography as the period from earliest recall to late adolescence, as we generally understand the latter in relationship to chronological age, even though psychologically, the childhoods of these subjects may have ended years earlier.”¹ For McKay, childhood is determined less by biological age or chronology and more by life experiences. On this theme, in his classic *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Claude Brown observed, “they ain’t got no kids in Harlem ... they don’t have any kids in Harlem because nobody has time for childhood.”² According to Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream*, “haunted childhood[s]” are indelible to growing up southern.³ North and South of the Mason Dixon Line, McKay concluded, “these young people must learn to protect themselves and to survive in a hostile society.”⁴ Daisy Bates’s presentation of her childhood in her autobiography is consistent with McKay’s conclusion that “large numbers of black youngsters do not have traditional childhoods.” “Rebirth,” the one chapter of *The Long Shadow* in which Bates discusses her traumatic youth, begins and ends with events that support the notion that Daisy Gatson’s childhood ended at an early age.

The way Daisy Bates wrote about her childhood is an example of how African-American activists who wrote autobiographies to make political statements against racial, gender and class oppression.⁵ In her essay titled “The Girls Who Became Women,” Nellie McKay framed the way black women “recall” their childhoods as “adult public responses to a hostile world,” offering valuable insight as to the proper context under which “Rebirth” should be interpreted. “From their recollections of their early lives,” she continued, “we learn that while they were quite young they became aware of and actively resisted the arbitrarily designated boundaries of race, class, and gender, unconscious of the path toward which they were headed.”⁶ Daisy Gatson may have exhibited glimmers of the courage she demonstrated over a quarter century later in Little Rock, but fundamental parts of her evolution into a Christian, married, respectable public leader for her race were inconsistent with the public image that her participation in the movement required. The transgressions Bates omitted are emblematic what Nellie McKay called the “claim to full

¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

² Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, 295.

³ Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 15.

⁴ McKay, “The Girls Who Became the Women,” 107.

⁵ For more on African-American childhoods and Black activism, please see, David Halberstam, *The Children*, (New York: Fawcett, 1998); Wilma King, *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives From Slavery To Civil Rights*, (New York: Palgrave, 2005)---*Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Ellen Levine, *Freedom’s Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Stories*, (New York: Penguin, 1993); Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 359-61; Christopher Metress, *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

⁶ McKay, “The Girls Who Became Women,” 107.

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ownership of her body and the dignity of an autonomous self.”⁷ They were also a rejection of what Dr. Carter G. Woodson coined the “Mis-Education of the Negro,” which he argued used the educational system as a means of thwarting radical black thinking, and perpetuating white control over blacks.⁸ McKay asserted that Bates wrote a political autobiography because identifying with a community allows the “marginalized” to “create their own image,” which is exactly what Daisy did in her memoir.⁹ Due to the fact that she wrote and published *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* during a time when it was not clear if the Civil Rights Movement would achieve its goals, Daisy Bates altered her narrative in a way that actually silenced controversial episodes from her upbringing, and emphasized the story she told as vindication of her belief that her later activism was shaped by the childhood experiences she specified.

—Excerpt from “Remembering Daisy Bates: A Biography of Midcentury Black Womanhood,” by John Lewis Adams, PhD. Dissertation, Department of History, Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 113. For discussions about race, gender, and the construction of identity, please see Karen Sacks Fields, “What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly,” *Oral History Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Health and Caring (Spring, 1989), pp. 44-53; Anne McClintock, “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family,” *Feminist Review*, No 44, Summer 1993, 61-80; Nell Irvin Painter, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth’s Knowing and Becoming Known,” *The Journal of American History*, September 1994, 461-485; Joan Scott, “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Winter 2001), 284-304.

⁸ Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, 55.

⁹ McKay, “Race, Gender and Cultural Context,” 175, 178