Popular Memoir in Neoliberal Australia

by

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Thesis
Submitted to Flinders University
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

9th August 2021

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Abstract

The widespread popularity of memoir over the last three decades in Australia demonstrates the importance of life narrative to national identity. However, it also reveals the pervasiveness of various ideologies, including that of neoliberalism. Though memoir's success and popularity has been welcomed by readers, writers and publishers, memoir has also been the subject of critical assessments that accuse the genre of inciting narcissism. This thesis seeks to examine the function of popular memoir, specifically within the contemporary Australian market, to analyse how popular memoir is integrated within the politics, culture and society in which it circulates.

This thesis traces the function of popular memoir during 2010-2017. This period is significant because its proximity to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 provides a unique opportunity to investigate the relations between how popular memoir and neoliberal ideology respond to global crises. Although, this thesis tends to focus on neoliberal ideology as a cultural force, one that intervenes in the way people perceive 'normalcy' in response to the crisis through life narrative rather than a vehicle for markets, publishers or authors to respond to crisis. In practice, this thesis focuses on the relationship between memoir and neoliberal ideology as a force that polices, challenges and negotiates norms of being in the world. For example, as economist Peter Bloom argues, neoliberal ideology responded to the GFC by reinvesting its energies away from the now compromised 'market' and towards physical, psychological and spiritual wellness. Subsequently, popular memoirs during this period are overwhelming structured by redemption narratives, which focus on individual self-determination and overcoming trauma to achieve wealth, success and happiness. Significantly, the popular memoirs in my case studies are authored by influential and celebrity subjects. Controversial wellness warrior Belle Gibson's Instagram account @healing_belle and her cookbook *The Whole Pantry* (2014); founder of the *I Quit Sugar* wellness franchise Sarah Wilson's memoir *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* (2017); Vietnamese-Australian comedian Anh Do's *The Happiest Refugee* (2010); lead singer of rock band *Cold Chisel* Jimmy Barnes' *Working Class Boy* (2016); and well-loved actress and comedian Magda Szubanski's *Reckoning* (2015).

In these case studies, I demonstrate how the popular memoir market traverses the spheres of 'wellness' and 'celebrity' and discuss how these spheres continually (re)produce particular kinds of subjects that are authentic and powerful. Both wellness and celebrity are grounded in neoliberal logics of personal responsibility, the individual and self-regulation that suggest the individual is always at fault regardless of their economic, cultural or political circumstance. These memoirs tell redemption narratives, in which the authors overcome trauma through personal willpower and become successful, popular subjects. I read this as a neoliberal structure in which the individual takes responsibility for their own trauma or disadvantage and is rewarded for successfully overcoming it by their own willpower. While this structure appears flawed, popular memoir is also site where these authors circulate simultaneously as authentic survivors of trauma who are also commercialised subjects: their experiences must also sell memoir and may serve to promote a career or public identity. Crucially, these authors are often framed by their popularity as good role models with relatable life narratives that readers should want to emulate. Typical of neoliberal ideology, deeper social, political, cultural and economic contexts are obscured in favour of the individual. As such, this thesis argues that popular memoir circulates within a social imaginary where 'ordinary' people also defeat trauma and become wealthy, successful and happy.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed....., *JacquiDickin*.....

Date.....18/03/2021.....

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship to this research. This work has also been helped greatly by the funding and support of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Flinders University, South Australia. Researching and writing a doctoral thesis requires a great support network, and I am very fortunate to have had the academic, virtual and personal support of many people throughout this process.

Thanks go to the many scholars in the International Auto/biography Association community, especially my colleagues in the Students and New Scholars Network. Special thanks to Craig Howes for his leadership of the IABA community and for his constructive comments on sections of this thesis.

I am indebted to my colleagues in the Flinders Life Narrative Research Group, and thank them for their constructive criticism, ideas, laughs and lock-ins; without which none of this would be possible. Special thanks to Emma Maguire, Pamela Graham, Tully Barnett, Marina Deller-Evans, Shannon Sanford and Edith Hill.

To Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas, my 'dream team' supervisors: your unwavering support and enthusiasm for this research has been a constant source of encouragement. I have learned and grown so much in your capable hands. Thank you.

As always, my family have offered love, laughs, hearty encouragement and an unwavering belief in my potential and capabilities. Thanks to Greg, Chris, Mitch, Grandpa and Auntie Sue for all the welcome distractions.

Thanks also go to the Rostan family, who gave me a place to stay when I first moved to Adelaide, have seamlessly accepted me into their family and have offered nothing but constant support and confidence. Also, to perhaps my fiercest supporter, Ethan Rostan, thank you for being my unofficial secretary, therapist and cheer squad. You lift and support me, always.

Finally, for Grandma and Uncle Robbie, who always knew that I could do it.

Introduction – Popular Memoir, Celebrity, The Boom/Lash and Redemption Stories

There are many possibilities as to why certain readers gravitate towards different kinds of writing about life, and indeed what makes memoir so popular in this day and age. Perhaps, it is a case of voyeurism where one can gaze upon the failings or successes of another and think that their life, by comparison, is not that bad. Or, perhaps, as Julie Rak suggests, reading lives is a way of exercising citizenship, as it reinforces normative ways of thinking and being in the world (2013). Memoir presents the story of a life, though not necessarily the chronological story of birth, life and death. Instead, memoir typically reflects on certain episodes or moments within a life. Memoir is a technology by which the self travels from private to public, and it is inherently a way of *being* public (Rak 2013). In the decades following the original memoir boom in the 1990s life narrative scholarship has shown increasing interest in the popularity of memoir. As memoir is more than an example of entertainment as a commodity, life narrative scholars want to know what memoir *does*, what is it *for*? Thus, I aim to address 'the questions "Why memoir, Why now?"' posed by Leigh Gilmore in her article *Limit Cases: Trauma and Self Representation* (2001, 129). Though first posed two decades ago, this is a relevant question in the current context of an Australian memoir publishing boom. This question is deceptively simple, and much like memoir itself, it resists an easy answer. In this thesis, I examine the popularity of memoir in an Australian context to understand identity as a commodity, but also to explore the function of popular memoir in politics, culture and society.

Neoliberalism is currently a pervasive ideology in Western culture, as such it plays an important role in how Australian people understand the world and their place in it. Neoliberalism is, at its core, an ideology that suggests that everything is understood through the principles of the 'free market' - productivity and profit are paramount. Economically, this manifests in Australian society through the privatisation of government assets like 'Centrelink', hospitals or indeed universities. Neoliberal ideology is present also in the growth of the gig economy, the increasing casualisation of employment contracts, or even raising the retirement age (the age at which you can legally claim a pension). Subsequently, neoliberal ideologies manifest in our everyday lives and intervene in our sense of 'normal' through a variety of mediums such as memoir, but also television or social media. As Daniel Worden argues in his 2020 book *Neoliberal Nonfictions*, what he calls 'documentary art' -

which includes multiple modes of the documentary aesthetic, including memoir – 'from the 1960s to the present time has articulated the ways in which neoliberalism and finance capitalism have isolated and limited, while championing and privileging, individual modes of being in the world' (127). Further, the memoir boom, for Worden, as well as the 'aesthetic uses of the memoir genre, reflect the cultural and ontological force of neoliberal reforms' (2020, 127). Though, Worden's analysis of the memoir boom and the continued prominence of the memoir genre does not simply position memoir as a passive symptom of a world increasingly controlled by neoliberalism. Memoir acts as a barometer of neoliberalism's idealisation of the entrepreneurial individual, charts constant production and consumption as markers of the good life and displays the erosion of commons and public discourse, but it is also a genre with political potential. As Worden argues, memoir under neoliberalism reveals the self as an object within a structure by exposing its limitations, rather than reaffirming problematic fantasies of upward mobility so typical of neoliberalism (2020, 128). Worden's work here is part of a growing field of memoir study that takes the genre's popularity as reason for further analysis as to its functions in wider society and culture, and in Worden's case, potential for political intervention.

Similarly, Megan Brown, in her 2017 book *American Autobiography after 9/11,* argues that memoir functions in America as a biopolitical technology that mitigates and creates opportunities for self-improvement out of the paralysing national anxieties that gripped America following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre. Firstly, Brown explains Michel Foucault's theory of biopower as an evolution of discipline from surveillance and physical separation (as in prison cells), to the management of subjects through classification: 'measuring their distance from established norms and optimising their productivity' (Brown 2017, 8). Subsequently, Brown cites Gilmore's book *The Limits of Autobiography,* and particularly Gilmore's ideas on life narrative and confession: that those who reflect on their lives are not unlike the self as bound to confess, in prison or other disciplinary institutions, 'if one imagines self-presentation as a kind of self-monitoring' (Gilmore 2001, 7; 20). It is through these concepts of life narrative and confession that Brown links memoir to biopower, as she explains: 'Confession remains a mechanism for truth and knowledge production, but under a regime of biopower, the self-actualization aspect of confession takes on greater importance' (2017, 9). Confession, for Brown, benefits the speaker because it allows them to work on themselves, and confession benefits the audience

by making legible the speaker's strategies of improvement, thereby moving closer to desired norms of health, happiness and productivity (Brown 2017, 9).

Confession is an integrated feature of life narrative, however the continued popularity of memoir genres contributes to the circulation of confessional energies from within memoir and its reception. Gilmore analyses these confessional energies through her critical category of the American neoconfessional, as a subgenre of memoir that emerged out of the popularity of the boom market for often scandalous or graphic private-made-public lives. Embedded in the American neoconfessional is what Gilmore calls the redemption narrative, which forms not only the storyline of the memoir but also structures how the scandals that come after it will be read. As Gilmore explains, 'elements of confession embedded in the American neoconfessional, include the notion that truth will be produced by a subject that is made believable less by [their] suffering than [their] anomalous redemption' (2010, 659). Crucially, Gilmore identifies that the story of overcoming that lifts the subject up and away from their suffering, through personal grit, and the achievement of a 'happier-than-predicted' ending is what makes the redemption narrative a marketable and repeatable structure (2010, 660).

Throughout this thesis I identify the redemption narrative as a popular structure of recent Australian memoir and explore how the redemption narrative functions as a vestige/fetish of neoliberalism while simultaneously acknowledging the genuine accounts of suffering and overcoming presented in these popular memoirs. The redemption narrative, Gilmore explains, 'features an "I" who overcomes hardship and recasts historical and systemic harm as something that the individual alone can, and should, manage through pluck, perseverance and enterprise' (2017, 89). Ultimately, redemption narratives task the individual with their own redemption. Further, Gilmore explains that scandal and judgemental energies have become an integrated feature of how popular memoirs are read in the post-boom market, which she calls the boom/lash. The boom/lash refers to a full-blown backlash against memoir, fuelled by its continued popularity, and a string of high-profile hoaxes that have resulted in a mistrust of the genre. The redemption narrative is crucial to Gilmore's theorisation of the boom/lash where brave nonnormative (ethnic, coloured, female) voices, which were popularised by the boom, are dissolved by the newly ascendant redemption narrative. As Gilmore argues, cycles of judgement which are embedded in the American neoconfessional form limit redemption to specific storylines. Significantly, the readers to which these memoirs are marketed retain the right to judge the value of the truth presented

and its producer. Readers of redemption narratives are free to champion or defame memoirists who succeed or fail to present normative life narratives, but also to avoid discussions about the more volatile elements of confessional representation (2010, 660). Fundamentally, the redemption narrative is a neoliberal formation designed to displace histories of racial and gendered violence into stories that champion the willpower of the individual.

Neoliberal ideology's foundational logic of personal responsibility locates all success and failure within the individual, which works to absolve governments from responsibility and provision for social services. Personal responsibility under neoliberalism assumes that everyone can achieve the same level of success, wealth and happiness, with variants in individual willpower being the only defining factor between people. In this way, complex and multi-faceted social issues like class, gender, race, ethnicity or illness shrink behind the barrier of the all-important individual. Though, as Brown reminds us, power does not simply oppress, and biopower, specifically, is an effective means of governing individuals under neoliberalism because it locates its legitimacy in its ability to maximise the capabilities of all people (Brown 2017, 9). As Brown argues, a technology such as memoir that leads to the self-management of individuals can be at once *both* troubling and satisfying (Brown 2017, 9). This thesis suggests that Australian popular memoir is such a technology that contributes to the management of Australian citizens as it circulates norms of self-presentation and self-actualisation while negotiating with multiple anxieties about individual and national identity. In this sense, popular memoir has the power and potential to be mobilised, by popular subjects, as a tool for social justice. Further, popular memoir in Australia today circulates as a symptom of the anxieties, securities, limitations and opportunities of a society grappling with neoliberalism. Specifically, this thesis argues that popular memoir functions within a social imaginary/fantasy in which 'ordinary' people defeat trauma and achieve success, fame and happiness. In this way, the memoirs that are examined in this thesis are not judged as inherently good or bad for their audience, instead the effects of these memoirs on Australian culture are multiple and simultaneous.

The reasons for focusing on memoir that is 'popular' in this thesis are twofold. Firstly, because I seek to disrupt the dismissal of popular memoirs as low value or narcissistic and subsequently dismantle judgement by some literary critics and academics alike that it contributes little to life narrative research (Rak 2013, 20). Secondly, because the reach of a

memoir that is popular is arguably wider (both in terms of audience and access to social commentary and public debate) than a more literary example, as such, a wider reach allows for a more demonstratable and grounded discussion of the function of memoir. These foundations for studying popular memoir are informed by Rak's pivotal 2013 work *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, where she locates memoir within production cycles as a way to explain how the memoir boom emerged, and how it continues. Rak defines popular memoir as memoirs written, produced and marketed by large publishing presses to mass audiences. This mass audience is described as a specific readership that enjoys consuming other well-known or extraordinary lives, either by well-known or ordinary people. In her study, Rak focuses on memoirs published by the two largest English-language publishers in North America, HarperCollins and Random House, in the year 2003, to demonstrate how the popular market operates. In my analysis of popular memoir, I discuss a subset of memoir written by people who have achieved notoriety/popularity *prior* to the publication of their memoir. Here, the genre of popular memoir and the work of celebrity culture intersect. Popular memoirs by celebrities use similar plot structures (the redemption narrative), styles and aesthetics as they repeat a genre proven to be successful in the mass market. Popular memoir is published somewhat differently to other forms of memoir, particularly in that popular memoir often appears in proximate chronology to notable events in the lives/careers of their authors. As Hannah Yelin explains in *Celebrity Memoir: From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics*, celebrity memoir too can capitalise on a successful career or revive a waning one (2020, 5). Popular memoirs are often also sought out by publishers, by which the publisher presents the opportunity to the well-known person to write a memoir based on its potential suitability and likeliness to sell during specific market trends. For this thesis, I examine popular memoir through notable examples published by Australian writers between 2010 and 2017, with a particular focus on how these popular memoirs negotiate with neoliberal myths through their redemption narratives. Popular memoir can be written by non-celebrities, but it is also written by subjects who already enjoy *popularity*; thus, it shares some key features of celebrity memoir. As Yelin argues, celebrity memoir exists at what she calls 'a nexus' of the promises of authenticity and access: 'it combines the "intimate" revelations that are central to celebrity culture with autobiography's promise of self-disclosure' (2020, 3). Similarly, while promising to reveal the 'real' person behind the public image, celebrity and popular memoirs impose a singular narrative upon the disorder of life experience *and* the multiple narratives that surround a celebrity (Yelin 2020, 3). Additionally,

while popular memoirs conform to a repeatable generic structure their subject matter is vastly different. I begin my case studies by analysing Belle Gibson's cancer scam *The Whole Pantry* to demonstrate how the redemption structure of popular narrative is redeemed through national scandal; secondly, I chart the movement of popular memoir through self-help to neoliberal life narrative in Sarah Wilson's memoir about overcoming anxiety *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*; then I interrogate happiness as a problematic aspiration and analyse Anh Do's self-deprecating humour as a survival strategy for marginalised subjects in his memoir *The Happiest Refugee*; in the fifth chapter, I take Jimmy Barnes' memoir *Working Class Boy* as an example of how life narrative is used to transform identity in the public; and finally, I examine Magda Szubanski's *Reckoning* as an example of resistant popular memoir.

My focus on popular memoir in this thesis is also informed by Peter Bloom's study of the potential of neoliberalism to be a moral and ethical system in his book *The Ethics of Neoliberalism*, particularly his concept of the neoliberal culture of capitalist idolisation. Neoliberal culture and finance capitalism as dominant economic systems have always fostered a culture that carefully balances individual and community. Cultural products like popular memoir promote myths of personal heroism with a regulated form of collective existence exalting figures like the cancer survivor, the comedian, or the rockstar. As Bloom argues, successful celebrities are understood through capitalist idolisation as good role models and evidence of the 'good life', which represents neoliberal pathology and commodification of the individual (2017, 96-97). Bloom's concept of capitalist idolisation here exemplifies why memoirs written by celebrities are read, and therefore must be studied, differently to memoirs written by unknown people. As Katja Lee explains in her work on celebrity memoirs, celebrities *already* circulate within a system where multiple participants (fans, industries, cultural products) negotiate the meaning of that persona/celebrity/individual (2014, 87; see also Marshall 1997, 47). Additionally, as participants or publics shape the meaning of celebrities, these celebrities (and their cultural products) gain privileged access to those publics. Lee explains further in her 2016 study of Canadian celebrity memoirs that these texts, therefore, must 'negotiate the pre-existing expectations of a public and signal their legitimate place in its culture' (2016, 268). As such, popular memoir becomes a site where expectations of confession and truth-telling that attach to memoir and expectations of identity and authenticity that attach to the celebrity converge in ways that are not always obvious or even intentional.

Rak explains that the discourse of celebrity has become one of the most important ways that individuals have not only understood themselves, but understood others to be *like* themselves (2013, 32). Subsequently, using capitalist idolisation as a lens through which to read celebrity memoir exposes that such affective connections to memoir by readers, can only ever be, as Lauren Berlant would say, 'cruelly optimistic'. Berlant's term describes cruel optimism as optimistic attachments where the object of such desires, and one's affective attachment to that object, is an obstacle to achieving the goal that first brought one to that object (2011, 1-2).The object in this affective attachment is the memoir, which contains a 'cluster of promises' that *seem* attached to it and are typically read in what Berlant calls 'intimate publics': spheres that produce affective connections with vaguely defined others through a sense of shared experience (Berlant 2008, 3). That is not to say that all optimistic attachment to memoir is cruel, even when it is problematic. As Rak reminds us, 'memoir makes people feel connected, and it connects individual feelings to group ideas' (2013, 33). Generally, readers of popular memoir want to live good lives, and the lives represented in popular memoir provide examples of how well-known people have achieved that 'good life'. These attachments become cruel specifically through capitalist idolisations in popular memoir because readers *feel* real connections to those well-known people based on the complex juxtaposition of truthfully perceived representations of life and the fantasy of capitalist idols.

In the chapters that follow I examine the power and functions of Australian popular memoir, specifically, I discuss how it operates within a cruelly optimistic and neoliberal social imaginary where ordinary people defeat trauma and become celebrities. These chapters progress thematically, charting a history of the market that runs through exemplar Australian popular memoirs published between 2010 and 2017. My choice of case studies reflects the market for 'popular' and 'bestselling' memoir throughout this decade, exalting those memoirs that have had a measurable impact in the public sphere or online commentary. Although there is one Asian-Australian author in my case studies, the other case studies reflect a preference for authors that appear similar to a dominant Australian readership, that is white Australian or British or European migrant authors. The lack of Indigenous voices in these case studies reflects an unfortunate fact about the market for memoir during this decade. As I investigate in this thesis, reading preferences and markets reflect a preference – one that I problematise – for 'particular' kinds of authors in this decade. Chapter One investigates and offers a historicization of the Australian memoir market, using historical

examples to demonstrate that memoir has always been a popular form of life writing in Australia. Secondly, this chapter discusses the popularity of Australian memoir during the 'boom' period of the 1990s, and charts sales data to demonstrate a snapshot of the industry at this point. Australian popular memoir began emerging as a stand-alone genre category during this period, as bestselling examples of memoir from America and Britain encouraged multi-national conglomerate publishers to attempt to emulate that success with Australian memoirs. Finally, this chapter discusses what Australian popular memoir looks like now with reference to data from Australian reading publics recorded from 2010-2019. During this period, the market is defined by a resurgence in demand for Australian writing and preferences towards Australian stories in both fiction and non-fiction. More generally, there is a propensity in this current market for memoirs that reflect the shape of Australia now and engage with anxieties around national identity.

Chapter Two examines *The Whole Pantry* scam by fake cancer patient Belle Gibson. Gibson's hoax autobiographical performance of cancer survival tapped into an existing market both for wellness, which was already a booming industry, but also for redemption narratives. As Gilmore reminds us, hoaxes and scams typically emerge through popular literary markets which have an existing readership (2017, 102). As a young, attractive single mother Gibson was the perfect subject to orchestrate this scam. She appears vulnerable and in need of support whilst also embodying aspirational values, such as beauty and wellness, on Instagram. This chapter examines the cyclical movement of the redemption narrative model of life writing through the author, the publishing industry and the readership of *The Whole Pantry*. As the redemption narrative moves, certain preferences regarding social inequalities, particularly the marketing of neoliberalism as a set of conditions by which we are expected to live our lives, are exposed.

In Chapter Three, I discuss how Sarah Wilson's wellness franchise *I Quit Sugar*, which also became a series of bestselling cookbooks, precedes and prepares for the popularity of her memoir *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful.* Wilson is a successful journalist, who developed her idea of quitting sugar while writing a column on 'living well' for women's lifestyle magazine *Cosmopolitan*. Significantly, in the form of a self-help diary Wilson writes her personal process of quitting sugar in the form of a redemption narrative of addiction and recovery. This encourages her followers to read Wilson's memoir about anxiety as self-help through the structure of a redemption narrative: Wilson, exasperated by

her anxious symptoms and the pressures of modern life, abandons medical treatment in order to find her own cure for anxiety. I read Wilson's memoir, in this chapter, as a neoliberal survival guide. Ultimately, Wilson's journey of enlightenment and self-sacrifice, that is so typical of self-help, leads her to self-acceptance and she explains that anxiety is not the problem it is the solution. This chapter uses Wilson's memoir to demonstrate that neoliberal reading practices are embedded in the industries of wellness and self-help that privilege stories by certain kinds of successful subjects.

In Chapter Four, I examine Vietnamese-Australian comedian Anh Do's memoir *The Happiest Refugee* as an example of humorous popular memoir that is not always what it seems. Asian-Australian migrant life writing in Australia has a rich history, that celebrates the contributions of Asian-Australians in contemporary Australian culture. In *The Happiest Refugee*, Do performs a neoliberal redemption narrative of successful migrant life: he reconciles his personal and family traumas, gets a university degree, builds a successful career and becomes rich and famous. But, crucially, Do's comedic style is self-deprecating as he makes himself and his Vietnamese ethnicity the butt of the humour. As such, this chapter examines how Do uses humour in his memoir to smuggle his trauma and present it in ways that are marketable to dominant Australian audiences. This chapter also actions a shift in focus from 'wellness' to 'celebrity' by interrogating Do's performance of the neoliberal good life, sold by wellness memoirs like those discussed in the previous chapters. Do's memoir demonstrates the complex tensions of the 'good life' which is read as achievable and expected while exposing and parodying those truly unrealistic expectations.

Chapter Five looks at the blockbuster popularity of Australian rock band frontman Jimmy Barnes' two memoirs *Working Class Boy* (2016) and *Working Class Man* (2017). *Working Class Boy,* specifically, is the site at which Barnes' identity undergoes a crucial shift that actions his adjacent powers in the public sphere and so I focus my textual analysis here. I explore how Barnes uses representations of childhood trauma in his memoir to disrupt the nostalgic image of the 'working class man.' Barnes' memoir interrogates and transforms the Australian 'working class man' symbol of traditional masculinity in order to re-imagine it for neoliberal times. This memoir is read through the therapeutic lens of self-help, which makes visible how Barnes' survival story is underwritten with neoliberal mythologies that champion the willpower of the individual. Barnes is able to escape the toxic environment of his childhood to follow his dream of singing in a rock band, but he dulls his emotional pain with

a rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle of alcohol, drugs and violence. Barnes’ successful story of overcoming childhood trauma, and the simultaneous story of overcoming his emotional trauma in the present, work to affirm the power of his memoir as a tool of social justice.

Chapter Six examines how much-adored actress and comedian Magda Szubanski’s memoir *Reckoning* is engaged in social justice around LGBTIQ rights and the same-sex marriage postal survey. Szubanski’s memoir presents her personal childhood through nostalgic experiences of a universal Australian childhood, which encourages intimacy and re-casts her recognition of her sexuality as a ‘normal’ childhood experience. A story that is presented as a quest for Szubanski’s authentic self, *Reckoning* offsets Szubanski’s vulnerabilities as a fat, gay, anxious, migrant woman with the neoliberal structures and myths that produce them. Crucially, as Szubanski works to reconcile her family’s intergenerational trauma from Poland and Ireland she comes to realise that the ‘authentic self’ she has been chasing is a lie. This chapter argues that the contemporary Australian desire to ‘measure up’ is informed by neoliberal myths of personal responsibility that locate all success and failure within the individual. Szubanski comes to realise, in her memoir, that the fat, gay, Polish-Scot, anxious self that had never ‘measured up’ to expectations is *her* authentic self which has brought her love, bravery, fame and happiness.

Finally, this thesis concludes with a chapter that examines what Australian popular memoir might look like in the future, and whether, under neoliberalism, its potential as a tool of social justice can ever be properly realised. This thesis understands the popularity of these memoirs as key to their ability to work with and on the publics in which they are created, circulated and read. With a look to the domestic and emotional affects of the global COVID19 pandemic, this chapter wonders how the devastations of the pandemic might influence what kind of subjects write popular memoirs in the post-pandemic world. Briefly, this chapter looks upon the as-if overnight popularity of the YouTube channel ‘Nat’s What I Reckon’, and its creator’s recently published memoir *UnCook Yourself: A Ratbag’s Rules for Life* (2020). As a subject that uses humour to interrogate some conditions of the pandemic, mainly the reliance on jar sauce, Nat takes on the persona of the neoliberal ‘hustler’. Further, Nat’s seemingly coincidental foray in the kitchen is linked to his own redemption narrative of healing after major invasive surgery. Nat’s success invites new questions about the intersections of class, the digital sphere, persona, popular memoir and the pandemic that have yet to be explored in this research. This tattooed superhero that we never knew we needed,

may just lead Australian readers out of the pandemic with his ‘unhelpful self-help' popular memoir.

Chapter 1 – Establishing A Market for Popular Australian Memoir

Australian Memoir: How did we get here?

Popular writing holds a significant place in Australian literary culture, these are the narratives that tell us about ourselves as Australians, and market Australia to the rest of the world. Memoir is a genre that is deeply interested in questions of the self, and how selves relate to the cultures, communities and worlds around them. As such, memoir is an integral site for understanding as well as questioning, and even re-establishing national identity. What we write, and how, provides a window through the red dust to the broader development of a culture cut off geographically from the rest of the world. This thesis is primarily concerned with ‘popular’ memoir and indeed the popularity that memoir performs in the public sphere, as such, it is important to map where this popularity came from. While the ‘memoir boom’ certainly contributed in part to the current popularity of memoir in the Australian market, this phenomenon is largely localised in America and Britain. The ‘memoir boom’ refers to the sudden global popularity of memoir, and specifically memoir that challenges the historical canon of autobiographical writing, signalling the emergence of life writing by marginalised authors (women, LGBTIQ writers, Indigenous writing, refugee writing etc.). This chapter offers an alternative historicization of the ‘boom’ in popularity of memoir by locating it in Australia. Significantly, as Julie Rak argues in *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* memoir is integrated with ideas of citizenship and national identity: ‘Citizenship becomes a way to express a need for any kind of public belonging, and a way to articulate an individual’s imagined relationship with others in a public sphere’ (2013, 211). The writing and reading of memoir, as a practice of *being* public, Rak argues is also a way of performing

citizenship. In this way, memoir is a genre that is 'socially produced, negotiated, negated, and embraced because technologies of identity are present in it' (2013, 213). Rak locates her study in North America as a way to understand the 'memoir boom', and the memoirs that continue to be produced by it, as a complex phenomenon of commercial publishing as well as citizenship and personal identity. I use Rak's study to think about what popular memoir is, how it circulates, and how it wields power in Australia because local trends reveal granular detail about Australian publics and ways of living and *being* Australian that are lost in more global perspectives. Locating this study in contemporary Australia also allows me to analyse how popular memoirs, as well as their authors, publishers and readers, act on and are acted upon by a pervasive ideology of neoliberalism that has come to infiltrate our modern life. Historical perspectives are integral for understanding how the memoir market emerged in Australia and how continues to develop today. In this chapter, I identify the beginnings of a national market that preferences Australian stories and discuss the differentiation of 'literary' and 'popular' memoir through theorisation of the bush myth. Ultimately, I map an alternative historicization of the memoir market that grounds its emergent popularity in specifically Australian cultural and market trends. With this, I will demonstrate that the current 'boom' in Australia originated organically through literary nationalism and not solely through influence from America and Britain.

A market for writing that is specifically 'Australian' originates largely in the post-WWII era, and is attributed to increased national sentiment as a post-war phase of 'national awakening' which began to create real interest in Australia's emerging book culture (Munro and Curtain 2006, 6). Publishing trends in this post-war era in Australia, analysed by Katherine Bode in her work *Reading By Numbers: Recalibrating the Literary Field* (2012), reveal an Australian market that was hungry for books 'about Australia'. Frank Thompson terms this, 'emergent nationalism' which would, 'achieve the fullest of its expression in the 1970s' (Thompson 2006 32; Bode 2012, 63). As Bode argues, this 'emergent nationalism' in the Australian literature market originates from the 'pulp' (popular) fiction trend in from the 1940s to the 1960s (today 'pulp' fiction is referred to as genre fiction). Two reasons are identified for this trend, firstly Munro and Curtain attribute the proliferation of Australian books, which were printed on 'anything that resembled paper' to the 'wartime restrictions on non-essential goods' and, in particular, to the 'respite' this brought from books imported from Britain (2006, 4; Bode 2012, 66). Secondly, and as Bode argues more significantly, Johnson-Woods

identifies that these ‘rich decades’ for Australian publishing were the result of more specific licensing restrictions imposed from 1939-1959 on printed matter from non-sterling currency areas. These licensing restrictions were designed to protect currency reserves, which effectively banned the import of American writing to Australia for twenty years (2004, 74; Bode 2012, 66). Free from the offshore domination of Britain and now America, Australian writers and publishers fostered their independence through the proliferation of a new Australian style (and later, American style) ‘pulp’ fiction which would mature into the widely regarded ‘golden age’ of Australian publishing in the 1970s and 1980s.

After Australian publishers found their feet during the post-war era, the ‘golden age’ that followed featured autobiography as a ‘turning point’ in the Australian book market. Chris Wallace-Crabbe in his chapter on autobiography in the *Penguin New Literary History of Australia* places Hal Porter’s autobiography *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963) as a critical turning point, marking a climax and watershed in the development of writing the self into a book in this country. Gillian Whitlock, in a review article for *Australian Literary Studies*, also identifies several other notable autobiographies published in 1963 – Miles Franklin’s *Childhood at Brindabella*, Katharine Susanna Prichard’s *Child of the Hurricane* and Xavier Herbert’s *Disturbing Element* – while George Johnston’s autobiographical novel *My Brother Jack* was published in 1964. Wallace-Crabbe argues that because of overseas influence and cultural introspection, autobiographical writing became more seriously regarded in the 1960s and texts such as Porter’s invited readings of autobiography as an artistic genre rather than purely referential or historical (Whitlock 1992, 261). Similarly, John and Dorothy Colmer argue in *The Penguin Book of Australian Autobiography* (1987) that Porter’s autobiography ‘proved beyond question that sophisticated fictional techniques could be applied to personal reminiscences in order to transform them into fine art’ (Colmer and Colmer 1987, 10). Wallace-Crabbe's and Colmer's arguments here seems to echo forward through time to the placement of Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* (1996) as a widely regarded turning point in the American autobiographical market towards the ‘boom’ because it was a memoir that ‘reads like fiction’ (Mitchell 2003, 614). Here, I read the Australian market as taking autobiography seriously slightly before America did. However, in the European tradition, autobiography and even memoir in its modern form has been published since the Eighteenth Century. Notably life writing is concentrated largely in England and France, as observed by Caroline Breashears in her study of what she calls ‘scandalous memoir’ written by women. Breashears notes that memoirs of scandal that were considered

'popular' emerged in the English canon slightly before the French (2016, 4). Significantly, Breashears points to a notion that works of memoir can become canonical without being particularly 'good', as the memoirs in her study achieved popularity mainly through the scandal they generated in the public (2016, 3-6). Crucially, both Porter and McCourt's memoirs were considered 'turning points' in their respective markets for autobiographical writing, but it is the proximity to 'literariness' and 'artfulness' of fiction that appears to determine their value. It's significant then, to note, that scholars of popular fiction such as Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman identify the 'turning point' for Australian fiction to be later, in the 1970s, both in terms of an increased production and in representing cultural diversity beyond the nationalist 'bush myth' (Gelder and Salzman 1989, 2-4; Goldsworthy 2000, 118; Bode 2012, 71).

This chronology of the Australian nonfiction market that I have been discussing, suggests that autobiographical writers began challenging the established 'privileged' canon for Australian writing, symbolised by the nationalist 'bush myth', before fiction writers (Whitlock 1992, 263). Bode argues, via Martyn Lyons, that the 'bush myth' was borne out of a creative moment in the 1890s when 'a specifically Australian literary nationalism took shape, based on a democratic and fiercely independent spirit located in a mythologised version of life in the bush' (Lyons 2001, xvii, xvi; Bode 2012, 57). Subsequently, the 'bush myth' came to stand in for an 'idealised Australia,' by which it questioned Australia's dependence on Britain and raised questions regarding pretentions of power. Thus, the 'bush myth' demonstrates that life writing in Australia is invested in reflecting an idealised image of the country that most readers find appealing. For example, in Chapter Four, I argue that dominant Australian readings of Vietnamese-Australian Anh Do's 2010 memoir focused on how grateful Do was for his rich migrant life in Australia. Here, powerful Australian readers choose to read this memoir as an uplifting story of Australia as the 'lucky country' instead of a traumatic migrant story of intergenerational trauma. Similarly, in Chapter Six, I argue that some readings of Magda Szubanski's memoir, in which she grows up believing that she is 'bad person' because of her sexuality, chose to read her memoir as a tale of Australia's growth in tolerance and acceptance of difference which obscures Szubanski's personal story as a lesbian. Notably, the idealised 'bush myth' clung to Australian writing until it was challenged through the 'turning points' of autobiography in the 1960s and fiction in the 1970s. In his Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Australian Autobiography*, John Colmer argues that there are national preoccupations that mark autobiography during this 'turning

point' era. For example, Whitlock points to Colmer's argument that Australian autobiography is primarily secular: 'It is not patriarchal religious authority that the growing child in Australia has to escape but an authoritarian educational system and the demand for social conformity' (Colmer and Colmer 1987, 10). As Whitlock argues further, the class-conscious, materialistic and utilitarian society that autobiographers such as Porter, Donald Horne and Patrick White reflect upon is vastly different from the democratic, egalitarian society advertised by the bush myth (1992, 263). Though this is not to say the bush myth was banished from Australian writing altogether, significantly for this thesis, Whitlock mentions that 'popular autobiographical anecdotal permutations' continued into the 1990s (see Pat Richardson's *Belle the Bushie* (1991)). In this, we can see the beginnings of separation within genres of 'popular' and 'literary' autobiography which bleed into future markets for 'popular' memoir, including the tradition of an idealised Australia that this thesis examines.

There are various important challenges in attempting to map the popularity of autobiographical writing during this period from the 'turning point' of the 1960s to the emergence of memoir as a stand-alone subgenre in the 1990s. The first challenge is one of taxonomy and classification, the term memoir, as it was understood during the period of the 1960s until 1990 is different to how life writing scholars, and the market, understand it today. Publication data in the online literary database AustLit from this era in Australia shows that the term memoir was used to describe everything from biography, to obituaries, to criticism and even to poetry collections, though most often works of memoir were mis-categorised as autobiography (this issue continues today, as such I will return to it later in the chapter) (AustLit 2002). However, Whitlock offers an explanation for this phenomenon in her discussion of Joy Hooton's 1990 scholarly work *Stories of Herself When Young: Autobiographies of Childhood by Australian Women*. In this work Hooton examines autobiographical writing by Australian women that was less well-known and attributed little significance, even completely absent in some cases from anthologies such as *The Penguin Book of Australian Autobiography*. Hooton muses, and Whitlock agrees, that these works were attributed less significance for reasons other than simply the gender of the author (the canon included mostly white men at this point). Instead they argue this lack of recognition was because these women writers crossed and recrossed the boundaries of autobiographical genre, branching into biography, poetry and even fiction (Whitlock 1992, 264). Hooton argues that the self created in women's autobiography is 'relational', as well as 'mixed, suspended and unresolved.' As I argue, this is in stark contrast to the imperial self that was

grounded in focus on place and individualism that was so typical of the 'bush myth'. As such, it's clear that this type of autobiographical writing resists easy classification, therefore it's significant that Hooton follows other notable scholars in criticism of the time (Shirley Newman (1990), Sidonie Smith (1987), Shari Benstock (1988)) to classify this kind of writing as 'life writing'. Further, these works Hooton has selected examine aspects of life that are taboo and challenge established societal norms (the work of today's memoir), they examine the social fabric and relatedness of communities of women, while rejecting the canonical focus on the land and the self. Hooton writes, 'These texts dissolve the notion of a homogenous culture [and] collectively they establish Australia as an exotic amalgam of alternative cultures' (1990, 374). Memoir, it seems, was alive and well during this period of autobiographical writing in Australia, it was just obscured by the challenges of its own classification.

The second challenge in mapping memoir during this period is a practical one, due to the faltering popularity of the genre during commercial takeovers of Australian publishing houses (the shift to multi-national conglomerates), and saturation in the market of mass-produced and cheap genre fiction during the 1970s and 1980s. Following lifts on licensing restrictions to overseas sellers in 1959, offshore publishing companies began to slowly integrate back into the Australian market resulting in fierce competition for Australian authors and titles. Though, this ultimately resulted in the fragmentation of the local publishing industry which narrowed avenues to publication for non-established Australian writers (Bode 2012, 73). Significantly, as Bode points out, those Australian publishers responsible for the most Australian books in the 1970s – Angus & Robertson, Rigby, Outback Press, Alpha Books and Wren Books – were all absent from the field by the 1980s (Schwartz 2006, 63, 66; Bode 2012, 73). The catalyst for the eventual fall in percentages of Australian books in the market from 1970 (60%) to the late 1980s (39%) was the acquisition of the two largest local publishers; James Hardie purchased Rigby in 1979, while A&R was acquired in 1980 by News Limited (today NewsCorp) (Galligan 2007, 42-43; Bode 2012, 73-74). In order to survive and remain competitive, the remaining local publishers invested in their lists of genre fiction, which had strong sales records and loyal audiences. By contrast, in America and Britain, as Rak observes in *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market,* memoir was beginning to appear on shelves next to genre fiction and other drugstore paperbacks. For Rak, readers bought only the books that they could afford which widened the classifications of highbrow (high class, expensive, literary) and lowbrow (low class, cheap,

commercial) literature. Similarly, the Australian market, even in its commercial turmoil, was overrun by American style genre fiction in the form of Westerns but there was no correlate visibility for memoir. Outputs of the American style Westerns by the two remaining Australian publishing houses (Horwitz and Cleveland) indicates that many Australian readers chose their reading material based on price rather than national sentiment (Bode 2012, 75).

David McCooey's *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* contains a study of modern Australian autobiography published throughout the twentieth century and focuses on an Australian market context. Significantly, McCooey argues for the importance of global perspectives in studies of national literature 'to consider how it particularly enunciates forms which may be common with other nations' (1996, 3). McCooey thus maintains the global perspective of his research by his detailed analysis of the relations between historical writing and autobiographical writing. For McCooey, the autobiographer is accountable to the events of history, be they hidden, apparent or recorded, in such ways that fictional writing is not. The state of the autobiographical market, and indeed autobiographical scholarship during this century, was largely concerned with questions of form which gave way to scholarly and public debates on the 'purpose' of autobiography. Under these conditions fiction, understandably, continued to dominate the general literary market even as autobiography and memoir were emerging as stand-alone genres. As McCooey notes, autobiographies that could be considered 'popular' during the twentieth century were rare and largely concentrated towards the end of the decade, like Jill Ker Conway's *The Road From Coorain* (1996, 80). Significantly, McCooey's focus on history in his analysis emphasizes a certain 'evocative particularity' which he argues is contained in the reading practices of autobiography, by which the reader is encouraged to consider *their own* lives in the reading of others. Significantly, this thesis also considers the ways in which popular forms of memoir circulate in social imaginaries in which the reader can imagine their own lives and their potential in relation to the life presented in the memoir. This concept of reading oneself into the autobiography that McCooey identifies, coupled with the detailed descriptions of experiences and artifacts that were typical of this era, forms his integral notion of 'artful histories.' From this, McCooey defines mainstream modern Australian autobiography as that which conforms to a certain market for 'artful' expression of one's personal history.

Throughout his study McCooey considers a series of themes that are used to link mainstream modern autobiographies together: childhood, the past, place, displacement and

death (the fitting conclusion to his study). Significantly, these themes are explained in their various cultural contexts, for example McCooey notes that shifting definitions of the family unit and proliferation of the nuclear family in this era informed how authors presented their childhoods. Subsequently, McCooey suggests that the grief of a recently deceased parent was often the catalyst for writing autobiography which links the act of self-writing, even in its infancy, with catharsis and emotional recovery. Beyond these themes McCooey notes that modern autobiography is presented with multiple 'tensions' relating to history and anxieties about national and personal identity. The activities of an individual's life are multiple and complex, and do not fit the simplistic notions of a unified narrative, much less a unified, essential or 'authentic' self. As McCooey writes: 'we do, however, continually bring these complexities into some kind of order. We tell ourselves what we are doing and why' (McCooey 1996, 14). In this way, autobiography and the various acts of self-writing that make up life narrative today may be a response to the anxieties of the 'meaning of life' and 'measuring up' to various expectations. Which is to suggests, that life, as we understand it under certain societal and economic conditions like neoliberalism, is not a life with any meaning at all. Instead it is the act of transposing that 'life' into a coherent narrative that engages with cultural histories and contexts that confers meaning to the self, subject and reader. The stake of popular forms of autobiography and memoir that are produced and circulated in a mass market then, is that it participates in determinations of what constitutes a meaningful or even normal life.

Rak notes that mass-market paperback non-fiction sometimes could and did have a major impact because of how it was distributed, such that the cheapness and easy availability of paperbacks allowed for lower income earners to access new knowledge and important social movements. For example, Rak explains that Dr Benjamin Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946) was the first bestselling mass-market paperback in America. The key to the success of Spock's book, and its influence on how Americans looked after their babies, was due to its distribution as an inexpensive paperback by Pocket Books and which was sold in places like drug stores where young parents went to shop. Rak also points out that social movements such as Black Power and the women's liberation movement were similarly influenced by cheap and readily available mass-market paperbacks, for instance, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

Conversely, the impact of mass-market non-fiction on social movements was not largely understood or felt in Australia until the 1980s and 1990s. For example, after a long

history of struggle to access the life narrative market Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) and Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) were the first Indigenous life narratives to be actively celebrated, heavily marketed and critically promoted by readers and publishers alike. Of the two very different narratives, Morgan's story of forced child removal was embraced by the larger white Australian public (it sold over 500,000 copies worldwide) while Langford Ginibi's story was deemed too political and found less favour with audiences. Significantly, these books emerged alongside the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody brought by the Hawke Labor Government, and appropriately shocked and surprised white Australian readers who had little previous knowledge of Aboriginal life. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith explain that the Royal Commission was ill-fated as its arguments and findings were framed in racial categories of deviance and constructed 'Aboriginality' in terms of criminality and victimisation. Subsequently, Morgan's *My Place* was widely read by white Australian audiences as a coming-of-age story rather than a human rights violation testimony; the coming-of-age story was clearly marketable to its intended audience as such readings obscure racialized histories of forced assimilation and child removal (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 97-98). Significantly, the coming-of-age story presents similarly to Gilmore's 'redemption narrative' as a personal story of overcoming trauma by individual pluck and willpower (2017, 101). As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, these kinds of dominant readings of popular memoir are amplified under neoliberal ideology through a logic of personal responsibility that locates all success and failure within the individual (Bloom 2017, 6). The example of *My Place* demonstrates the ability of distribution strategies to bring important stories to a mass-market audience, but it also exposes how popular life narratives, despite their intentions, are made vulnerable to certain normative readings when they cross cultural, social and political borders. Significantly, the following chapters of this thesis explore how popular memoir is made vulnerable to normative readings under neoliberal logics that privilege stories of the successful, wealthy and happy individual.

Here comes the 'boom': Australian memoir from 1990s onwards

The 1990s saw the rise of global popularity in life writing, and memoirs in particular. Subsequently, public and academic discussion of this area of writing also expanded (Miller 2000; Miller 2007; Frost 1999). The trans-national popularity of Australian-turned-American author Jill Ker Conway's elegant 1989 memoir *The Road from Coorain* marked the beginning of a global memoir boom. Conway poignantly describes her life growing up in rural New South Wales, and then her move to Harvard as a graduate from the University of

Sydney. Conway's memoir not only established a position in the global memoir sphere for Australian authors but promoted the role of women in the memoir genre (Klinkenborg 1989). McCourt's acclaimed 1994 memoir *Angela's Ashes* demonstrates a second phase of this transformation; publishers decided to market the work as 'memoir' rather than 'fiction': it was to be 'a memoir that reads like fiction' (Mitchell 2003, 614). This decision in 1996 led to McCourt being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Angela's Ashes* in 1997, which itself marked a shift in the cultural value and marketing of memoir (McCourt 1996).

Katherine Bode, in 2010, used data from online literary database AustLit to examine recent increases in the publication of Australian autobiographies and biographies. Her comparison considered the increase in publishing of auto/biographies against a decrease in the publication of novels, which she argued could be temporary. Earlier, Susan Currie and Donna Lee Brien examined Nielsen Bookscan data from 2006 and 2007 to determine the number of life writing texts that appear in the top 10, top 100 and top 5000 lists. They concluded that life writing texts only make up 4 per cent of books considered popular, and that there was no substantial growth (2008). However, there are some inconsistencies with the aforementioned types of data collection, for example it is unclear whether Bode, Currie or Brien used 'sales data' in their studies, or if they even had access to it. As has been noted by Emmet Stinson, publication statistics rarely translate directly into sales figures and therefore cannot give an accurate determination of a book's popularity in the Australian market (2016). If the same amount of published titles was responsible for a larger proportion of sales, then there would be clear evidence of increased popularity during this period (Stinson 2016; Zwar 2012).

The Australian book publishing industry, like many other English language industries, consists of a small number of large publishers which are responsible for the majority of sales in the sector: Penguin Random House, HarperCollins (owned by Newscorp), Harlequin (a division of HarperCollins), Picador (the Australian imprint of Pan Macmillan), Hachette, Simon & Schuster and Scribe. Some independent publishing houses still operate in Australia with Allen & Unwin producing sales of nonfiction to match multi-national conglomerates. Other smaller presses include Text, an independent Melbourne press, which published Magda Szubanski's bestselling memoir *Reckoning* in 2016 and went on to publish Sarah Krasnostien's popular and prize-winning biography *The Trauma Cleaner* in 2017 (Throsby, Zwar, and Morgan 2018, 9). Although trade publishing remains a strong sector in Australia, recent changes in onshore and offshore trading processes have created some major challenges

for the industry. Data from Nielsen Bookscan on sales of Australian trade books from 2006-2015 underlines the extent of the contraction in onshore trade book sales, from a peak of $1.3 billion in 2009 to a low of $989 million in 2013, following which there has been a gradual increase in sales. This data from Nielsen Bookscan also shows a decline in the selling price of books from $19.10 in 2009 to $16.90 in 2014. This decline is attributed to increased competition in the market from online and offshore retailers coupled with the switch to cheaper formats by publishers (Throsby, Zwar and Morgan 2018). Although, this downward trend is not reflected in the retail selling price for contemporary Australian memoirs, which remains high at $24 AUD per unit in 2018 (Books+Publishing, 2017). Additionally, data from IBIS World published in 2016 shows that behind educational publishing (41.4% of market share) the 'Adult: non-fiction' category holds the higher percentage of publishing market share at 26.9% compared to 'Adult: fiction', which holds only 14.1% of market share (cited in Throsby, Zwar and Morgan 2018, 5). Although it should be noted that the 'Adult: non-fiction' category encompasses more than just memoirs, other non-fiction subgenres such as cookbooks or self-help books also populate this category which may explain why it holds the larger percentage of market share.

Jan Zwar has provided a helpful historical and economic context for Australian non-fiction sales and publishing through the 2000s in her 2012 study 'What Were We Buying?' Zwar notes that there was a 'handful' of top-selling non-fiction books, narrative non-fiction or otherwise, for every year in the 2000s. Top-selling books here accounts for total sales figure of 100,000 or more titles in one year. A particularly exceptional work might have sold as many as 300,000 titles, although a run of 5,000 for an Australian author is generally considered successful (Zwar 2012, 4). For example, rock icon Jimmy Barnes' 2016 memoir, which I examine in Chapter Five, became a blockbuster bestseller by selling upwards of 500,000 titles. This level of popularity had not been achieved by any other memoir in Australia's publishing history until Barnes' published a sequel work of memoir in 2017 with similar results. This suggests, as I argue in Chapter Five and Chapter Six, that the popularity of the author's public persona is crucial to the potential and power of a popular memoir, and its author, to participate in public discourse on social justice issues. According to Nielsen Bookscan data analysed by Zwar, the most popular combined category for non-fiction in the 2000s were sport-related autobiographies and biographies. This category far surpasses general autobiography and biography (not sport) and food and drink which make up the second most popular category of non-fiction books in this period. Due to Australia's cultural

obsession with sport, and sport's visible position in communities, media and politics in Australia, this is not surprising.

The next most popular categories of non-fiction, after sports auto/biography, general auto/biography and food and drink are mostly books relating to lifestyle. Books relating to health, fitness and diet, parenting, coping with problems and illness make up the next biggest combined category. These are followed by travel guides, including books about where to eat and drink. Following this is books about succeeding in business, improving one's wealth, being a motivational manager, and investing shares in real estate (Zwar 2012, 5). Zwar attributes the popularity of lifestyle and travel books in this period to the strong economic growth Australia was experiencing in the early 2000s. As Zwar notes, 'It is fair to say that the popular categories of non-fiction reflect the lifestyles and preoccupations of Australians at the time; cooking, travelling, losing weight, getting rich, turning one's life around, predicting one's future and reading about other people's interesting lives' (2012, 7). Peter Donoghue nominates the 'romantic' genres of non-fiction 'self-help, travel, personal investment [and] children's' as the 'traditionally profitable legs to publishing stools' (2011 cited in Zwar 2012, 7). As I discuss later in the chapter, preoccupations with self-help, travel and personal investment are trends that continue in Australian popular memoir today, promoted as neoliberal stories of redemption and success. Globally however, this period of the 2000s was marked by the war in Afghanistan, the September 2011 attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States, and the violent occupation of Iraq.

As Whitlock explains in *Soft Weapons* popular memoir can be a potent, yet flawed weapon in social justice pursuits (2007, 3). She notes that when such texts coincide with global disputes, the uses to which they are put should be questioned (Whitlock 2007, 94). For example, in Whitlock's example, Jean Sasson's international best seller *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq,* the occupation is justified as the progress of civilisation and modernity appears on behalf of the oppressed. As Whitlock argues, 'this nostalgic insertion of a colonial past into a colonising present is accomplished through devices that are specific to the best-seller' (Whitlock 2007, 94). Significantly, Gelder remarks that popular fiction can on occasion be hooked into the ideological work of speaking to urgent global realities, and this is clearly what happens in *Mayada* (Whitlock 2007, 94; Gelder 2004). As a literary field, popular is distinguished by an entire process of production, distribution, advertising and consumption. Popular fiction and nonfiction alike are caught up in the mechanisms of the marketplace, they are conscious of their readers and determined to please them (Gelder 2004). Significantly, in

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, where I discuss two life narratives engaged with the discourses of wellness and self-help, I argue that there is a practice of reading embedded in these industries that privileges particular successful subjects. As Whitlock argues, the expectations of readers play a crucial role in which memoirs are able to enter the popular market, and those that are thrown out (2007, 95). Conversely, writers in the popular market are prolific, and they become brand names: readers and publishers expect that these writers will produce similar successful results with every new book they write. This explains the presence of Jean Sasson as a broker in the marketing of women's life narrative. Writers of popular memoir, as celebrity subjects, maintain a sense of intimacy with their readers and use technologies like the Internet and social media to curate their public celebrity, as well as endorse their memoirs and other cultural products.

As Gelder's work in popular fiction suggests the production and reception of best-sellers and popular literature defines a literary field (2004). Often this is taken to mean that 'popular' books are transient, ephemeral things, and given that the economy of the popular often operates through multiple, and related cultural products as well as a series of similarly published books, this may be appropriate (Whitlock 2007, 95). However, like all commodities, the movement of popular memoir through the market is dynamic. Some memoirs strike it rich, sell thousands of copies and allow their authors access to the public domain. Though, at the other extreme they can be recalled and removed from the shelves as a bad product: *The Whole Pantry* scam by Belle Gibson, which I explore in detail in Chapter Two, is an example. Sometimes popular texts enjoy a prolonged shelf-life: Whitlock notes that, despite aspersions about its quality and recognition of problematic characterisation, Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* has been continuously in print since 1987 (2007, 97). Like the Eighteenth Century 'scandalous memoirs' of Breashears' study, books can be popular *because* they are canonical, but also *because* they are problematic and/or scandalous. Readers may prefer particular brands, writers and publishers but they are still discriminating. Gelder makes a critical point in characterising the readers of popular genres: they may be leisured, fast, believing, and enchanted consumers, but they are not unthinking, uncritical and undiscriminating (Janice Radway [1987] came to a similar conclusion in her study of romance readers) (Gelder 2004). These readers can be disturbed by scandal, for genre shapes but does not fully determine reader response. The veiled best-seller, like popular memoir, is at risk when it engages with contemporary events as directly as *Mayada*, even as it seeks to contain the occupation of Iraq (Whitlock 2007, 95-97).

Although the popularity and global fascination with Arabic women's life narratives has begun to fade out during this decade (2010-2019), globalisation and mass migration assumes that the fascination with the 'other' (whatever form they take) continues in trends of popular memoir. For example, of the case studies that follow three out of the five memoirs are authored by migrant Australians, firstly Anh Do in 2010, Magda Szubanski in 2015, and Jimmy Barnes in 2016 (with a second memoir published in 2017). As Australia comes to terms with its increasing multiculturalism, and the nationalist anxieties about identity which come with it, stories that consider the 'other' will remain popular. Basic trends identified by Zwar in the 2000s have not changed dramatically at the turn of the decade, Donoghue's 'romantic' genres still remain strong earners in the non-fiction best seller lists. Top-sellers this decade include cookbooks like Sarah Wilson's *Simplicious: I Quit Sugar* series about cutting out consumption of refined sugar (*Think Australian* 2017). Zwar reminds us that it is helpful to note that trends which align with the general popularity of how-to books, getting ahead in life or the cult of the individual originated early in print culture and are not necessarily indicative of changes in Australian culture (Zwar 2012, 7). However, I argue that increased sales of these titles from generally popular to exceptionally popular reflects the increased instability of the Australian economy in 2018 and the turn to a neoliberal market society. Significantly, trends like 'getting ahead' and the 'cult of the individual' are deeply embedded in neoliberal logics of personal responsibility that fetishize the individual. As such, I argue in this thesis that popular memoir amplifies these trends and further imbues them with cultural, social and political dimensions in modern day Australia under neoliberalism. This neoliberal turn affects not only the 'type' of nonfiction that becomes popular, but also how writers of life narrative become published, especially amongst the general turn to digital publishing. Zwar identified in the 2000s that the establishment of journals *The Quarterly Essay*, *The Griffith Review* and the popularity of *The Best Australian Essays* allowed writers of life narrative to reach audiences under the literary aegis of these publications (2012, 17). Similarly, online publications such as *Overland, Meanjin* and *The Lifted Brow* offer opportunities for new writers of life narrative to gain publication, audiences and publicity.

Publishing has been facing dramatic changes over recent decades, spurred largely by globalisation and the digital revolution. Baker, Brien and Webb argue that some of the most significant transformations are: the democratisation of publishing through self-publishing; significantly expanded commentary on publishing through social media; the rise in popularity of writers festivals and events; the evolution of literary prizes and events as public and media

events; the emergence and rapid growth of online book review and fan communities; and increased polarisation of the book industry (see Sapiro 2010) (2019, 2). Additionally, there has been a significant rise of commentary on social media, which Simone Murray calls 'the digital literary sphere' to describe the relationship between digital communication technologies and contemporary literary culture (2015, 311). Such developments have resulted in the publishing industry being more 'visible' (and indeed more accountable) to the public, the media and the academic community than it ever has been before. As observed by Pamela Hewitt these changes are both 'massive' and 'rapid', and her question of how we are supposed to keep up with these changes when they are so widespread is an important one (2015, 2). As Baker, Brien and Webb argue, such a question might best be answered by 'gaining a sense of how the processes and practices of publishing, and published materials themselves, are inflected by, impacted on, and reflected by the culture in which they are produced and circulated' (2019, 3). Herein lies the definition as to why this research, and life narrative study more broadly needs to engage in publishing studies. The study of life narrative requires looking beyond the written word as these texts circulate in and around cultural moments that require understandings of varied areas of human experience. Much more than entertainment commodities, these texts *do* things. Specifically for this thesis, I seek to investigate what memoirs do, but also *how* they do it, which has brought me to publishing as an industry that is embedded in social, cultural and economic values. A memoir (in a very literal sense) is an end product of the publishing industry, it is edited, printed, marketed and sold as a product intended to make profit – but still, in order to enter the market to potentially be consumed by readers, a memoir needs to be published. Therefore, as I argue, a memoir's capacity to *do* anything is deeply embedded in the publishing industry in which it is created, circulated and sold.

Publishing used to mean preparing printed material for sale, an activity largely carried out by publishing houses that chiefly sold books to bookstores and libraries (Hewitt 2015). This model is still the mainstay of the industry, and though it is rapidly changing to accommodate digital publishing, the distribution the process of delivering words on a readable surface remains the underpinning logic of the industry (Hewitt 2015). As Baker, Brien and Webb argue it is essential to understand these traditional publishing practices and processes because they represent core publishing and distribution, even as it moves through a technology-driven metamorphosis (2019, 4). For example, it is easy to forget that new forms of life writing in blogs and posts on social media platforms are also underpinned by

publishing processes even if they are less formal, more democratic and mediated (largely) by the author. Emma Maguire, in her study of the life writing of girls on social media argues that certain social media platforms demand conformity to certain styles associated with that platform's brand. Instagram, for example, in an oblique way encourages posters to match the idea of the 'unmediated everyday' while conforming to aspirational beauty trends (Maguire, 2018). Facebook, similarly, has updated its terms to weed out the constant advertising by businesses on user news feeds, which has pushed social media professionals to rely on personal story to covertly market products. Discussions and debates about the ontology of publishing arise from these systemic changes that the industry is going through, particularly those changes driven by technology. These changes have produced a publishing environment that has been described by some working in the industry as 'in decline.' While other industry commentators see challenges that force publishers to reinvent themselves in order to survive, though often in ways that disadvantage writers (Brauck, Hobel and Voight 2013). Other commentators, notably those in academia, perceive these changes, particularly those driven by technologies and greater access to publishing processes that these technologies enable, as opportunities for furthering the publishing landscape towards a 'global culture' (Galliand 2011, 8).

Self-publishing seems to be an under-discussed publishing method for authors of memoir and other literary nonfiction. Though self-publishing struggles to compete against the multi-national conglomerates in the Australian market, it can still be a viable route to success (Baker, Brien and Webb 2020, 6). Appearing on a podcast with *The Garrett*, author and publisher Euan Mitchell explains how self-publishing can be a successful publishing route for memoir in Australia: take the case of Torre DeRoche and her travel memoir *Swept: Love With a Chance of Drowning.* After the manuscript was rejected by publishers and literary agents, both in Australia and the United States, DeRoche ordered 200 print-on-demand copies of her memoir and developed an eBook which was sold through her website, where she had also posted an excerpt of her memoir. Additionally, because it is a travel memoir, DeRoche posted excerpts of her work to travel forums online, which worked to market her work to a targeted audience. By 2011, the memoir had been signed by Hyperion Voice in America and Summersdale in the U.K. Then Penguin bought the rights to sell in Australia and New Zealand, while Seismic Pictures in Hollywood bought the screen rights. Of course, this is just one success story among many instances of self-publishing in Australia, but it does point to the ways in which the landscape for publishing has changed during the digital

revolution. The case of DeRoche demonstrates how the book market has gone beyond the traditional publicity model of pitching to the media through interviews on radio, television or getting a review in the press before going online. Though, of course, the phenomenon of blogs, and blogs that turn into traditionally published books precedes this example. Further, Galliand's view of publishing suggests that although it is usually seen as a business, it can also be approached as an art. Books approach publishing as a communicative act that connects readers with writers, and further, books frame publishing as a series of social and cultural practices.

As Baker, Brien and Webb argue, if a goal in researching the publishing industry is to discover how or why certain texts – 'blockbusters' – make huge profits, we might approach publishing from its position as a business and develop the appropriate questions and methodologies to answer those questions. But social and cultural factors are equally important in understanding why people buy books and why they choose certain books in particular (2019, 5-6). As I argue in this thesis, the question of why certain memoirs become popular -- while others do not -- is not a question that can be answered fully with quantitative sales data. Further, understanding the popularity of memoirs requires stepping back and looking out at the social and cultural factors that surround that memoir, and its author, at the time of publication. Exploring how, and more importantly why, certain markets for certain kinds of memoir emerge can go a long way towards understanding the cultural, social and political climate in which they circulate. Limiting my case studies to 'popular' memoir assumes that 'popular', as a definitive subset of memoir, narrows the avenues both to publishing for the writer, but also the portals to the 'I' for the reader. These case studies involve recognisable authors, some Australians have known them for decades like Magda Szubanski (best remembered for her role as 'Sharon' on 90s sitcom *Kath & Kim*), Jimmy Barnes (front man of iconic Australian rock band Cold Chisel) or Anh Do (Vietnamese-born comedian, children's author, and host of television show *Anh's Brush With Fame*). Others invade our living rooms on news broadcasts and current affairs shows, like Sarah Wilson the best-selling cookbook writer who showed the world how to quit sugar, or Belle Gibson known globally as the wellness warrior who faked brain cancer.

Stories of Australia: Popular Memoir from 2010-2020

In the first section of this chapter I discussed Australia's early fascination with the 'bush myth': a manifestation of Australian literary nationalism that was based on a vision of the democratic and independent spirit that characterised a mythologised version of life in the

bush. Subsequently, this idealisation of Australia informed much of the life writing and fiction published throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Lyons 2001, xvii, xvi; Bode 2012, 57). While much of this Australian literary nationalism was built on government-sanctioned post-WWII initiatives to protect the wounded economy by the grinding to a halt of offshore literary trading, the last decade from 2010-2020 has seen a resurgence in the idea of an Australian literary nationalism. Overwhelmingly, literary sales data reporting in the last decade from Macquarie University, ArtsHub and Books+Publishing has revealed that today's readers in Australia want stories *about* Australia *written by* Australians (Throsby, Zwar and Morgan, 2018; Simpson, 2019; 2018). Over the past ten years, the number of Australian writers and books that make the top 10 national best-seller lists has grown exponentially. This a trend that expands across both Nielsen Bookscan lists and media publications (newspapers, magazines etc.), Jimmy Barnes, after the publication of his two consecutive memoirs, stayed on such bestseller lists in these publications for four consecutive years (Books+Publishing, 2018). Additionally, Andrea Simpson, writing for the Australian creative industry support organisation ArtsHub, explains that an appetite for Australian stories by Australian writers encompasses both fiction and non-fiction books equally, which further suggests a national sentiment for locally produced and authored writing (2019). Significantly, the rise in popularity and demand for Australian authored books is not a mere default coincidence or an exercise of patriotism. As the social context of the last decade suggests, Australia is at a crucial juncture of understanding its identity both on a national and global level and this identity struggle is reflected in the minds and reading appetites of its people.

As Australia struggles to come to terms with its increasing multiculturalism, particular issues of social justice that have plagued the last decade feed rising anxieties in the public about Australia's national identity. Mark Davis, in his article 'Culture Wars and Corporatism' published in *Australian Literary Studies*, points to 'debates' and 'regressive policies on Indigenous Rights' as well as, 'draconian anti-asylum-seeker policies', and 'aggressive inaction on climate change' as just some of the issues that have plagued Australia and sparked national debate in the last decade (2019). The Australian Government's dangerous mishandling of asylum-seeker policies have gained global attention; from the Children Overboard disaster in 2001 to multiple accounts of asylum-seeker boats being towed back to their country of origin. Later, the Australian Government became the target of a global crisis of human rights when the gross details of indefinite offshore detention were exposed in Manus Island prisoner Behrouz Boochani's memoir *No Friend But the Mountains*

(2018). The memoir's publication was a rare feat of personal resilience, as Manus Island forbids prisoners the use of paper or pencils; Boochani smuggled in a mobile phone and wrote the memoir entirely in the form of text messages that were sent to and then translated by Dr Omid Tofighian at the University of Sydney. Tofighian explains that this process took almost six years, Boochani was only able to send messages sporadically and sometimes not for many months while Tofighian often worried whether he would ever hear from his friend again (2018, xvi-xvii). Though not a 'popular memoir' by my definition, as Boochani only reached a level of celebrity following the publication of his memoir and it certainly was not published for a popular market. This memoir still sold thousands of copies, won Australian literary awards, and has mobilised publics to seek justice. Significantly, *No Friend But the Mountains,* works as an example of how memoir in Australia during this period is engaged in, and shaped by, issues of social justice and national identity (Cardell 2020, 1-2).

This decade has also seen an increase in the publication of collections of life writing at the intersection of personal and national identity from the margins in the *Growing Up in Australia* series. A series of six anthologies that explore growing up 'Muslim', 'Asian', 'Aboriginal', 'African', 'Queer' and 'Disabled' the series compiles life stories from marginalised Australians reflecting on their childhoods and 'growing up' in Australia. This series reflects a readership sentiment of wanting to further understand the multitude of faces, bodies and identities that make up today's Australians. Crucially, the popularity of this series of anthologies suggests a hopeful turn away from the idealised 'bush myth' as the ideal white, colonial Australian towards greater understanding of the Other through multicultural perspectives. Though, as Pamela Graham argues, in her study of *Growing Up Asian In Australia*, childhood perspectives are largely presented through broad tropes of 'leaving home, falling in love, coming out and finding one's feet' which tends to 'universalise' childhood (2014, 71). Thus, situating the experience of the 'other' within universal childhood works to build intimacy with the reader, and they read these, possibly different, childhoods through their own memories of childhood. As I argue in Chapter Four, Anh Do performs a redemption narrative of childhood trauma, overcoming adversity and becoming successful through self-deprecating humour as a way to parody established ideas about exceptional Asian-Australian identity. Crucially, by virtue of their difference, established narrative templates for writing childhood in Australia like nostalgia, trauma, or overcoming adversity, may not be available to the contributors in this series. Significantly, in the absence of a template that 'adequately reflects their experiences,' Graham suggests that such contributors

use other narrative devices, such as humour, to subvert or rewrite the existing autobiographical scripts for Australian identity (2014, 71-76). The popularity of the *Growing Up in Australia* series suggests a desire to make visible the various histories of race, gender and class that white colonialism has thus far worked to obscure.

Popular memoir, as a subgenre driven by market forces of the popular and the celebrity, typically follows trends related to national reading appetites that intersect with current social issues in the public. Furthermore, even at the celebrity level, life writing by migrants has emerged as popular trend in Australian publishing – this is reflected in the case studies that follow with three out of five of the exemplar popular memoirs written by migrant celebrities. Significantly, these migrant celebrities, Anh Do, Jimmy Barnes and Magda Szubanski, are all considered to be national Australian symbols of success. As such their celebrity identities, and by extension their personal stories, are tied to a collective Australian national identity. Though this idea of collective national identity is routinely circumvented in these popular memoirs in favour of more 'private' and personal anxieties about 'fitting in' and 'measuring up' to national expectation. This interplay of exemplary celebrity lives and personal, private concerns is an integrated feature of popular memoir, and demonstrates how private lives are packaged and constructed for public consumption. Additionally, personal concerns about 'measuring up' are a socially integrated feature both of Australian life and of reading, more generally, in this decade.

Reader expectations are central to the issues of taxonomy and mis-categorisation of memoirs as autobiography mentioned earlier in this chapter. Put simply, readers and publishers are not life narrative scholars, and in most cases, they are likely not aware of the generic differences between memoir and autobiography. Additionally, mis-categorisation does not just occur at the level of the publisher, solicited and unsolicited reviews of memoir frequently use the term autobiography as if it is interchangeable with memoir. For example, the memoirs I examine in Chapter Four, Chapter Five and Chapter Six all state somewhere on the cover, blurb or title page that the book is a 'memoir' and all three have had reviews in national media publications that refer to the book as 'autobiography'. No wonder readers think that the terms are interchangeable. Significantly, Rak came across a similar problem in her study of popular memoirs in North America and argues that if genre is merely descriptive and taxonomical, such taxonomies will 'proliferate endlessly' (2013, 24). Her point is that life narrative is an experimental form of autobiographical representation where writers frequently test the limits for representing the self: 'there will always be cases where a work

"slips through" the autobiographical pact or another attempt to fix a genre rhetorically' (2013, 24). For example, some memoirs examined in this thesis are not 'straight' memoir, Gibson's scam that I examine in Chapter Two was proliferated on Instagram, and Wilson's memoir in examined in Chapter Three moves through many different forms including memoir. Of course, Rak does not suggest that we abandon genre completely, in the case of memoir and particularly 'popular' memoir, she argues that we should take into account what readers, publishers and cultural industries *think* memoir means (2013, 24). After all, in Lejeune's autobiographical pact, if the name of the protagonist, the proper name of the author on the cover, and the name of the real person match then a reader can expect that it is an autobiography, and this is an informal 'deal' between writer and reader (Rak 2013, 22). Further, Rak explains that Lejeune pictured the autobiographical pact, as a way for a reader to look at a text, and its paratexts, to decide how it should be read, or even if it should be read at all (2013, 24). Ultimately, genre is an organising system that makes an object recognisable or legitimate within a system, but Rak argues that we should also think of genre as an industrial set of principles that work to create that system (2013, 26). Publishers seek out popular memoirs because they have proven to be a marketable formula, but readers *read* popular memoir because it will provide an interesting story about an interesting person. Though, as this thesis argues, popular memoir may also reaffirm readers' imagined securities about an idealised Australia and provide hope that their personal traumas might be defeated so that they can also achieve success, wealth and happiness.

Books that focus on self-improvement, also called self-help books, have been experiencing record sales and uptake as Australia struggles with economic instability, rising unemployment rates and career insecurities fuelled by the economic ideology of neoliberalism. Though an ideology fundamentally built on economics, and prominent in governmental and professional contexts, neoliberal ideology understands everything under the ideals of the 'free market'. As I discuss in the Introduction neoliberalism is more than just an economic set of policies, it is a pervasive ideology in Western culture that understands individuals not as humans but as capital: as self-monitoring subjects that constantly work to improve themselves for the benefit of the market (Worden 2020). The prevalence and continued popularity of specific self-help books in Australia reflect not only the economic toll of neoliberalism but the insatiable desire for Australians to want to be better. For example, Scott Pape's *Barefoot Investor* series of books subtitled as 'the only money guide you will ever need' have consistently topped best-selling lists in Australian non-fiction

categories from 2015-2019. Pape is an economic expert, and his common-sense style advice is designed to assist singles, families and now even young adults, to get ahead with their money. Crucially Pape's advice is centred on the individual – not only do you have to do the work, you also have to buy the book. In this way, self-help is packaged as professional financial advice. Further, self-help takes on a multitude of forms through physical, spiritual and psychological wellness - these books can help you do anything, from quitting smoking, to healing cancer, to dealing with your anxiety. As Simpson explains, the data shows that 'Australian's interests are evident: self-help and finance [and] a taste for home-grown writers' (2019). Though, as this thesis argues, readers respond to the economic instability of neoliberal times by consuming uplifting narratives that help them feel better, preserve hope for the future, and in which they can imagine finally becoming successful, wealthy and happy.

In the chapters that follow, I consider how popular memoir functions within a social imaginary where ordinary readers of celebrity narratives believe that they, too, can overcome trauma and become successful and happy. Significantly, I also analyse how such a social imaginary functions as a vestige of neoliberalism, and particularly how this social imaginary combines with neoliberal logics of personal responsibility, self-management and empowerment. I begin my case studies with a scam because this instantly places neoliberal ideas that could be understood as inherently 'good' like personal responsibility and self-management within complex structures of judgement that destabilise their understandings. From here the intellectual ground is more fertile to problematise these concepts and interrogate how life narrative acts upon, and is acted upon by neoliberal concepts in multiple, simultaneous and problematic ways. Popular memoirs published to respond to the industries of wellness and self-help are important starting points for this thesis, as this social imaginary presents less as a 'fantasy' than a real achievable goal. For example, embedded in the discourses of wellness and self-help is a neoliberal distortion of choice: mainly that choices aren't exhaustive in controlled markets, one chooses based on what is available. Thus, wellness and self-help fail to read recovery as a choice at all, rather it is framed as a moral imperative. Memoirs in this space work to reinforce this neoliberal distortion of choice, through generalised redemption narratives where surviving trauma results in recovery and the ultimate reward of accessing one's 'authentic self'. Importantly, as these redemption narratives saturate the market, they become preferential to readers, who are then recruited to

judge the authenticity of redemption narratives to exalt those who succeed and throw out those who fail.

Chapter 2 – The Whole Scam: Analysing autobiographical performance in Belle Gibson's #instamemoir

Introduction: Writing the Wellness Warrior

In 2014, Belle Gibson, a 26-year-old single mother from Melbourne is one of the most popular Australian entrepreneurs in the growing wellness industry. She is also the talk of Australian media, with a feature in fashion and lifestyle tabloid *Elle Magazine* that calls her 'The Most Inspirational Woman You Will Meet This Year'. Gibson has millions of followers of her food and wellness blog *The Whole Pantry* and her accompanying Instagram account @healing-belle. Gibson's story is remarkable, her Instagram posts explain that she was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer in 2009. After several rounds of chemotherapy that fails to shrink her malignant brain tumour, and leaves her feeling sicker and sicker, she abandons medical treatment. Instead, Gibson empowers herself by embarking on a healing journey of natural remedies, alternative therapies and a strict diet of whole foods. Her initial prognosis in 2009 estimated that she had 'four months to live', years later in 2014 Gibson appears as the picture of wellness, a pretty young woman with long blonde hair and a wide smile, she is fashionable and a confident entrepreneur. She doesn't *look* like a typical cancer patient. Instagram and *The Whole Pantry* present Gibson as knowledgeable about health and nutrition, and crucially, this knowledge is situated in her own personal experience. Subsequently, she provides her followers access to her personal life in vulnerable expressions of the continuing emotional toll of her cancer diagnosis. In this, she seems genuine and trustworthy.

Gibson explains that she grew up in a very dysfunctional home; she doesn't know her father, while her mother has multiple sclerosis, and her younger brother suffers autism. At six years old Gibson starts cooking dinner and has to stand on a chair to reach the stove. She recalls in the autobiographical section of her cookbook *The Whole Pantry* that, at the time, she did not understand the ritual of cooking, it was: 'a job, a way to get out of doing the

dishes' (Gibson 2014, 4). Gibson writes that she moves out of home at the age of twelve, and her new place has a vegetable garden allowing her to learn 'what real food was' (Gibson 2014, 4). In June 2009, at the age of twenty, Gibson presents at her doctor with blurred vision, headaches and trouble concentrating and the doctor responds by prescribing anti-depressants and books her in for an eye test. Soon afterwards, Gibson has a stroke at work which later tests reveal is a sign of brain cancer. Her doctor says, 'you have malignant brain cancer, Belle. You're dying. You have six weeks. Four months, tops' (Gibson 2014, 4).

Initially Gibson follows traditional treatments of chemotherapy and radiotherapy for two months. Then, following an incident where she vomits and passes out in a park opposite the hospital she decides to abandon treatment. Gibson becomes inspired reading about the detoxification properties of lemons on the Internet and immediately begins travelling the world, educating herself, talking to people and healing herself naturally. In 2010 Gibson gives birth to her son Olivier, fathered by her ex-boyfriend and 'best friend' Nathan Corbett; Gibson writes in *The Whole Pantry* that it was a miracle as she was told by doctors that she couldn't have children (2014, 5). In 2012 Gibson falls pregnant again with her new partner Clive Rothwell but suffers a miscarriage which leaves her feeling depressed and unsupported. In her grief she turns to Instagram, searching for a community and wanting to share what she has learned about nutrition during her journey with cancer. The response, Gibson recalls, was immediate: 'my Instagram account got ridiculous, with hundreds of people contacting me, offering advice and sharing their stories' (Gibson 2014, 5). By early 2014 Gibson's story of beating the odds and finding her own way to cure cancer has gone viral, and fans follow her Instagram feed religiously. Even Penguin Random House are set to publish her cookbook and Gibson sells her wellness app to technology giant Apple.

At the height of her popularity Gibson developed a wellness app which shared the name and purpose of her original wellness blog *The Whole Pantry.* Like her blog, the app focused on health and nutrition, offering recipes, nutrition information, and digital shopping lists. The app won Apple's Best Food and Drink App Award in 2013 and was subsequently picked up by Apple's iPhone and Apple Watch developers. *The Whole Pantry* was the only health and wellness app to be programmed into the first Apple Watch prototype, meaning that the app would be pre-downloaded to every Apple Watch sold. Simultaneously, Gibson's Instagram handle @healing_belle, where she presents her story of healing cancer, amassed over 200,000 followers on the social media site. Later in 2014, Lantern, the lifestyle imprint of Penguin Random House, published *The Whole Pantry* cookbook in Australia and by 2015

were set to release the book in the U.K. through Random House and the U.S. and Canada through Simon & Schuster. However, the book never made it overseas.

On the 8th of March of 2015, just one month before *The Whole Pantry* was set to be released overseas, Australian journalists Beau Donelly and Nick Toscano revealed that over $300,000 worth of donations from The Whole Pantry business had not been received by various charities. Donelly and Toscano reported that a spokeswoman from the Buhmi Sehat foundation, a recorded beneficiary of one of Gibson's fundraising events, could say 'with confidence' that they had 'never received a donation from Belle Gibson' (Donelly and Toscano 2015). Just three days later, *The Australian* newspaper published an exclusive interview with Gibson, where she casts doubt on her own cancer claims revealing that she was 'misdiagnosed' with cancer by a team of doctors from Germany that she declined to name (Guliat 2015). Gibson is described as 'visibly upset' during the interview, crying multiple times and lamenting that her doctor had 'led her astray' (Guliat 2015). Donelly and Toscano explain in *The Woman Who Fooled The World: Belle Gibson's Cancer Con* that they had been investigating Gibson for almost six months before they broke the story on missing charity donations for Fairfax Media in March of 2015 (2018, 136-137). Their book-length exposé reveals the challenges of investigating Gibson within established media conventions and positions Gibson's story and success within the booming, and yet problematic, wellness industry. Donelly and Toscano also present testimony from cancer sufferers who trusted Gibson, abandoned medical treatment, and followed her nutritional and lifestyle advice even to the detriment of their health. I use this work as a platform from which to discuss Gibson's self-representation on Instagram and in *The Whole Pantry*, and specifically how Gibson's story was able to amass such global popularity in a short space of time. As such this chapter is a study in the production, circulation and power of what I call popular memoir, specifically in the context of the wellness industry. Gibson presents a life narrative that trades in the popularity of the wellness industry and provides hope to a community of cancer sufferers with an uplifting tale of individual triumph that fully emulates the image of the 'wellness warrior'.

The thriving wellness industry is largely built on entrepreneurial women, colloquially referred to as 'wellness warriors', who provide advice based on their own personal healing experiences with wellness products (yoga, meditation, nutrition or coffee enemas for example). The original 'wellness warrior' is fellow Australian woman Jess Ainscough, a former editor of teenage girls' magazine *Dolly*, who created *The Wellness Warrior* blog to

document her journey with a rare form of soft-tissue cancer, epithelioid sarcoma (Davey 2015). Ainscough initially followed a course of medical treatment after she was diagnosed in 2008, but when chemotherapy failed and doctors recommended the amputation of her arm (the site of her cancer) she halted medical treatment and started an alternative, Gerson Therapy. Gerson Therapy is a combination of daily coffee enemas, a heavy regime of dietary supplements and a strict organic, vegetarian diet (Davey 2015). Gerson Therapy initially had positive results for Ainscough, so much so that her mother also abandoned medical advice to follow this alternative treatment when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. However, after her mother's untimely death in 2013, Ainscough famously returned to medical treatment but her cancer became more aggressive and she passed away in 2015 (Davey, 2015). The narratives of Ainscough and Gibson are closely aligned, and Gibson even describes Ainscough as an 'inspiration' and a 'close friend,' Gibson was even in attendance at a private memorial service for Ainscough's mother. The symbol of the wellness warrior, like the wellness industry itself, when read through the neoliberal lens of personal responsibility is problematic. Significantly, neoliberalism functions on an ethos of personal responsibility and self-management which locates all success and failure within the individual (Bloom 2017, 6). When read this way, 'wellness warriors' reflect this neoliberal focus on the individual, as the term warrior invokes military symbolism which implies that one has to fight and only those who fight hard enough deserve healing.

Peter Bloom, in *The Ethics of Neoliberalism*, explains that the wellness industry emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, which dismantled traditional neoliberal ideals of productivity, upward mobility, and wealth (2017, 99). Significantly, the crash proved that the current capitalist system was fallible, and in its aftermath emerged deep concerns about the effects of neoliberalism on individuals. Bloom argues that neoliberal logics of personal responsibility and happiness are reflected in these concerns. Such logics reinforce market principles and power relations and Bloom argues they are deeply embedded in the contemporary wellness industry: 'Happiness could easily be found … if only people worked hard enough to personally achieve it' (Bloom 2017, 99). Happiness, here, is read as a reward for appropriate personal responsibility to one's physical, psychological, spiritual and financial health. The continued popularity of the wellness industry is a significant example, not only of the neoliberal logic of personal responsibility, but also how neoliberal ideology, more generally, is so embedded in our everyday lives that it often circulates and operates unnoticed. The key is that wellness, for example, *seems* like a good thing. In a time of great

financial instability who wouldn't want to feel better, be less stressed, become more productive, and have better work/life balance? The wellness industry offers products and services that can deliver on such desires. Additionally, consumers in neoliberal times want health and wellness advice based on personal experience, from people who project an image of health and happiness. Such images work to provide authenticity and authority to the person who offers the advice but also to the narrative being presented as personal experience.

In Gibson's life narrative, wellness coincides with the controversy of alternative cancer therapies as she claims that a change in her diet was the main healing power against her terminal brain cancer. Colleen Moriarty, in online magazine *Yale Medicine,* explains how typing a cancer diagnosis into Google results in being 'bombarded with claims or miracle cancer "cures" … Patients are looking to alternative answers, trying Chinese herbs, vitamins, minerals, meditation, meditation, tai chi, yoga, bee venom and extreme dieting' (2019, n.p.). The position of the wellness industry phenomenon located online is crucial here, as it distances wellness from the trusted contexts of traditional medical practice and positions personal experience as the arbiter of truth and authenticity. As Baker and Rojek's article in *The Conversation* examining 'wellness influencers' notes, celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Kourtney Kardashian use their celebrity to sell vitamins and supplements (2019). Though, crucially, they each represent themselves as our 'trusted friend' and 'equal' and transactions are achieved here as a form of friendship where they, despite their celebrity status, stand with us against professional medical elites (Baker and Rojek 2019). As I argue in Chapter Three, founder of the *I Quit Sugar* franchise Sarah Wilson addresses her readers directly in her self-help memoir to appear as their equal and facilitate trust and authenticity which authorises her to offer advice. Similarly, as Gibson projects her life narrative in an online space she also appears accessible and trustworthy to her followers which authenticates and authorises her narrative and advice. For Moriarty, alternative therapies are a complex problem with multiple effects, for instance, patients who use alternative therapies are more likely to delay or refuse traditional medical treatments in favour of such alternatives (2019, n.p.). Crucially, in Gibson's life narrative refusal and abandonment of traditional medical treatments is framed as individual self-empowerment: 'I was empowering myself to save my own life' (Gibson 2016, 4-5). Additionally, Moriarty theorises that those cancer patients who turn to alternative therapies aren't really looking for a cure at all, they are seeking a sense of control. Moriarty cites Paediatric Allergy and Immunology specialist Gary Soffer, who explains that cancer patients who turn to alternative therapies are 'seeking ways to change the

experience of their disease and their quality of life' (Soffer cited in Moriarty 2019, n.p). Crucially, Gibson presents a life narrative on Instagram of 'living' with cancer, complete with pictures of looking well, being productive and running her business.

Gibson mobilises newly established audience expectations for how health and wellness advice circulates, as well as for the kind of narratives that might be most successful in this context. Crucially, as I argue in my analysis of Wilson's self-help memoir in Chapter Three, discourses of self-help and wellness trade heavily on ordinary people's desires to achieve the 'good life' by accessing their 'authentic self'. In *American Autobiography After 9/11*, Megan Brown considers self-help memoirs of recovery from addiction as potential self-care guides that address post-9/11 anxieties in the American public. Crucial to her argument is the neoliberal idea of the self as an enterprise, which she argues neatly parallels the discourses of recovery as well as generic conventions of self-help memoir that view the self as a project (2017, 37). In this chapter I read Gibson's life narrative as a self-help memoir which is circulated digitally through Instagram and travels to traditional print production in her cookbook *The Whole Pantry*. Further, I use the media scandal that was generated around Gibson to discuss media conventions, audience expectations and cycles of redemption that shape popular memoir in neoliberal times.

Background: Sick Bodies

Gibson's life narrative operated through three distinct channels, firstly image-based social media site Instagram where Gibson uses an autobiographical persona to share her 'story', which I refer to as an instamemoir. The term 'instamemoir' describes a particular method of constructing life narrative via the Instagram platform, both text-based and image-based media are posted chronologically to present a specific period of life 'as it happens' – for Gibson this is the story of her 'living' with cancer which is tied together by the narrative arc of her success in the wellness industry – a story about cancer bracketed within the rags-to-riches success story of a young woman. Secondly, the 2014 publication by Penguin Random House of Gibson's cookbook *The Whole Pantry* provides an autobiographical prologue to the instamemoir. Finally, through various news media which includes feature articles and interviews with Gibson about her life. Throughout interactions with various media channels Gibson uses her autobiographical persona to perform a certain kind of cancer suffering, with sometimes visible symptoms, but also promotes 'living' with cancer through established philosophies of wellness.

Earlier I have argued, via Bloom, the wellness industry operates foundationally on the neoliberal myths of 'happiness' and 'personal responsibility' which emerged out of the global financial crisis of 2008-2010 (2017, 99). Catastrophic financial collapse destroyed traditional neoliberal values of professional upward mobility. Bloom argues, instead of seeing the desire to be 'happy' and to achieve 'fulfillment' as challenges, neoliberalism merely sees them as new market opportunities to be mined. Coupled with the myth of 'personal responsibility', neoliberalism found, in the wellness industry, a way to turn physical, spiritual and mental health into commodities (Bloom 2017, 99). Significantly, although the online spheres in which wellness primarily circulates seem like democratised spaces under an assumption of equal access to the Internet both for wellness warriors and for consumers, the reality is far more complex. 'Wellness warriors' are highly mediated subjects that market and sell wellness products, as well as the image of wellness, to regular health-conscious consumers. These products range from health foods and recipes, to meditation, gym memberships, herbal teas and activewear. Crucially, within this mediated market space, consumers believe that they have the freedom of choice about what kind of wellness information and products they wish to consume. Though, as Bloom argues this seemingly robust discourse of choice gives way to a neoliberal illusion of 'choice': choice facilitates freedom, but available choices in the neoliberal free market are largely restrictive and controlled by faceless corporations (2017, 130). Choice, under neoliberalism, is largely superficial. Additionally, the wellness industry offers consumers the opportunity to feel they are contributing to social justice by consuming 'ethically branded' products, but this is still a system based on consumption within a controlled market (Bloom 2017, 130). Indeed, in an industry that markets 'choice' while selling increasingly similar products and services, how do 'wellness warriors' differentiate themselves from each other, and from the consumerist model of the 'free' market? The answer may lie in precisely *how* they market their wellness products, by attaching them to individual stories of recovery evidenced by the visual health and happiness of the wellness warrior. Gibson's use of new and emerging life narrative technology to promote cancer survival by consumption of whole foods and nutrition positioned her in a powerful way to take advantage of this market.

Gibson also uses her autobiographical persona to engage with dominant discourses of illness, particularly terminal cancer sufferers, and challenges the traditional role of the 'sick body'. The traditional role of the 'sick body', as famously defined by sociologist Talcott Parsons in his 1951 book *The Social System*, is understood through an institutionalised set of

expectations for patients that are guided by four assumptions: 1) that a sick person should be liberated from their everyday social responsibilities (like going to work or participating in social events) and withdraw from public space to get treatment; 2) that the state of sickness cannot be changed by the force of will; sickness is a biological state, not a choice and should be treated as such; 3) that illness should be approached as an undesirable state that a person would want to get rid of; 4) that the sick person should seek proper technical and scientific competences to get treatment and that person should collaborate and respect the technical authority in order to be cured and thus able to return to sociality once again (Parsons 1951, 436-437; Stage 2017, 77). This set of assumptions offered by Parsons presents the 'sick body' as one that is withdrawn from society due to an undesirable biological state, the body should 'want' to return to society and therefore is required to seek and respect the proper technical authority in order to facilitate this return.

The use of new technologies like social media and blogging to circulate life narratives that trade on the affective potential of illness have facilitated new definitions of the 'sick body'. Carsten Stage argues that:

> The intensity of the blog environment risks supporting the problematic intimization and privatization of political problems, by encouraging emotional, short-term investments and by shifting responsibility for social improvement too far towards the individual: in other words, suggesting that solutions to large-scale political problems (eg. the lack of money for cancer organizations) become dependent on the individual's willpower and extraordinary entrepreneurial capacities. (2014, 183)

Stage's argument that illness blogs are particularly clear examples of broader social transformations which expose the increasing de-privatisation of the 'sick body as part of citizens' entrepreneurial attempts to reach certain – both personal and social – goals in the future' is critical (2014, 183). Following the shift toward the individual in neoliberal myths of 'happiness' and 'personal responsibility' Gibson positioned cancer, illness and wellness as contingencies of life that would be widely recognised by her audience. Crucially, Sarasvathy's 'logic of effectuation', developed as a marketing strategy in 2001, determines that entrepreneurial activities are initiated by what is at hand (an experience, illness, history etc.) (245; cited in Stage 2017, 59). Sarasvathy explains that the underlying logic of this effectuation approach is about controlling the future of the market thereby reducing the need

to predict it and mitigating risk. Additionally, new markets are created through alliances and cooperation between business entities instead of competition. For example, by associating herself with other legitimate cancer sufferers and wellness practitioners through cross-promotion Gibson was able to authenticate her false autobiographical persona and secure the future of her market.

Stage positions language, storytelling and narration as tools that neutralise and enforce order on the 'disruption of illness' and 'give voice to the personal account of suffering' (2014, 171). However, Stage's study is not limited to simple narrations of personal accounts of suffering, as he notes a blog written by an ill body that is informative or entertaining may, in itself, be considered entrepreneurial activity. Instead Stage defines his 'entrepreneurial illness blog' to be 'a blog that aims at creating social value by fostering actions among receivers to the benefit of a cause that transcends the personal needs and local horizon of the blogger' (2014, 174). An 'entrepreneurial illness blog' is then, an autobiographical project that transcends the perceived 'life' of the author and mobilises the audience towards a larger social or humanitarian goal. The case studies explored by Stage in *Networking Cancer* analyse the blogs and social media profiles of three terminally ill young people, Rosie Kilburn (1992-2011), Jessica Joy Rees (1999-2012) and Stephen Sutton (1994-2014). These blogs and profiles all use the affective network of cancer suffering, in profoundly different and creative ways, to encourage their followers to donate money towards organisations that research and support cancer and its sufferers.

Gibson's blog, as well as her social media presence is clearly an example of an 'entrepreneurial illness blog' by Stage's definition. The promoted benefit of Gibson's intsamemoir transcended her 'assumed' local horizon as a young woman with a malignant brain tumour. Clearly Gibson's instamemoir circulates within a system of value associated with public affect or affect capital, which Stage argues is a symptom of illness blogging that is achieved through a combination of text-based and visual-based blogging techniques. Stage contends that this entrepreneurial approach can be understood in social context by which 'a "good life" is often understood as an "entrepreneurial life," thereby creating a certain pressure to perform and make positive effects' (2014, 176 emphases in original). This social context can also be understood as embedded in ideas of neoliberal capitalism that define illness as the inability to work, as I argue, Gibson challenges this definition by being 'visibly' ill and also 'visibly' productive. Gibson creates a life narrative through her instamemoir that markets cancer 'survival' against the dominant narrative of cancer 'suffering'. This follows a

trend identified by Stage where cancer sufferers, through increased access to social networking platforms, are working to individualise the cancer narrative and thus expose the complex realities of life and death with cancer.

To further discuss the popularity of Gibson's scam I draw on Anne Rothe's 2011 book *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in Mass Media*, which explores the ethics of victimhood and violence as melodramatic spectacles. Particularly, I position Gibson's scam within Rothe's concept of 'trauma kitsch' which omits socio-political contexts of victimisation, oppression and violence by representing these political subjects as individual tragedies. In this way, as Rothe argues 'trauma kitsch covertly reinforces the power structures that have created these represented injustices' (2011, 45). By conveying the message that 'teary eyed sentimentality' in the form of inspiration, empathy or sympathy with Gibson as the cancer sufferer is the appropriate response to her life narrative, critical reception is suppressed and so too the possibility of political action. The seemingly progressive discourse of cancer activism uses 'trauma kitsch' in a similar way to obscure political problems in favour of sentimental reactions. According to Barbara Ehrenreich, American-based breast cancer movements suppress the political agency of sufferers not only by infantilising them with such kitsch objects as pink teddy bears, but also by inciting, and even enforcing, the popular psychology of positive thinking (2001, 53). Although there is no empirical evidence to support the purported healing function of positive thinking, it continues to be marketed by the wellness industry as the cure-all solution to the problems of capitalism – from poverty and unemployment to terminal illness, which is evidenced in Gibson's instamemoir. Following Rothe, I argue the kitsch master narrative suppresses what should be orchestrated anger at and collective political action against what Ehrenreich calls the 'Cancer Industrial Complex', which promotes profitable drug or wellness treatments over costly research into the prevention or environmental causes of cancer (Ehrenreich 2001, 53).

It says a great deal about the climate for neoliberal life narratives and the success of the wellness industry that Gibson's life narrative was taken as fact and not a scam, despite its blatant logistical inconsistencies. Investigative journalists Beau Donelly and Nick Toscano (who later published the exposé *The Woman Who Fooled The World: Belle Gibson's Cancer Con)*, noticed when writing on Gibson for *The Age* newspaper that when pressed on the simple matter of her age, when she was officially diagnosed with cancer, or even the name of her doctor Gibson would become visibly confused. This performance was regularly dismissed by the public within the pathological framework of cancer, sufferers of brain

cancer particularly struggle to recall important chronological information. Despite a few confidential tip-offs from friends of Gibson who doubted her diagnosis, Donelly and Toscano as journalists did not have access to medical records, they could not *prove* she was lying and therefore the story was too much of risk to run (2018, 136-137). Instead, the scam would eventually unravel from Gibson's fake donations to charity, she would often praise her followers on social media for their generous fundraising efforts for cancer research and other cancer support services. However, when Donelly and Toscano contacted these various support services in 2015 they were either unaware of donations, had not received them, or worse, had never heard of Belle Gibson or The Whole Pantry business (Donelly and Toscano 2018, 139-140). In the next section, I use Leigh Gilmore's concept of the redemption narrative and its enmeshment within what she calls 'neoliberal life narrative' to discuss the role of scandal in recycling and redeeming the redemption narrative as a popular structure of memoir (2017, 101). Subsequently, I locate the media industry of tabloid magazines as central to this redemption of the redemption story and pose important questions about negotiations of power and mediation between author, memoir, audiences and the media in the facilitation of scandal. Similarly, I consider the position of the redemption narrative within the wellness industry as neoliberal empowerment of the individual.

The Scandal: Redemption of the Redemption Story

Responding to what they call a 'crisis of suspicion' around contemporary witness narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson consider the damage that hoax narratives do to human rights discourses. This damage does more than unsettle 'relations among witnesses, publishers, activists, and readers,' more broadly it aims to 'confront the vulnerability of life writing and our attachments to its premise of truth-telling' (2010, 591). As a thesis that engages with popular memoir, I consistently engage with the idea that the commercial publishing industry is a machine that drives the commodification of life stories, but in the context of hoaxes and scams, it also provides opportunities for exploitation. Brown argues that scandals and hoaxes have influenced contemporary writing by the inclusion of disclaimers, 'playful' approaches to narrative structure and even memoirs that downplay rather than emphasise the author's subject position (2017, 18). Though, more importantly, frauds impact memoir reading, calling reader's attention to the strategies authors use to represent authenticity and an increasing level of scepticism about those strategies (2017, 18). Scams like Gibson's offer opportunities to interrogate the complicated interplay between autobiography, authority and authenticity, revealing the possibilities and limitations of a certain post-truth era of reading

that Brown describes. Additionally, the existence of this scam online reveals how the forces of commodification and exploitation in traditionally published forms of life narrative, and the ethical implications of these practices, also exist online.

Faking cancer in online spaces like the blogosphere or social media by the use of life narrative, like other online hoaxes, is not a new phenomenon. Some more examples of 'faking' cancer via the Internet include Debbie Swenson, who in 2001 was exposed as the orchestrator behind the U.S. based leukemia blog *Living Colours* narrated through the persona of a young college student named Kaycee Nicole. Also, the 'Warrior Eli' case from 2012 in which a 22-year-old medical student Emily Dir adopted the persona of adult Canadian JS Dirr who shared *his* story of a family living with children with cancer and losing his wife. These examples are different to Gibson as she uses her biological identity, while these instances of faking cancer are combined with identity fabrication, the authors adopted completely different ages, genders and personas. Kylie Cardell and Emma Maguire, in their article 'Hoax Politics: Blogging, Betrayal and the Intimate Public of *A Gay Girl in Damascus*' suggest that as the gap between real life and online life narrows users perhaps 'expect more accountability in online identity' (2015, 217). They note that, rather than being accepted, hoaxes spark outrage and signal 'expectations of reliability in identity claims in digital contexts' which reaffirms that genre pays a key role in how life narratives are consumed online (2015, 217). Gibson's life narrative, particularly the small details of her biological identity, such as her age, childhood and family that she chose to fabricate, reveal how online frauds and scams have evolved under these audience expectations. Gibson's goal was to craft a life narrative that, as I will show, represents neoliberal ideas in relation to both vulnerable suffering and the achievement of success.

Gilmore, in *Tainted Witness*, explains the 'redemption narrative' as the foundation of what she calls 'neoliberal life narrative': stories where people overcome hardship and disadvantage, despite or even because of their circumstances, by nothing but their own personal willpower (2017, 89). Gilmore notes that the popularity of redemption is crucial, and while redemption narratives are the preferred theme of life narrative they also describe structures of participation in scandal: 'when readers consume narratives and throw out the fakers, then tastemakers and readers participate in a ritual cleanse of the category and the redemption narrative is redeemed for future use' (Gilmore 2017, 101). After all, the issues that the public had with Gibson's scam were twofold; readers felt slighted that the story and persona they had emotionally, even financially, invested in had been exposed as a fake, and

they were outraged at the feeling of being duped by the scam. Crucially, Gibson as an individual remained at the centre of such outrage from readers, they touted her as a bad person or someone who suffered from Munchausen Syndrome (Weaver 2015). Esposito and Perez explain that, in neoliberal societies, a person's refusal to assimilate into what is deemed 'rational' is typically associated with personal deviance or assumed pathology (2014, 416; Esposito 2011). Crucially, positioning such refusal or failures within the individual obscures wider social, political, cultural or economic dimensions that might also have contributed to such failure. The exposure of Gibson's scam poses questions about how the wellness industry uses personal experience and life story to gain authenticity and authority, and it also reveals a practice of reading that preferences particular kinds of 'successful' wellness subjects.

Though, perhaps more urgently, the scam exposed a lack of regulation or responsibility within the wellness industry, and the publishing industry, to the circulation alternative cancer therapies that have little, or no, medical basis or proof. After all, Gibson had a personal responsibility to not only meet her potential, in neoliberal terms, but also to ethically offer authentic self-representation through her life narrative. Subsequently, her failure to adhere to such personal responsibility spurred a public backlash that focused on her as an individual, which meant that political questions revealed by her instamemoir were neither addressed, nor answered. The recent 'throwing out' of controversial Australian celebrity chef Pete Evans suggests that the publishing and media industries continue to seek questionable or even scandalous wellness subjects. Evans used his celebrity as the judge of a popular reality television show *My Kitchen Rules* to push his pseudoscientific wellness views to millions of followers on social media. Some of his radical advice suggested that followers should avoid sunscreen because of its harmful chemicals, that enforcing a paleo diet could cure autism in children and that routine vaccinations are poisonous and cause detrimental diseases (Stamp 2020). Significantly, Evans maintained his celebrity and published cookbooks for almost ten years even while pedalling these claims on social media. His public rejection by television networks and publishers in November of 2020, instead, was catalysed by a social media post which contained an anti-Semitic symbol, widely recognised as a hate symbol by its association with Nazi ideology (Stamp 2020). Significantly, Evans retained a loyal and fanatical following of over one million people on social media who were quick to defend him and his views. Here, the cycle of scandal has only tightened affective bonds resulting in a wellness community that thrives on their perceived otherness and

exceptionalism. By comparison, audiences did not rush to defend Gibson, even as the tabloid media outlets tried to infantilise her as a damsel in distress.

What is equally fascinating about the fallout of the Gibson scam is the ease with which the literary genre of melodrama allows for the victim/villain dichotomy to shift from Gibson to her readers and crucially the redemption story itself as a narrative device. Prior to her exposure, melodrama positioned Gibson as the damsel in distress to the evil and villainous practitioners of traditional cancer treatments, which were causing her to suffer needlessly. This is a simple plot structure which is common in trauma kitsch, crucially, in personalising good and evil, trauma kitsch suppresses the psychological complexity of its characters so they represent quasi-allegorical absolutes (Rothe 2011, 46). As both a dramatic genre and a mode of emplotment, melodrama enacts the optimistic belief that good always triumphs over evil, resulting in the victim being redeemed and the villain being punished. Through exposure of the scam, the melodramatic dichotomised characters of Gibson's life narrative became complicated. Gibson was no longer the victim and thus, for the conclusion, needed to be re-framed in public as absolute evil. Suddenly we see Gibson's readership and the redemption structure take up the role of the victim, infantilised, passive and co-opted by the evil Gibson for the purposes of making profit. Genre is important here, as Gilmore explains a confessional compact between writer and reader is compounded by the theoretical claim that the writer can be bound to confession and judged by readers precisely because their choice of genre (memoir) signals their assent to judgement (2017, 103). Significantly, this process of judgement offers similar opportunities for affective attachment and feeling together within a community of readers that was originally offered by Gibson's now tainted instamemoir. Readers, here, by binding together in an act of judgement are performing anew their own redemption narrative while providing an opportunity for Gibson, as a newly tainted subject, to do the same.

Crucially, trauma kitsch and melodrama continued to populate the terms of exposure and subsequent fall of Gibson, and trauma continued as the central feature. Gibson's readership was represented as traumatised by having their hopes dashed, their money stolen and generally being duped by the scam. But Gibson's fall was also framed as traumatic by popular media for her. A popular glossy magazine *Australian Women's Weekly*, claimed that Gibson had always 'struggled' with the truth and that perhaps she was still the victim of a dysfunctional upbringing (Weaver, 2015). Simultaneously, Gibson was villainised in legal discourse, despite the tabloid magazine's attempts to re-victimise Gibson; in the eyes of the

law she was still a criminal and would have to pay back the money that she failed to donate to charity. The vilification of Gibson continued when claims were made public that *The Whole Pantry* business did not have any money left, and therefore could not pay back the lost donations. Viewed as just another deception, this excuse was not good enough for Victorian courts and Gibson was personally sanctioned to pay the money back or her assets would be seized. Crucially, while news media trades on verifiable fact, investigative journalism and witness testimony under legal discourse to discredit Gibson, tabloid magazines trade on the *personal* pain of sentimentality to re-victimise her. Simply put, news media sell newspapers and reports in the facts of how Gibson hoodwinked a nation, and tabloid media sell interviews that commodify personal pain under the guise of finding out the 'truth' behind why Gibson lied. Thus, Gibson as a young, white woman is primed as a redemptive subject, through which tabloid media and memoir publishers alike, can reaffirm the redemption narrative that is so crucial to their sentimental market.

Gilmore explains the emergence of the redemption narrative and its crucial relation to scandal in an American cultural context. She argues that viewing the rise of neoliberal life narratives through the scope of emergent backlash to first-person narratives, allows us to see how the public testimony of Anita Hill precedes and prepares for the mid-1990s memoir boom, particularly by women or colour or the queer community (2017, 86). Secondly, focusing on Oprah Winfrey's sentimental media empire and its relationship to testimonial networks reveals how representations of trauma and gender migrated from memoir to self-help through her television show, book club, networks and live tours. Significantly, this occurred at a specific moment when the judgement of life writers associated with the boom/lash provided a structure for preserving the redemption story's popularity by relocating it from doubt to a self-help commodity (Gilmore 2017, 86). Using Gilmore's established pattern, we can understand how Gibson's life narrative, by its proximity to the wellness and self-help industries, avoided the sticky judgement and uncertainty associated with women's life writing (Ahmed 2014).

Jurisdiction is an important process throughout this redemption as the conditions at which the public reject Gibson expose preferences to certain kinds of 'tainted' subjects. According to Gilmore, 'the consumption of popular memoirs promotes a practice of reading in public focused on the mass circulation of life narratives, especially those with a redemption plot whose authors become the target of potent judgemental energies' (2017, 102). In response to hoaxes, this judgement is mediated through intertwining strands of

memoir and self-help discourse represented by globally bestselling memoirs like James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* or more specifically through Gibson's instamemoir. In Chapter Three, I argue that Wilson's memoir, as an example of wellness/self-help memoir, offers generalised narratives of personal trauma with happy endings that direct the sympathy and compassion of readers, which could be mobilised toward nonnormative authors, towards similar others. As Gilmore argues, the voices that circulate in the testimonial space carved into the public sphere by memoirs are 'governed by unspoken norms and explicit market formulas which shape the dynamics of reading and limit who can speak, how, and for how long' (2017, 102). What Gibson's instamemoir provides is a unique opportunity to analyse a neoliberal life narrative that failed in the public without harming the neoliberal brand and popularity of the redemption story.

At the point of exposure of Gibson's scam, after a brief period of removal from the public eye, tell-all interviews with Gibson were released that repositioned her within the affective community of readers that she had created, who were now disavowing her. Crucially, these interviews seem like an opportunity for Gibson to 'come clean' and tell her side of the story, but they are heavily mediated by the media industries that facilitate them. For example, in interviews for Nine television Network's *60 Minutes* and *The Australian Women's Weekly* magazine, Gibson focused more on the 'emotional truth' of her instamemoir rather than chronological and recorded facts. This is significant, as the tabloid magazine conforms to a genre similar to the talk show made famous by Oprah Winfrey, it survives and thrives on discourses of sentimentality, self-help and redemption. Consequently, tabloid magazines and talk shows fuse public issues with private problems but without political analysis and they preference the emotional redemption story over analysing detailed histories of systemic violence and oppression.

The interview published in *Women's Weekly* appears on the surface to be attempting to save the tainted image of Gibson by trivialising her relationship with the truth as a 'struggle' with the 'truth.' Significantly, the magazine trades on scandals that reinforce the popular structure of sentimental pain and personal redemption, but it is a redemption story that requires saving (Weaver 2015). Gilmore explains that in the context of 'talk' Oprah's personal revelations about her own sexual trauma and recovery 'radically realigned power on her couch' (2017, 107). Trauma and survival, thus, became the 'material of a new market for memoirs through the production of personal stories and the promotion of non-experts as consumers and authenticators of these performances' (Gilmore 2017, 107). Gilmore's

explanation closely aligns with the wellness industry as it is similarly grounded in the neoliberal empowerment of the individual as the 'expert' in their own health, as they consume and authenticate wellness performances. Crucially, in the context of tabloid magazines, Gibson's individual power is circumvented through cycles of judgement and directed back towards media industries and their audiences. The magazine infantilises Gibson, successfully framing her as a helpless victim of her own mental health, the evil manipulative medical industry and her childhood. The magazine claims, through Weaver's interpretation, that Gibson's narrative goes like this: 'I am a young woman with no family to guide me – and I was preyed upon' (Weaver, 2015). Similarly, Gibson describes her childhood as 'tough': 'All of a sudden, I was walking to school on my own, making school lunches and cleaning the house every day. It was my responsibility to do grocery shopping, do the washing, arrange medical appointments and pick up my brother. I didn't have toys' (Weaver, 2015). By introducing Gibson's difficult childhood into the affective currents circulating around the scandal of her scam, the redemption story becomes associated with Gibson's ability to overcome childhood trauma to become a successful neoliberal subject and entrepreneur and moves away from Gibson's fraud. Gibson moves from being the villain back to a victim and the deeper problems of an unregulated wellness industry, the dangers of personal experience as authentic medical advice, and the preference for redemption narratives of wellness remain obscured and unacknowledged.

The ongoing popularity of the wellness industry after the exposure of the Gibson scam in 2015 shows how neoliberal myths of 'personal responsibility' for professional and individual wellness are adapting to non-market pressures. Further, the fact that the wellness industry remains popular while Gibson has been 'cleansed' from the public sphere as a liar demonstrates the successful redemption of the 'redemption story' model of popular memoir. Neoliberalism's need for a robust discourse of individual choice and responsibility points to the cultural work the popularity of memoir performs. The pervasiveness of the redemption narrative preserves the hope that neoliberal policies and ideologies mock (Gilmore 2017, 91). The backlash against Gibson when she was exposed did not focus on the rampant commodification of the wellness industry, and its invested stakeholders like Instagram, nor the authenticity of her redemption 'illness to wellness' narrative. Clearly, Gibson was thrown out by her followers as a failed individual, which allowed for the 'redemption narrative' utilised by her instamemoir and the wellness industry to continue as successful avenues for individual betterment and success.

Wellness Narratives: Cookbooks and Social Media

Cookbook's in the wellness industry function as a commodity that authenticates but also acts as evidence of the lifestyle of its 'wellness warriors'. Hadley Freeman, writing for *The Guardian* newspaper, argues that for wellness warriors, 'publishers cannot give them book deals fast enough, and bestseller lists in the UK, Australia and the US are filled with volumes on wellness, which mix recipes with vague nutritional advice and, of course, many, many photos' (2016, n.p.). Gibson's instamemoir offers an example of how this wellness lifestyle is effective, while Gibson's book, *The Whole Pantry* offers the evidence as to why and how the lifestyle is effective. Unlike Instagram, where the content is mediated by Gibson, a cookbook is published through professional processes and associations with a trusted institution: Penguin Random House. Penguin avoided ethical responsibility in this instance by ensuring that *The Whole Pantry* carried a disclaimer disavowing medical expertise or authority, with the publisher declaring that neither it nor the author accepted responsibility for 'any adverse effects or consequences arising from the use of any suggestions, preparations or procedures included in this book' (Gibson 2014, xi). Unlike legacy publishing, there is much less pressure to prove certain aspects of one's life narrative with evidence, be that of illness, of wellness advice, or even one's identity.

Gibson's self-representation @healing_belle quickly became one of the most popular accounts on Instagram. However, Gibson tested and curated her narrative to different audiences on alterative social media platforms before going live on Instagram. What is presented in @healing_belle is not the immediate or everyday narrative that is typical of Instagram, or indeed that Gibson wants her readers to believe. Crucially, in her narrative Gibson is diagnosed with cancer in 2008, for five years she used alternative kinds of social media to practice her story, and gauge its response, before she joined Instagram in 2012. For example, earlier in 2010 after she moved to Melbourne but before giving birth to her son Oli, Gibson joined an online parenting forum called *What To Expect*. It's here that Gibson begins to build her audience, however Gibson offers a more vulnerable frame through which to read her persona from the Instafamous wellness warrior that emerges later on Instagram.

What Gibson is doing here is an extension was what scholars have found characteristic in the practice known as 'mommy blogging'. This forum is an intimate space filled with new and expectant mothers which encourages self-exposure, what Aimée Morrison terms a 'personal mommy blog' (2011, 38). Mommy blogs do not operate like

Instagram; affordances such as the use of pseudonyms, avatars and omission of personal identifiable information like addresses or 'real' names allow users to share their experiences without fear of exposure, judgement or scam in the 'real' world (Morrison 2014, 117). In this way, mommy bloggers make a conscious effort to balance personal vulnerability against the benefits of disclosure and publication. A certain level of vulnerability is expected in personal acts of self-exposure but this intimate public generally gives way to a collective consciousness and instead tells a collaborative autobiographical story about pregnancy and motherhood. Morrison notes that, for the most part, mommy bloggers employ strategies to mitigate potential real-world fallout from anything posted in the blog environment by disguising their identities (using pseudonyms), their work life and their geographical location (2011, 40). Gibson, unsurprisingly, does not conform to these conventions of the traditional mommy blogger, instead she introduces herself as 'Belle, a young woman new to the city of Melbourne'. Further, Gibson takes the expected self-exposure of mommy blogs to a new level and divulges intimate details about her finances, finding somewhere to live and her deep disappointment in her friends. On the 20th of April 2010 [the post has since been deleted] Gibson writes that she is depressed at seeing all the beautiful pictures of other women's baby showers on the forum and it's particularly hard for her: 'I'm working part-time, going to the hospital at least once a week after work hours, then travelling an hour home to cook and clean and try and fit some rest in' (Gibson quoted in Donelly and Toscano 2018, 23). By revealing herself as vulnerable, overworked and in need of support Gibson is using the affordances of the intimate public of mommy blogging to gain a network of sympathetic followers.

After the birth of her son Gibson joined a parenting group on Facebook that was directed more at her local suburb Richmond in Melbourne. This time, Gibson put her efforts into transposing online relationships into real-life friendships, she would meet up for coffee with other members of the group, as well as attend playgroups and birthday parties. Eventually, Gibson would begin to workshop her business plan and approach the Facebook group to brainstorm ideas for her business name (Donelly and Toscano 2018, 25). By 2012, two years after her initial post on *What to Expect*, having practiced her story on parenting forums and gained a tribe of followers Gibson took to Instagram with her handle @healing_belle. From here the story went viral, and Gibson's audience shifted from other mothers (most of whom were older than her) to health-conscious and fashionable young women. During the shift from parenting forums and Facebook to Instagram, Gibson's

persona changed from vulnerable and struggling to successful, vibrant, and positive with the occasional hint that she was a terminal cancer patient. The affordances of the Instagram platform, for example, the ubiquitous filters or use of folksonomy like hashtags encouraged this shift in Gibson's persona for her to maintain popularity – unlike the responsible self-exposure of the mommy blogging environment, Instagram encourages mediated and filtered looks into people's everyday lives. In this, Gibson seems to find a balance between the conventions of the Instagram platform while still trading on her sentimental redemption narrative about living with cancer.

Instagram is a social media network used for personal sharing as well as product marketing and commerce. While corporate entities do often hold Instagram accounts, most of the most successful 'influencers' on the site are young women presenting experiences and commentary designed to be read as autobiographical and authentic. Alice E. Marwick, in her 2015 article which analyses selfies and the attention economy, argues that the Instagram platform 'tends toward the documentary' and this is a deliberate function of the platform. While users can view accounts and posts on a web browser, posts can only be uploaded from the mobile app on Android or iPhone (2015, 142). Instagram is a visual platform, but textual elements offer posters the chance to position and present their identity in relation to visual content. In her bio, a short text that frames the Instagram account page and underscores the user picture, Gibson writes 'Belle Gibson: Gamechanger with brain cancer + a food obsession' (Instagram 2012 cited in Donelly and Toscano 2018, 26). Gibson's bio provides a constant frame, a master narrative, through which the audience is encouraged to read the images below. Although the images are generally colourful, positive and ascribe to the subgenre of 'wellness', this instamemoir is read differently because the bio reminds the audience that this is the life of a terminal cancer sufferer.

With the emergence and continuing popularity of online self-representation – blogs, vlogs, social media – the terrain of the study of life narrative shifts with the frequency of every system update. In their 2010 book *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson use the term 'life narrative' to describe 'autobiographical acts of any sort', to distinguish this growing field of study from the more formal 'life writing' which encompasses legacy publishing (autobiography, biography, memoir etc.) (4). As Smith and Watson explain, life narrative refers to autobiographical work that can be 'written, performative, filmic or digital', and is a more accommodating term than 'life writing' because it can include nonwritten forms of self-representation as well as collaborative forms that represent other lives as well as

one's own (2010, 4; 39-40). Reading the @healing_belle Instagram handle as life narrative makes visible its mediation, both through the conventions of the Instagram platform and the social, cultural and political contexts in which it circulates. I specifically refer to @healing_belle as an instamemoir because it *rejects* the conventions of the Instagram platform by subverting the visual to the textual in order to link her posts together in logical/narrative sequence. Instagram is a photo-sharing app designed to express the unmediated everyday by users sharing 'moments' of their lives, and while the app allows for the inclusion of textual captions, they are not the focus of the feed. Gibson created her instamemoir through chronological episodes, largely through text, with either her own selfies or generic images (where Gibson is not the focus or even in the picture) accompanied by a wall of text. These walls of text link together in logical and narrative sequence, which suggests that Gibson created the plot first, and then later 'published' it to Instagram. As such, her instamemoir follows the structure of redemption, beginning with her diagnosis, failed medical treatment, epiphany and abandonment of medical treatment, personal sacrifice as she went through her healing journey, and her eventual success as a wellness warrior.

Scams like Gibson's emerge from the margins of a 'reality hungry' media culture, in which marginalised subjects have harnessed a range of media tools to reproduce, create, represent and market themselves in a variety of ways. Central to this production is digital media. From the late 1990s onwards, the advent of 'user-generated content' altered the way that we read, consume, produce and think about media. It has changed the range of representations on offer and produced new forms of autobiographical subjects which are central to digital entrepreneurship, like the Instagram 'influencer' or 'celebrity'. Initially, Gibson used the socially affective media landscape of blogs and Instagram to build her career and her 'identity' as a cancer sufferer, survivor, mother, and wellness warrior. This is not dissimilar to how Wilson builds her identity, which I discuss in the next chapter, Wilson also participates within an intimate media community of wellness-conscious followers prior to the publication of her print memoir. Wilson builds an entire media empire, including published cookbooks and eBooks, based on her own experiences of cutting out refined sugar and seeing health benefits and reduction of symptoms of her autoimmune disease. This both legitimises and authenticates Wilson's position as an authority-through-experience, which continues in her print memoir about managing anxiety. Additionally, using social media is framed a legitimate and 'proven' entrepreneurial career-building activity. This chapter asks what we

can learn from reading these texts on social media as life narrative, and central to this question is how new media landscapes shape and change representations of selfhood.

The seemingly mundane practice of 'everyday' autobiography that Gibson was undertaking by posting her daily actions is a crucial element to the traction gained by her instamemoir. By deploying everyday autobiography with reoccurring tropes such as the role of the mother, wellness, and illness, Gibson is constructing a convincing narrative identity to suit her autobiographical persona. To explain further, I draw on Paul John Eakin's analysis of narrative identity in his 2008 book *Living Autobiographically: How we create identity in narrative*. Eakin's foundational argument of narrative identity lends much to my analysis of Gibson's multi-modal autobiographical scam. Eakin argues that we live autobiographically creating a discourse of identity which is developed through the stories that we tell each and every day (2008, 4). To use Eakin's argument, Gibson's regular postings of the everyday read together form a cohesive discourse of narrative identity, albeit a false one, that her followers find relatable and therefore form a sentimental connection with. Further, Eakin contends (both in his 2008 book and in an earlier 2001 article 'Breaking the Rules: The Consequences of Self Narration') that the prerequisites that determine personhood are also the prerequisites that determine who can tell a life story and who cannot. Conclusively, Gibson's autobiographical persona had to 'be' a certain kind of person (recognisable and relatable) in order to be given the space to perform her instamemoir with a sympathetic audience.

As the instamemoir progressed, Gibson's persona embodied her new status as a 'wellness warrior' evidenced by the transition from 'everyday autobiography' on Instagram into the established 'wellness' theme. 'Wellness' in 2015 was already a recognised social media aesthetic signalled by commodities like white interiors, tea sets, beaches, yoga, nutritious foods and meditation (Maguire 2018, 178). While the 'wellness warrior' is a kind of influencer that specifically markets wellness products for profit, the biggest commodity being traded on social media is: the self. The main body of Gibson's instamemoir conforms to this 'wellness' aesthetic, there were recipes for organic foods and healthy juices, photos of perfect-looking food, lemon tea served in beautiful china, spreads of paw paw, raspberries and passionfruit and an outstretched hand holding a freshly cut coconut over aquamarine water in a tropical-looking location. This was followed by a pastel-coloured chart of pictures of foods that help hydrate. Occasionally there are pictures of her son Oli playing with trains, proudly displaying his artwork or drinking a 'hemp super smoothie' (Donelly and Toscano 2018, 26-28; Sullivan 2014; Michael and Dean 2015; Ryall 2015). Images are the main

vehicle that drives this transition from ‘everyday autobiography’ to ‘wellness warrior’ and slowly Gibson’s account page @healing_belle begins to mirror the Instagram accounts of other popular ‘wellness warriors’. Crucially, the textual elements which had used descriptions of her cancer to disrupt the positive story promoted by the imagery also underwent a transition.

Commodities feature strongly in Gibson’s posts, particularly luxury items like jewellery, expensive clothes, and nutritious ‘trendy’ foods, suggesting an aspirational luxurious lifestyle. Each of these aesthetics employs technological elements, such as filters, captions and hashtags which give texture and voice to the representation. Additionally, life narrative themes which are deployed on social media (such as wellness, illness or the redemption narrative) engage with commodities to convey the taste and status of the person being represented. These identities and themes are prevalent on Instagram, but this is not merely coincidental, for example, Morrison uses the Facebook status update to argue that the ‘affordances’ of social media coax certain autobiographical performances from users (Morrison 2014, 117). Significantly, Gibson is drawing on contemporary social media conventions for self-presentation of wellness and femininity, and crucially the positive reception of her Instagram highlights how femininity and wellness are being constructed in spaces like Instagram – a visual based, networked, social media. Further, in highlighting the constructive and performative nature of social media, this instamemoir complicates the idea that these images are an achievable or simple documentation of life. Rather, these are highly mediated versions of lives and selves that reflect social and cultural pieties about gender, race and class.

Gibson deploys multiple levels of deception within this instamemoir and the wider performance of her autobiographical persona in *The Whole Pantry*. Gibson’s instamemoir is the story of her ‘living’ with cancer, it represents an interplay between the polar opposites of living and dying that would seem impossible, or even satirical, if it wasn’t intended to be read as memoir. While the images on Gibson’s Instagram radiate health and happiness the captions often detailed Gibson’s many health complications and offered advice for treating medical conditions naturally. In a particular post on Instagram, Gibson presents herself at her most youthful, feminine and healthy with a caption that hints, almost playfully, at her terminal illness. The post is a photograph of Gibson in the car, it’s a close-up, she is wearing oversized sunglasses and a nose ring, her lips are pink and pursed and her skin is perfect ([Instagram image] sourced from Ryall 2015, *Image: onlybelle*). This photograph clearly

engages with discourses of femininity, a sense of youth and playfulness that evoke a typical young woman's Instagram selfie. The caption however reads: 'I feel like I'm dying … and I'd know' ([caption] sourced from Donelly and Toscano 2018, 27). Read under neoliberal frameworks of personal responsibility the reveal the redemption narrative in Gibson's instamemoir this post becomes an example of how cancer sufferers can, and should, 'live' when faced with terminal illness. In this way, the textual elements of Gibson's instamemoir disrupt and offer deeper context within frameworks of illness and neoliberalism to signal how the audience is supposed to read and respond to her autobiographical persona.

On 29th of July 2014 Gibson uploaded her most popular post to Instagram, which included a picture of a bouquet of bright pink balloons in the shape of a love heart. As usual, the caption contradicted the sunny disposition of the image, Gibson was announcing that her cancer had spread to multiple organs:

> With frustration and ache in my heart // my beautiful, gamechanging (sic) community, it hurts me to find space tonight to let you all know with love and strength that I've been diagnosed with a third and forth (sic) cancer. One is secondary and the other is primary. I have cancer in my blood, spleen, brain, uterus, and liver. I am hurting. As some of you remember, there was a scare I briefly spoke about here 4 months ago where we found gynaecological cancer that I stood up against with the strength that I wouldn't have had if it weren't for each of you. With these, it was only a matter of time before it all fell apart as my body goes through the waves of this process. I wanted to respectfully let you each know, and hand some of the energy over to the greater community, my team and TWP – through this I am still here reading, listening and learning with and to each of you, but need to respectfully and with great honour hand it over to TWP to carry on our legacies and collective message. (Instagram post, cited in Donelly and Toscano 2018, 94-95)

It is significant to note that at this point in 2014 *The Whole Pantry* cookbook was well into a pre-press marketing campaign led by Penguin with the book set to be published in October of 2014. This post both markets the forthcoming book by encouraging Gibson's heartbroken followers to buy it, but also shifts Gibson's self-representation from 'curing' cancer to 'improving the life' of a cancer sufferer. In the concluding section of this post Gibson encourages her followers, who may be feeling emotionally impacted by this announcement,

to turn to Gibson's Instagram account, the app and the (forthcoming) book. The head of Lantern at Penguin Julie Gibbs, after reading this post, announced that they were confident that sales would not be affected by this new diagnosis, 'we know a huge number of her followers are waiting for this book'. Additionally, the marketing campaign shifted from how Gibson had cured her cancer to how her healthy lifestyle had prolonged her life – much more than doctors had expected (Gibbs cited in Donelly and Toscano 2018, 96). The announcement of Gibson's new, and deliberately devastating, diagnosis acted as a crisis point for her autobiographical persona, death was now perceived as imminent. Gibson, and importantly her publishers at Penguin, successfully traded on this climactic moment and the emotional connections she had created with her followers to encourage sales of her forthcoming book.

Conclusion

Gibson's autobiographical performance of cancer survival tapped into an existing market for wellness, which was already a booming industry, but also for neoliberal life narrative that makes success appear achievable for everyone. As Gilmore reminds us, hoaxes and scams typically emerge through popular literary markets which have an existing readership. The scammer assumes the 'fashionable' identity to which the market is receptive and follows existing literary structures and tropes that the readership will resonate with (2017). As a young, attractive single mother Gibson was the perfect subject to orchestrate this scam as she appears vulnerable and in need of support whilst also embodying aspirational values such as beauty and wellness. This scam allowed for neoliberal definitions of the 'sick body' as something that should not be constrictive to productivity to be realised through the highly visual and mediated medium of Instagram. Crucially, Gibson was able to appear happy and fulfilled through her autobiographical persona whilst also claiming to be suffering from a terminal illness. The research of Stage shows that cancer sufferers have been challenging the traditional limitations of the 'sick body' for years, using autobiographical literary devices to separate their identity from their illness and regain control of the disrupted self. Specifically, Stage notes that younger cancer sufferers began using the affordances of social media in new and creative ways to fundraise for cancer research and to leave legacies for their friends and family through the medium of blogs and personal websites. This too, happened long before the world had ever heard of Belle Gibson.

Questions surrounding the cyclical movement of the 'redemption narrative' model of life writing through the author, the publishing industry and the readership are central to this

research. As the redemption narrative moves, certain preferences regarding social inequalities, particularly the marketing of neoliberalism as a set of conditions by which we are expected to live our lives, are exposed. Examining the Gibson scam from the perspective of its performance on social media allows for discourses of 'personal responsibility' and 'wellness' to be problematised within their social context. This chapter has explored the ways in which the neoliberal brand of the redemption story survived through the public judgement of Gibson after her scam was uncovered by Australian media. The backlash from the public focused on Gibson as an individual, using sentimental tropes to infantilise her and obscure her role as a callous and calculating villain. Crucially, by focusing solely on the issue of Gibson's agency in the construction and orchestration of the scam attention is diverted away from the larger political issues uncovered by the scam. Such as the unregulated market for alternative therapies, and the rampant commodification of wellness and practices of reading that privilege certain 'exceptional' subjects. These insights are valuable as the redemption narrative continues to engage with discourses of wellness and personal responsibility through the guise of anxiety and mental health under neoliberalism. The next chapter will continue to critique the wellness industry and examine the circulation and reception of the redeemed redemption story through Wilson's memoir *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*. As I argue, a neoliberal system of value circulates between Gibson's instamemoir and Wilson's 'new memoir about anxiety' in which solutions to large scale political problems (unequal access to health and wellness services) become the responsibility of the individual.

Chapter 3 – Surviving Neoliberalism: Instructional Life Narrative and Anti Self-Help in First, We Make the Beast Beautiful

Memoir and (Anti) Self-Help

Sarah Wilson is the author and founder of the wildly popular *I Quit Sugar* series of cookbooks. Wilson began her career as a journalist with media giant NewsCorp at just 24, and in her successful career Wilson has been a restaurant critic, editor of tabloid women's lifestyle magazine *Cosmopolitan* and co-host of reality cooking television show *MasterChef*. During an assignment with *Cosmopolitan*, Wilson authored a weekly column where she detailed testing out some of the latest and most popular wellness trends. During a particularly slow week, Wilson came up with the idea of completely cutting sugar out of her diet and recording her results for the column. The results were immediate, and Wilson was feeling so good by the end of the week that she decided to continue her new diet. Thus began the *I Quit Sugar* blog where she writes about feeling well, tests substitutes for refined sugar, shares recipes and reveals the psychological challenges of quitting sugar. Significantly, although the blog primarily aims at sugar-free cooking, it also adopts the popular structures of self-help, diary and memoir through a narrative of addiction and recovery. As Wilson writes, refined sugar is incredibly addictive, and thus the project of 'quitting' sugar exceeds the practical challenge of substituting ingredients in cooking and also becomes a challenge of self-discipline akin to beating drug or alcohol addiction. Significantly, Wilson encourages her followers to write a journal to track their progress, which positions the act of self-writing as the mode, but also the mechanism, for their 'recovery' from sugar addiction (Wilson 2017, 51). Significantly, journaling is a way of getting in touch with the feelings of 'failure', which she believes are 'useful' because they remind followers why they wanted to quit sugar in the first place (Wilson 2017, 51). In this way, her followers are encouraged to also read her upcoming memoir about her never before mentioned experiences with anxiety as a healing project.

Kylie Cardell, in *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary*, argues that constructions of the diary as a technology of the self reveal a certain discursive ideal about the individual and the authentic self: that it can be 'made' or 'made visible' through writing (2014, 30). Cardell's argument parallels neatly with Wilson's idea of journaling as a mode for recovery, but also as a mechanism for recontextualising failure as 'useful' to recovery. Significantly, diary, and blogging as an online mode of diary, can be understood as a more

'private' and therefore more 'authentic' space for understanding thoughts, feelings and reflections on the self under the guise of therapy (Cardell 2014, 34-35). It's interesting, then, to note that some formal aspects of Wilson's blog are carried forward into her memoir. As Cardell notes, the rhetoric of the diary as private is more significant than its adherence to a specific form or structure, thus diary often appears as casual or rough. Subsequently, what Cardell calls the 'how-to' journal, are seen and sold as aesthetic objects (2014, 35; 30). Similarly, Wilson's memoir is only available as a hardback, and on its cover is a beautiful mural of an octopus against shimmery silver type. The book itself is aesthetic, suggesting it is intended as a gift or a keepsake. Additionally, the style of the memoir-text is episodic, with numbered sections, notes in the margins, lists, and while it conforms to a chronological storyline of Wilson's life she often writes tangents that digress from the story. Although published as memoir, Wilson seems to be playing with form in a way that links back to her previous blog which conveys continuity, authenticity, authority and foregrounds the redemption narrative of self-help in her memoir. Megan Brown, in *American Autobiography After 9/11*, studies how memoir published after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America negotiate with and attempt to reconcile a widespread sense of anxiety in readers. Brown suggests that the growing popularity of self-help memoirs, as opposed to more 'obvious' self-help books, may be because they are less likely to broadcast readers' vulnerabilities (2017, 34). Similarly, Brown links the emergence and popularity of self-help memoirs to the neoliberal logics of personal responsibility and self-management. She argues that self-help memoirs function as biopolitical technologies by presenting ways to 'live' with anxiety and reconcile its symptoms through self-regulation and self-improvement (2017, 35). In this chapter, I analyse Wilson's memoir as a redemptive story of healing and self-actualisation that functions through discourses of self-help as a survival guide for neoliberal times.

The global popularity of memoir and the self-help industry have emerged through largely similar trajectories. An emphasis on recovery, redemption and success through effective self-management and self-actualisation as healing in these contexts reflect the prevalence of neoliberalism in the Western World. Importantly, 'popularity' for my purposes refers to the mass popularity of memoir at the turn of the 21st century, and crucially the turn to a more 'neoliberal' popular memoir. For Gilmore, this emergence of neoliberal life narrative works to dissolve the complex nonnormative voices that emerged from the 'boom' into individualist tales of generic selves overcoming personal trauma instead of responses to histories of violence. To follow Gilmore, what I call popular memoir follows this dissolution

of nonnormative (i.e. non-white, non-wealthy, non-famous) voices by repetition of neoliberal stories that propel well-known voices, like Wilson, as evidence of a social imaginary where regular people defeat trauma and become celebrities. Similarly, 'popularity' in terms of the self-help industry refers to its emergence in the mass market as neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility and 'personal wellness' were taken up to recover from the global financial crisis of 2008 (Bloom 2017, 107). In this way, I follow the work of Daniel Worden in his book *Neoliberal Nonfictions: The Documentary Aesthetic from Joan Didion to Jay-Z* (2020) where he argues 'the "memoir boom" and the aesthetic uses of the memoir genre ... reflect the ontological force of neoliberal reforms' (127). By discussing the commodification of memoir and self-help together, I argue how the intertwinement of memoir and self-help demonstrates the contemporary intrusion of neoliberalism into our everyday lives. Additionally this intertwinement also demonstrates redemption cycles of neoliberalism through popular memoir as a moral and ethical system.

The popularity of memoir, and its relationship to self-help discourse, can scarcely be discussed without reference to the global cultural phenomenon of American talk show host Oprah Winfrey and her Book Club. As Gilmore argues, Oprah participates in her own redemption story of sexual violence, poverty and upward mobility, which provides an example of how we should read these 'new' popular memoirs. Some more famous/scandalous selections of Oprah's Book Club appear in the height of memoir's popularity from 1996-2012 such as James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild.* Oprah's Book Club, which preferences similar stories of suffering and redemption, works with her talk show, to teach her predominantly female audiences to consume these stories as a means of belonging (Gilmore 2010, 663). This is key to memoir's intertwinement with self-help, as Worden notes: intimacy and belonging are things that lack in neoliberal culture as personal relationships are structural and impersonal instead of personal and ethical (2020, 137). What memoir offers, that is coached and commodified by Oprah, is the opportunity for self-realisation through intimate contact with another. As Gilmore argues, via Eva Illouz, the force of the 'tentacular structure' of Oprah's media empire 'draws together the market of book publishing with the activity of reading in intimate publics and forms a jurisdiction of taste that shapes life writing' as it shifts from politicised testimony to generic neoliberal self-help (Illouz 2003, 5; Gilmore 2019, 101).

The normalising effect of self-help narratives with happy endings like those of Frey, Gilbert, and Strayed but also Belle Gibson's *The Whole Pantry* scam or the subject of this chapter Wilson's *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* direct sympathy away from nonnormative life narrative to life writing that allows readers to experience compassion for similar others (Gilmore 2019, 102). Specifically, 'nonnormative' here comes to mean authors that aren't economically, socially or culturally privileged and don't fit the 'normative' neoliberal story. As Gilmore argues, the predominance of redemption narratives (like self-help memoir) works to discredit other life narratives, often written by women or those that do not resemble book-buying audiences. Subsequently, as redemption narratives come to dominate the popular market, neoliberal codes of 'normalcy' narrow and norm permissible accounts of suffering (2017, 101-102). Put simply, Wilson is a privileged subject, she is a white middle-class celebrity woman who has the time, money, inclination, authority and backing of a publisher to produce a memoir detailing her personal experiences of suffering anxiety. A memoir that transforms anxiety into its own solution. As I have argued in Chapter Two, embedded in the wellness industry is a practice of reading that privileges certain kinds of subjects: successful subjects that project an image of wellness, the kind of subjects that readers want to emulate. The audiences for these life narratives could be argued to constitute intimate publics, as Lauren Berlant, who coined the term, explains: 'an intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's core interests and desires' (2008, 5). Significantly, participants of these intimate publics feel like they are ethical places where they have rich continuity with vaguely defined others, which is the affective magnet of intimate publics. Conversely, as Berlant argues of the intimate public of femininity: 'a kind of soft supremacy rooted in compassion and coercive identification wants to dissolve all that structure through the work of good intentionality, while busily exoticizing and diminishing the inconvenient and the noncompliant' (2008, 6). As I argue further in the sections that follow, Wilson's book, much like Berlant's description of the sphere of femininity, builds intimacy with its audience through the shared experience of anxiety, while covertly diminishing those that do not fit the normative successful neoliberal story.

Peter Bloom in his book, *The Ethics of Neoliberalism*, introduces a critical ethical dimension to the legitimisation and reproduction of neoliberalism, notably through its discursive framing as a problem that needs to be fixed. Bloom argues that neoliberal ideology individualises ethics, by making individuals personally responsible for ethically reforming

the system (2017, 51). As markets fell and capitalism failed in the global financial crisis of 2008, and trust in economies that were deemed 'too big to fail' faltered, newly emergent neoliberalism focused its energies on individual, psychological, spiritual and physical wellness. Though, instead of understanding the global financial crisis as a failure, a new narrative emerged of a potentially more moral calling that sought to fix the problems of capitalism:

> This moral calling also extended similarly to an individual personal morality. Neoliberalism was accused of threatening the very comprehensive well-being of modern subjects through a combination of overwork and anxiety that could be traced back to a corporate reality obsessed with profit and productivity. Countering this systemic problematisation was a pronounced discursive emphasis on individual 'wellness'. Being physically and mentally healthy has become a mantra bordering on the pathological. (Bloom 2017, 107)

Cederstrom and Spicer refer to this condition as the 'wellness syndrome': Today wellness is not just something we choose. It is a moral obligation that we must consider it at every turn of our lives (2015). Significantly, instead of seeing the desire for wellness, work-life balance, and personal fulfillment as challenges, neoliberalism merely sees them as opportunities to be mined for profit.

The self-help industry, which had been building prior to the fall of markets in 2008, found its moment during this global imperative to focus on the physical, psychological and spiritual wellness of people during the long period of market recovery. Fundamentally, the self-help industry is based on two concepts, consumerism and positive psychology (Brinkmann 2020, 243). The consumerist model directs people towards products, services and professionals (yoga retreats, crystals, books, seminars etc.) for an answer to their problems in an attempt to prop up the economy while the markets recovered from the crash (Bloom 2017, 13-15). Wilson notes in her book: 'The standard solution is to consume – food, possessions, partners, gurus. If our self-worth is suffering, we're told to buy a new moisturiser' (2017, 245). Positive psychology on the other hand bolsters the 'just be happy' approach that pushes the neoliberal discourse personal responsibility onto unhappy and dissatisfied people (Brinkmann 2020, 243). Thus, this works in tandem with the consumerist model by repeating the mantra that happiness is a personal choice, and as a result is largely

unable to provide an exit from consumerism and egocentricity that its gurus sense many people are seeking (Davies 2015, 6). Embedded here, as I argue previously in Chapter Two, is a neoliberal distortion of 'choice' as exhaustive option. For example one can 'choose' to be happy, but they must consume that happiness from the mediated, available and 'normal' forms. Ultimately, the fatal flaw in the self-help industry is that it appears as a moral system, caring about the wellbeing of people, but is a capitalist recovery strategy designed to trap vulnerable people into patterns of continuous consumption.

As the popularity of self-help grew, the market for self-help products and gurus expanded exponentially which created fertile ground for alternative therapies, frauds and scams that were merely designed for profit through exploitation. For example, in Chapter Two, I argue that the marketability of Belle Gibson's cancer scam is rooted in how she represents 'suffering' a terminal illness as 'living': looking physically well, running a successful business and being an active single-parent. Significantly, Gibson's scam reveals some of the neoliberal codes of personal responsibility that underwrite the wellness and self-help industries, particularly that consumers can, and should, live their 'best' life regardless of other social, cultural or economic obstacles. The popularity of wellness and self-help is grounded in its potential for individual self-empowerment through 'taking control' of one's own health and happiness. However, much like redemption narratives in the memoir market, as self-help gained popularity and power it also became the target of potent judgement. Simultaneously, hoaxes and scams had some consumers questioning self-help's promises of happiness through consumption. Globally distributed publications such as *The New York Times, The Huffington Post* and *GQ Magazine* began publishing articles on the self-help 'problem' which focused mostly on its perpetual cycle of consumption and self-improvement as well as self-deprecating mantras that there is always something wrong with you that needs fixing (Schwartz 2018; Taylor 2011; Skipper 2018). Crucially, this 'problem' is also reflected in memoir that engages with self-help as life is framed in this context as a project: at the beginning there is something wrong with the life and the 'fix' becomes accessible through acts of confession (of wrongs) and a journey self-sacrifice. Evidenced here is a form of public backlash against the self-help industry that was perpetuated by social commentary but, crucially, only focused on the failings of the industry and not the neoliberal distortions within it. As Bloom notes, 'all unhappiness and dissatisfaction was reduced to a lack of positive attitude' (2017, 99). Happiness could easily be found if only people worked hard enough to personally achieve it. Deeper questions as to the ethics of such a system were marginalised as

either unimportant distractions or evidence of psychologically detrimental mentality (Bloom 2017, 99). As a result, self-help was thrown out as an exploitative failure, and much like the redemption cycles of neoliberal life narrative identified by Gilmore, the neoliberal distortion of personal responsibility was redeemed anew through the newly emergent anti self-help movement.

The anti-self-help movement operates on the potent rejection of attributes familiar to self-help, such as consumerism and positive psychology, but fails to shift responsibility for happiness and wellness away from the individual. Pioneers of the anti-self-help movement are Danish Psychology Professor Svend Brinkmann and author Mark Manson. Manson published his #1 Bestseller *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* in 2016 which kickstarted the movement by breaking sales records for non-fiction, even though the book was still widely categorised as self-help literature. To accompany his new book, which presented a no-frills, straight talking brand that openly rejected positive psychology and consumerism, Manson published '5 Problems with the Self-Help Industry' on his website which describes self-help as 'a billion dollar industry with a set of glaring problems all its own' (Manson 2016, '5 Problems with the Self-Help Industry'). Soon after, in 2017, Brinkmann published his book *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze* which focused on ancient stoicism as the remedy to positive psychology. Brinkmann remains active in both the public sphere and the academic sphere sharing his research on constituting balance between subjective notions of happiness and ethical notions of happiness (2020, 142). Crucially, for Brinkmann, happiness and fulfillment are much more than an emotional affair of just feeling good, it is also about living in a 'right manner' (2020, 142).

Following the success of Manson's wildly popular introduction to the concept of anti-self-help, an Australian voice also emerged in 2017 with the same brand of anti-self-help in order to tackle the issue of widespread and growing anxiety rates. In the memoir Wilson is presented as a successful, middle-class anxiety sufferer, which contributes a sense of authenticity to her experience that she relays as advice to her readers. Prior to the publication of her memoir Wilson is already a *New York Times* bestseller for her *I Quit Sugar* series of cookbooks which offer recipes and advice on avoiding refined sugar. While Wilson, with her multiple television appearances and successful business ventures, is the typical writer of a self-help book, her success appears at odds with her claims of crippling anxiety and poor mental health. However, as her 'new story about anxiety' reveals, Wilson has struggled with anxiety-related illness since childhood (Wilson 2017, front cover). During her career she

spends countless amounts of time and money on medications and treatments, travels the world, scours the internet, speaks to experts, and even spends months at a time unable to leave her house because of the severity of her symptoms. *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* is 'nomadic … it meanders through disciplines and between polemic, didactic and memoir' as it follows Wilson's journey to knowledge, enlightenment, acceptance and redemption (Wilson 2017, 'five things to know about this book'). Wilson begins her memoir as an anxious kid in a country town four-hours from Sydney, then in her twenties she drops out of University and becomes stranded and broke in Los Angeles. From here Wilson redeems herself twofold, by her professional success and by her eventual enlightenment that anxiety was never the problem, it is the solution.

Wilson cites rising anxiety rates in Australia and she presents various statistics, but it is her personal experience that legitimates her solution to the issue. She writes, 'We're all getting more anxious, not less. You're not imagining it' (Wilson 2017, 117). Wilson writes that in Australia, according to the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) anxiety related problems have increased from 3.8 per cent of the total population in 2011-2012 to 11.2 per cent in 2014-2015 (Wilson 2017, 117; ABS 2015). Though it must be noted that these are the rising rates of diagnosis, as Anthony Jorm points out reported rates of anxiety-related symptoms in the NHS (National Health Survey) have stayed relatively stagnant (Jorm 2019, 3-4). However, Wilson notes that when traced even further back comprehensive research at the San Diego State University found that anxiety has increased steadily over the past eighty years but revealed no insight into causation. Wilson responds to these figures:

> Here's my (possibly) contentious idea: It's because we're going in the wrong direction. We're grasping outwards for satisfaction, sense of purpose and for a solution to our unease. When we really need to be going inwards. (Wilson 2017, 117)

Essentially, Wilson is pointing her readers away from the outside world as the source of their anxiety and instead points them back towards the individual. But she goes further than this: 'We also need to recognise – and many doctors don't – our anxious behaviours are so often the *solution* to our problem, not our problem (2017, 29 emphasis in original). For example, Wilson cites anxiety-induced bulimia as one of her solutions to the problem that she formulated in childhood, she would aid the 'flutteriness' in her stomach by binging and purging vita brits, thereby also purging her anxiety (Wilson 2017, 29). Here, Wilson performs

an act of confession located in childhood that is so typical of memoirs of self-help, she writes that she 'never ever spoke about it', until the memoir, for fear that someone (a parent or doctor) would take her solution away (Wilson 2017, 29). Wilson's attempts to formulate a solution to her anxiety in childhood frame the life that is presented in the memoir as a project; something that needs fixing. Additionally, as Wilson's secret childhood solution is presented as in danger of being taken away by authority figures, we are encouraged to read her later abandonment of medical treatment (that often failed to work or had awful side-effects) in her late-twenties as a re-awakening of her self-empowerment towards finding her own cure. Crucially, the memoir positions her taking back control of her life from doctors as the springboard that leads to opportunities for the enlightenment, self-acceptance and redemption that becomes Wilson's cure.

Redemption, Instructional Life Narrative and Starting Conversations

This thesis argues that redemption narratives are the typical structure for Australian popular memoir, and this follows Gilmore's concept of the 'redemption narrative' in her analysis of the American neoconfessional brand of memoir and neoliberal life narrative in America. Gilmore defines the 'redemption narrative' as the introduction of trauma and suffering followed by a process of overcoming (an obstacle, an illness, abuse, addiction etc.), 'this redemption narrative forms both the storyline of the memoir but also structures how the scandals that come after them will be read' (Gilmore 2010, 658). The key for Gilmore, particularly in her conceptualisation of her American neoconfessional brand of memoir, is that the potent judgemental energies that emerged against memoir during the 'boom' have been absorbed into the brand itself, resulting in confessional memoir that actively displaces histories of racial or gendered violence into individualist tales of personal redemption which invite scandal (Gilmore 2010, 658). This, for Gilmore, is American memoir in neoliberal times where she argues that 'elements of confessional mediated in the emergent American neoconfessional include the notion that the truth can and will be produced by a person made less believable by her suffering than by her anomalous redemption' (Gilmore 2010, 659). I use Gilmore's idea of the American neoconfessional to argue that the redemption narrative as a neoliberal narrative construction normalises suffering as 'just a part of life' by rendering it illegible without its eventual redemption. Further, the narrowed points of entry to the mass market of Australian popular memoir attach the possibility of redemption, and legible

suffering, to increasingly generic normative voices which complicates and obscures suffering by nonnormative voices.

The role of redemption in Australian popular memoir has become increasingly complicated by the effect of various neoliberal myths of personal responsibility, empowerment and happiness/success. Brown analyses this phenomenon in her book *American Autobiography After 9/11* (2017) in order to argue that popular memoir under neoliberalism has become a biopolitical self-care guide to counter the widespread cultural and social anxieties of a healing/wounded America. As such, Brown cites Gilmore's confession-as-redemption concept and takes it into the realm of Foucauldian biopolitics by arguing that memoir, as well as being governed by norms, also polices such norms by governing from a distance; for Brown, memoirs function as biopolitical technologies. As I argue, Wilson's memoir exemplifies this kind of biopolitical and neoliberal life narrative because Wilson as an individual is tasked with solving anxiety as a complex mental illness. As soon as Wilson finds her independence in her twenties, she abandons medical treatment in favour of finding her own way through her many complex medical and psychological problems. By rejecting traditional medical treatments Wilson reaffirms that her biggest obstacle is not her anxiety, instead she must overcome the failings in her 'self'. Further, anxiety, as the central concept, is reduced to an individual problem which works to obscure the social, cultural, economic and neoliberal dimensions of the issue.

Wilson's book is structured and composed in such a way that it's not just memoir, it's a mix of psychological theory, instructional self-help and memoir which, crucially, is chronologized by the redemption narrative of her life story of anxiety. As Brown argues, personal experience transforms into expertise through juxtaposing academic and professional expertise with personal reflections and anecdotes (2017, 41). In this way, Wilson's memoir about anxiety is not presented as largely sensational or cathartic, and although it involves scattered sections that are intended to be informative and *instructional*, I argue that the sections of life narrative in the memoir-text have *also* taken on an instructional element. Significantly, other examples of popular memoir examined in this thesis subvert this instructional element by presenting the personal experience of their authors as 'just' their experience. To explain further, Worden argues that personal experience is the mediator of truth in neoliberal times, and when combined with Brown's concept of memoir as a biopolitical technology, memoir is revealed as technology that (re)produces, polices and governs norms of self-presentation (2020, 19; 2017, 38). Wilson's memoir specifically

targets the self-help market, but as I have demonstrated in other chapters, popular memoir itself in Australia under neoliberalism has taken on elements of instruction, governmentality and normativism as mechanisms for self-management of proper, ideal subjects. Theories about self-management, and subsequently self-help, are also helpful starting points for thinking about memoir because often life writing positions the author's self as an ongoing project of transformation and self-improvement.

Wilson's memoir is written in a style that foregrounds shared intimacy as she explores what she calls the 'masks that people wear', the pressure of performance and improvement in everyday life (2017, 53). Her tone is pensive, reflective, and occasionally overtly hopeful. She often addresses the reader directly, as she repeats phrases to encourage the reader to agree with her: 'don't we?', 'don't you reckon?', 'Yes?', 'Right?' Also significant, is the shift in the signifier from 'I' to 'we' during her descriptions of everyday anxiety:

> I concede, most of us do fear all of this … Then, if we flee this sitting with ourselves, we encounter anxiety of, well, knowing that we're fleeing ourselves and truth. It's a quandary: an anxious riddle, as Freud referred to it. I guess we have to ask ourselves, which anxiety is the worse? Or perhaps the question is, if anxiety is unavoidable, which anxiety will produce the better life, the bigger life, the more meaningful life? The better journey? (Wilson 2017, 101)

The reader is invited to recognise themselves in the writing, to feel legitimated, justified and like someone understands them. Wilson presents herself as a reliable and trustworthy narrator while readers engage in a wilful delusion of authentic autobiographical connection with the 'real' Wilson behind the memoir, instead of the 'celebrity' Wilson presented in the memoir. Significantly, Smith and Watson explain that the assumption that a 'real' self can be revealed at all, though particularly through the act of writing the self, is rooted in problematic Enlightenment models of the unique, coherent individual (2001, 6-7). Similarly, the neoliberal concept of the 'authentic self': presented in self-help as a reward for personal sacrifice, discipline and a process of self-discovery, is also based on this illusory assumption. As Berlant argues illusions of intimacy expose a sphere of 'soft supremacy rooted in compassion and coercive identification' (2008, 18). Berlant goes on to call these spheres, intimate publics, where different people brought together by common experiences are encouraged to feel together. Although as Berlant explains, intimate publics, like memoirs, are

juxtapolitical in that they exist proximate to politics but represent a space that seems more available to participation because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are uncaring about regular people (2008, 3).

Wilson writes in her memoir that this is just her experience and sometimes just knowing that other people suffer like she does helped her through her anxious moments. On the page titled 'five things to know about this book' that precedes the beginning of the core text, Wilson writes: 'I am not a medical professional. This is my personal and creative response to my condition and the research around it' (2017, 'five things to know about this book'). By insisting that this is not a just self-help book, or not *that kind* of book (i.e. one that assumes to have an answer), Wilson is saying that this is not a judgemental space, that she is not an expert on anxiety, and that she doesn't 'have all the answers' (Wilson 2017, 11). Highlighting Wilson's lack of formal training further centralises her personal experience as more valuable than the facts and statistics that she presents alongside it. Subsequently, Wilson and her publishers are invested Wilson's status as a non-expert, as this disrupts the cycles of judgement that attach to traditional, overly commodified, self-help and instead suggests that it is anti-self-help. Although the book is marketed as helpful advice, Wilson appears to believe that this is *just* her experience, while simultaneously selling that experience as valuable. The excerpts of memoir that guide Wilson's anti self-help memoir-text function in a number of important ways. Firstly, the confessional element of airing her often graphic and embarrassing symptoms of anxiety works to authenticate and legitimise Wilson as a trustworthy narrator by ensuring that readers do not feel judged for their own shortcomings. Secondly, the juxtaposition and oscillation between her personal triumphs and her blunders and failures works to preserve some of the hope that neoliberal ideologies mock, but also rejects the linear progression of recovery touted by other self-help texts. Thirdly, the overall redemption arc of Wilson's journey to enlightenment through anxiety, supplemented by the neoliberal success story of her business venture, works to recontextualise anxiety as the solution instead of the problem, thereby reducing it to an individual obstacle. By returning to multiple points in her life in a loosely chronological order starting with childhood, working through her twenties and into her current life moment in a down-to-earth, conversational and confessional manner Wilson is levelling the playing field with her audience by demonstrating how she *used to be* just like them.

As noted in the previous section, anti-self-help texts typically present a narrator that is ordinary, and work against the expectation of the damaged self-help brand that only experts

are able to give advice on living well. Popular memoir too, has staked out the authority of personal experience over expertise through Oprah's talk show omitting experts from conversations about life narratives that explore trauma and redemption. In so doing, Oprah comes to stand in for these expert mediators based on her own personal experiences, and this parallels how Wilson is presented as the expert in her memoir. However, while Oprah is confident in her personal expertise on her talk show, Wilson is presented in the memoir as uncomfortable with the status of expert. For example, very early in the book Wilson offers an admission that she doesn't 'have an answer to … any of it' but is a 'committed striver', she's 'strapped in' and 'doing the work' (2017, 11). Similarly, Wilson repeats that this is 'not that kind of book', but this claim is most adamant when she introduces her passage on meditation:

> I'm not a meditation teacher and I don't want to share how to meditate here. Again, not that kind of book. I'm just offering a bit of insight into my experience. I figure it might help you feel more comfortable about it, and with being not particularly good. I still find it helpful to hear about other people's tussles with meditation. (Wilson 2017, 69)

Here, Wilson's experience retains its value as helpful, and its status as less-than-perfect experience (being 'not particularly good' at meditation), again, focuses on the personal aspect of her experience as what is valuable and helpful. As Worden argues, memoir embodies a 'formal design that privileges personal voice as the sole arbiter of experience, a design that conforms to the hyperindividualism of neoliberal culture, while trying to renew ethical bonds between reader, writer and character' (2020, 132). There is a tension here as Wilson's book acts as a site for vulnerable, intimate and ethical connection between writer and reader, while marketing a privileged story of redemption as desirable and necessary under neoliberal myths of personal responsibility.

Anxiety is often considered to be a private matter, as particular symptoms or episodes of mania present sufferers in their most vulnerable moments. As Wilson confesses some of her darkest moments her book becomes a site of intimate identification between writer and reader. For example, Wilson reflects upon her time in graduate study in California where the subject of her final paper, developing an alternate theory of time, became such a big question that she spiralled into a kind of mania. Wilson expresses that during this time she would test the existence of God by throwing herself down flights of stairs and 'accidentally-on-purpose'

setting her apartment on fire (Wilson 2017, 106-113). Similarly, Wilson describes in great detail crouching in front of the mirror in her apartment in Sydney's Northern Beaches:

> I was fat, sick, broke, unemployed, humiliated, isolated, alone, defeated and entirely stripped bare.
>
> Anyway, on this late winter morning I'm kneeling in front of the mirrored wardrobe in my bedroom silently howling.
>
> I'm clinging to the floor like I'm going to fall through it and I've been scraping at my stomach. It's red and bleeding from the nail tearing. I've been here for three days. (Wilson 2017, 281-282)

As Gilmore argues, the elements of confession mediated in the American neoconfessional, and later in neoliberal life narrative, read suffering as ubiquitous and contain the notion that truth will be produced by a person made less believable by that suffering than their anomalous redemption (2010, 659). In this way, Wilson's confessions of suffering may offer an opportunity for affective connection with her readers, but Wilson, in the memoir, is made authentic by her ability to recover and redeem herself from that suffering. Subsequently, in the memoir, this episode is followed by a kind of epiphany of acceptance for Wilson that 'none of it matters', which ends with her triumphantly eating peanut butter with a spoon, naked, in her kitchen (Wilson 282-283). As such, the redemption narrative of survival and recovery continues, and this juxtaposition of suffering and triumph works to preserve a sense of hope for the anxious reader.

The villain of *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* is not anxiety, the villain is what Wilson refers to as 'Modern Life' which is mostly always capitalised and therefore a main character in Wilson's book. Modern Life, as such, is not just a term to determine temporality but instead stands in as a characterisation of all the pressures, inconsistencies and mysteries of life that trigger an anxious response. In this analysis, I read Modern Life as a representation of life under neoliberalism as Wilson's descriptions of her Modern Life echo such issues as always having to be 'on', the lack of personal time, pressure to conform to expectations and absence of human connection, which are decidedly neoliberal (Worden 2020, 137).

> Let's take a look at how Modern Life goes. Mostly, it's frenetic and at a pace that's not conducive to reflective thought.
>
> Working on the fly from laptops.
> Weaving in and out of traffic.
> Eating on the run.
> Walking around with takeaway coffees.
> Keeping up with technology updates (the Anxiety of Being Three Updates out of Date!)
> Being expected to turn around school projects overnight (what's your problem? You have Google!).
> Ferrying toddlers to violin lessons.
> Taking the whole family to Paris and London (for no reason other than everyone else seems to be doing it).
> Online grocery shopping on your lunch break. (Wilson 2017, 243)

Ultimately, Wilson does not suggest that Modern Life is the direct cause of anxiety, instead she suggests that it exacerbates symptoms that already exist. For example, Agger notes that even in our down time we are constantly consuming, and that we are bombarded through the internet and television with images of the good life that we are expected reproduce. 'Yet the intensification of time robbery and time administration robs people of the time and space in which to recreate themselves, reproducing their selfhood and identity in ways that allow them to function during public time' (Agger 2007, 222). Modern Life, for Agger and for Wilson, uses expectations of the good life as a norm, coupled with restricted time, to demand certain reproductions of identity and selfhood that conform to neoliberal expectations of productivity, responsibility and perceived happiness.

Though, despite growing demands for the 'good' life and happiness, such contentment remains elusive for many in the grips of Modern Life (Bloom 2017, 100). For Wilson, especially when the pressures of Modern Life become overwhelming, her solution is to remove herself in what she describes as her 'Mid Thirties Meltdown' (Wilson 2017, 49). In very Elizabeth Gilbert fashion, Wilson's anxiety flares up and she makes the snap decision to up and move 'to an army shed on seven acres of forest in the Byron Bay hinterland. Because that's what you'd do, right, when the proverbial hits the fan?' (Wilson 2017, 49). She packs

the scarce belongings that she needs into the back of her car, sells the rest at an 'everything must go' style garage sale, and within a week she's gone. During this time, she pays the bills by continuing to write her column on living a better life, and by chance she can't think of a topic, so she cuts out sugar from her diet and writes about it. After two weeks, she feels good, so she starts writing tips and recipes on a blog, 'which turned into an eBook (I taught myself how to make such a thing squirrled away in my shed), which turns into a bunch of print books, which turns into an online cooking program, which has seen two million people ditch the white stuff' (Wilson 2017, 50-51). By dropping out of society Wilson has the rare opportunity to focus her productivity on something that she is passionate about. Ultimately, as Wilson reminds us, her *I Quit Sugar* empire affords her the kind of lifestyle where she can travel for five months of the year (Wilson 2017, 53). Although Wilson calls this a meltdown, it functions as an image of that elusive 'good life' where the greatest successes come through overcoming suffering – in Wilson's case, an anxious episode.

Some of the solutions to anxiety described in Wilson's memoir reflect levels of freedom that Wilson is presented to have, because of her wealth, her status as a single childless woman, and her occupation that her readers may not share. Significantly, Wilson seems acutely aware of this issue and uses bracketed subtext to consider her own privilege and point out the absurdity of her own solution:

> (I've previously wondered if it's a privilege to even be able to question your anxiety as I do here – whether anxiety is a bourgeois affliction. I don't any more. I think the issue has gone rogue – more on this to come – and while not everyone can book themselves into a meditation retreat in Sri Lanka for two weeks at a time, or flee to a shed in the Byron Bay hinterland, most of us really do benefit from knowing we're not alone and from trying out each other's simple techniques for accessing some stillness and peace. But I digress...). (Wilson 2017, 53)

Popular memoir is typically authored by well-known people and celebrities that arguably have more privileges of wealth and freedom than the thousands of middle and lower-class readers who consume their memoirs. Though, as Gilmore argues, embedded in neoliberal life narratives, like popular memoir, are relations of judgement that limit possible redemption stories to specific storylines, thereby powerfully norming the voices that crowd the public sphere. As these kinds of stories and voices continue to sell well in the market, publishers and

writers alike are incentivised to repeat these optimistic stories of overcoming trauma (2010, 660). Wilson's memoir enters the market under these conditions, she is a celebrity in her own right already, but she also has a career of writing experience in newspapers, magazines and as the editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Unlike Jimmy Barnes, for example, whose memoir I examine in Chapter Five as an integral part of his public identity transformation from the 'bad boy' of Australian rock n roll to a survivor and advocate against domestic violence and toxic masculinity. As I argue in Barnes' case, reading his memoir in the context of his career as a rock n roll musician, revealed his childhood abuse as a story of redemption and survival. Conversely to Barnes' memoir exceeding expectations, Wilson's readers expect her to not only produce 'good' writing but also to engage with deeper levels of thinking about the conditions of life and her own privilege, as she is presented to do here. Her legibility of her own privilege, even if it appears subtextually, suggests that Wilson is using a neoliberal style popularised by Australian popular memoir in order to speak back to the issues of Modern Life.

Wilson's memoir reveals unhelpful neoliberal perceptions of anxiety as an illness that deems sufferers unable to be productive, but also considers the tendency to blame individuals for their anxiety. Significantly, by locating the causation of anxiety beyond the individual, Wilson's memoir, like Gibson's in Chapter Two, reveals flaws in the neoliberal logic of personal responsibility that deems all success and *failure* the fault of the individual. For example, Wilson likens blaming people with anxiety for being anxious to blaming people for being obese:

> It is not our fault that we're addicted to sugar and getting fatter. Obesity is not an issue of self-control, or lack thereof. Every reasonable and respected voice in the debate now acknowledges that the way in which we're force-fed sugar by the food giants deranges our metabolisms to such an extent that for many no amount of willpower, hardcore workouts or dietary commitment can make a difference … We can no longer point the finger at individuals caught up in the unfortunate metabolic cycle. Just as we can't blame those of us with a highly sensitive amygdala for being anxious. (Wilson 2017, 54)

While Wilson points blame away from individuals for these problems, she continues to position the individual as the solution, and her musings about causality and agency here are

not new. Similarly, passages like this where Wilson problematises 'sugar' as a contributing factor to obesity, provide continuity between her earlier *I Quit Sugar* blog, which I argue performs as a self-help diary. In this way, readers are encouraged to consume her memoir about anxiety in similar ways to how they might have participated in, and consumed, her blog – as instructional self-help. Additionally, this continuity foregrounds the redemption narrative of 'living' with anxiety, just as Wilson's blog also became a sentimental redemption narrative of recovery from sugar addiction. In 2007, Berlant analysed obesity and agency in her article 'Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)' using the obesity epidemic in America to rethink the taxonomies of causality, subjectivity and life-making embedded in normative notions of agency. Berlant argues that obesity, which is recognised as a global crisis in and of itself, is a symptom of an older and more complex story: 'the destruction of bodies by capitalism in spaces of production and the rest of life. The obesity epidemic is also a way of talking about the destruction of life, of bodies, imaginaries, and environments by and under the contemporary regimes of capital' (2007, 764). Significantly, Wilson's memoir reduces these complex issues of obesity and anxiety to redemption narratives that promote individual willpower and self-acceptance as the sole cures of these issues. Reading Wilson's memoir against Berlant's analysis of agency, reveals the ways in which redemption narratives, by their focus on the individual, work to obscure wider social, political, cultural and economic issues.

Questions of agency and causality instead of attributions of blame, in the case of health crises, can work to shift blame for the symptoms of neoliberalism away from individuals and rightfully towards companies, institutions and government. As Berlant explains, federally supported health initiatives, such as the designation of National Depression Screening Day (in 1991) in America: 'established its claim on crisis consciousness explicitly on the basis of the costs of human mental suffering not just to humans but to "productivity" at work, business profits, insurance, health care providers, and the state' (Berlant 2007, 769). Similar mental health initiatives operate in Australia such as R U OK?™ Day, where people are encouraged to start conversations with friends, loved ones and colleagues about their mental health. Events such as these stake out a public interest in getting people to feel better by changing their behaviours, therefore becoming more accountable and reliable to themselves, their families, and their work. In this way obesity and mental health are both corralled under the neoliberal logic of 'personal responsibility' which, crucially, renders the question of causality effectively moot (Berlant 2007, 770). Similarly,

while Wilson appears to create space for important questions around individual blame and causality regarding anxiety, her ultimate redemptive solution of anxiety as the solution, as an opportunity for growth, pushes this back to the discourse of personal responsibility as an individual solution.

Under neoliberalism, governments, institutions and companies are absolved of responsibility. The solution to any problem is always the individual. For example, in my discussion of the fallout of Gibson's cancer scam in Chapter Two, I note how blame was always levelled at Gibson as an individual, and not the wellness or media industries that profited from her fabricated story and from her public downfall. Scandal is a symptom of popular memoir and redemption narratives, it is integrated in reading practices as a way for audiences to weed out fakes, thus strengthening the dominance of such memoirs in the market. Similarly, scandal is also a symptom of the logic of personal responsibility, which contains a prevailing feeling that neoliberalism confines individuals to a fate of perpetual anxiety and dissatisfaction, such feelings render personal responsibility a necessary and urgent response (Bloom 2017, 100). Memoirs like Wilson's, and scams like Gibson's, provide narratives based on personal experience that preserve the hope that everyone can achieve the 'good life' in the face of anxiety and dissatisfaction. Further, as Wilson's characterisation of Modern Life suggests, survival under such anxiety and dissatisfaction is understood as a fact of 'life' that remains unquestioned. As Berlant argues: 'at the same time that one builds a life the pressures of its reproduction can be exhausting' (2007, 778). Fundamentally, these concerns represent a shared ethos that centres on individuals taking personal responsibility for their own fate and, crucially, that of wider society.

As this thesis argues, popular memoir both confirms and disrupts this idea of personal responsibility by presenting celebrity stories of the 'good' life, even as it is only read as attainable through overcoming trauma, as allegories of what 'ordinary' readers can, and should, achieve. For Wilson, this social imaginary is obvious, anxious people are constantly held responsible for their own anxiety even if, as she notes, that anxiety is exacerbated by the forces of neoliberalism. Ultimately, as Bloom argues, it is up to individuals themselves to make up for the moral failings of the neoliberal system by morally reforming themselves and ethically improving their communities 'in order to create a more fulfilling and righteous existence for the world' (Bloom 2017, 105). Wilson's book, as an expression of her personal responsibility, works to fix the ways in which neoliberalism morally fails anxiety sufferers.

What becomes clear is that this issue of anxiety, especially as a symptom of life under neoliberalism is a complex problem, and its complexities exceed Wilson as a life writer. As I argue in the previous chapter, via Gilmore, these kinds of neoliberal problems are beyond the scope of any one memoir to fix, and it is equally irresponsible to mount these unrealistic expectations on to memoir. The ultimate function of Wilson's memoir is not to solve a problem, instead she hopes that it will start a conversation that may lead to collective action against that problem. Importantly, this is a hope, not a demand, true to the structure of Australian popular memoir it does not impose an ethical demand on the reader, it simply asks them to come on the journey. In the meantime, Wilson offers a set of tools and possibilities for living with anxiety during these times based on personal experience, in essence a survival guide for neoliberalism. As Bloom argues, neoliberalism has made present authentic and rising concerns about whether it is even possible to live a truly moral life in such a free-market world. As Bloom ultimately asks, 'In an age of zero hour contracts, slowly decaying post-industrialist communities and massive personal debt, how could anyone do more than to sensibly survive as best they could?' (Bloom 2017, 100).

Surviving or Thriving?

Bloom's analysis introduces a critical ethical dimension to the legitimisation of and reproduction of neoliberalism. Notably, that is sustained as vital through its discursive framing as a problem to be fixed. Neoliberal ideology was responsible for placing responsibility for 'fixing' capitalism on individuals and organisations, which eventually manifested into a discourse of 'personal responsibility' which would extend into personal life (Bloom 2017, 51). Crucial to the ethical power of neoliberalism is the role of empowerment. This process must be understood as one of subjection and subjectification and framed, crucially, as opportunity for agency. It stands as a profound possibility and desirable imperative for people to establish their unique 'authentic selves' and shape their environment (Bloom 2017, 53). Empowerment to access one's 'authentic self' offers hope, which is preserved in popular memoir, of changing, reforming and redirecting tools people can draw upon in order to morally improve the system. Significantly, this often manifests as a set of daily coping techniques for lessening the human and social costs of the broken system, like Wilson's suggestions to 'Build Your Own Boundaries' which are her tips for living a better life (Wilson 2017, 256-260). This can also manifest as collective action towards reforming neoliberalism and turning it into a more moral system, which is what Wilson hopes for by starting conversations. As Bloom argues, the ethical power of neoliberalism is, thus,

grounded in the empowerment it offers individuals to politically, institutionally and even personally ethically reform this system even as they are denied the opportunity to fundamentally alter it or replace it (Bloom 2017, 53).

In the free market, under the neoliberal myth of choice, people are encouraged to constantly consume, to believe that the solution to any problem can be found in the global marketplace. Though, more than just being constantly encouraged to consume, as Brown argues, via Nadesan, the 'good subject' of biopolitics is self-monitoring and self-regulating, in the sense that they take it upon themselves to find reasons to consume products, services and ideas (2017, 47; Nadesan 2008, 212-213). For example, Wilson writes that her anxiety impeded her ability to hold down a normal job, so she 'confected a gig' where she tested ways to heal herself by writing a column on living well (2017, 1). When faced with a problem, Wilson determined that she was not 'measuring up' to the expectations of normalcy around her, so she began consuming as a means to 'fix' herself and become 'normal' once again. Significantly, Wilson also turned this problem into an opportunity for both profit and growth by turning it into a job. Though, she writes that with all this research and free time she was still not able to live in the 'present moment': which other self-help gurus and yoga instructors talk about 'as though it's something you can buy off the shelf' (Wilson 2017, 2). Wilson is working towards becoming the 'good subject' by self-identifying her issues with anxiety, as well as their effect on her working life and looking for solutions. Similarly, the self-help guru and yoga instructor are read as generic and aspirational 'good subjects' because they see the desirable 'present moment' not as something difficult or challenging to achieve, it is simply a matter of choice, of selecting a product from a shelf. As Wilson writes: 'When you realise there's no guidebook, an opportunity suddenly presents itself. If no one knows what they're doing, if there's no "right" way to do life, then we can surely choose our own way. Yes?' (2017, 6).

Neoliberalism as a dominant economic system has always fostered a culture that carefully balances individualism and community. In this context, cultural products like popular memoir promote myths of personal heroism with a regulated form of collective existence. As this thesis argues, popular memoir functions within a social imaginary that exalts figures like the cancer survivor, the comedian or the rockstar, in turn, readers believe that they too can defeat their traumas and achieve the heights of success, wealth and happiness described in these memoirs. As Bloom argues, this culture of capitalist idolisation ranges from the modern celebration of entertainers and athletes as potential role models to the

desire for strong leaders to be figureheads for social and political movements. It, furthermore, represented a contemporary capitalist 'pathology' and commodification of the individual (Bloom 2017, 96-97). The publication of popular memoir too, codifies and manages this culture of capitalist idolisation by determining some of the extent to which idols get to speak, what about, and for how long (Worden 2020, 137-138). Wilson clearly benefits from her privilege as a popular subject, but she is simultaneously presented as an authentic survivor of anxiety with helpful experience to share with her readers, in the form of self-help. Neoliberal ideology, as a culture that makes self-improvement and recovery necessary and urgent through logics of personal responsibility, coaxes this kind of autobiographical representation from Wilson. Wilson is acted on, but also acts within this system by talking back to our neoliberal culture by characterising it as 'Modern Life', which encourages her readers to question certain conditions of personhood. Simultaneously, Wilson is offering strategies for survival in this harsh neoliberal system which is all tied up in a redemption story of human triumph over suffering. Further, Wilson creates an intimate sphere of belonging for vulnerable sufferers of anxiety where she presents herself as an equal participant in that sphere, just another sufferer, sharing her experience and nothing more.

The focus on emotions and feelings as a guide for life, rather than sets of expectations presented by cultural products like memoir, appears to work against the neoliberal formation of the singular unattainable 'good life'. Wilson wonders whether the constant pressure to find the 'right' or normative answer, and immediately, has resulted in a set of brains are that so busy that they forget to '*know* and *feel* if it's the right answer' (Wilson 2017, 244). From here, Wilson speaks, rather overtly, back against certain failings of Modern Life, which are bracketed by the concept of self-mastery and self-management:

> But self-mastery triumphs in this Modern Life of ours. So if we haven't found happiness or calm or balance amidst it all – if we don't cope – it's because we've not tried hard enough. Because Modern Life dictates there's an answer out there … you just have to try harder to find it and master it. Of course it doesn't exist. So we are set up to fail. (Wilson 2017, 245)

Crucially, a passage such as this introduces the unique role of neoliberal empowerment argued by Bloom, such that individual responsibility is 'set up to fail' and readers are encouraged to fix this problem. As Wilson goes on, 'This is the new barometer of success,

wellness and success: how well you can create your own ways to shut down the distractions … You mean I don't have to wait for anyone else to fix this? I actually *have* to do it myself. You beaut!' (Wilson 2017, 255). Here, hope that individual action has the capability of fixing the failings of neoliberalism is preserved, and crucially, readers are empowered by Wilson's words. The danger though, as Bloom notes, is that the system is designed to offer the opportunity for moral reform even as people are denied the capability to alter it.

Key to my reading of Wilson's book as a survival guide for neoliberalism is her own personal story of triumph and self-empowerment that seems to authenticate the possibility for empowerment and success in her readers. For example, Wilson writes that at a writers' festival she was asked 'How do you do it?' The audience member mentions that she doesn't understand how Wilson manages to do so much, to run a business, and do public talks when she has anxiety. Wilson knew her answer immediately: 'I told her I look back now and can see that every major step forward in my career had been driven by anxiety' (Wilson 2017, 173). Crucially, at this point of the narrative Wilson has come to the crux in her search for enlightenment, she has come to understand the 'truth' of anxiety, her truth, that echoes throughout her memoir-text. 'I think anxiety pushes us. It exists to do so – it helps us friggin' fire up. Even when it makes us stall with terror, it eventually makes conditions so unbearable that we ricochet off to a new important direction. Eventually' (Wilson 2017, 173). Crucial to Wilson's ability to access her truth is being able to look back over times in her life and this too functions to preserve hope by the promise that the 'truth' waits for sufferers in the future.

The preservation of hope is integral for survival in neoliberal times, but also, this hope functions to sustain sufferers through particularly difficult times. As Wilson goes on to explain, much like the confessions of her own suffering, surviving and thriving through difficult times shows how anxiety functions as a solution instead of a problem. Further, anxiety begins to appear as a metonym that could stand in for any obstacle to the 'good life' - class, education or gender, for example. Crucially, Wilson encourages us to get closer to these obstacles in order to overcome them, to let them consume us and only then will we understand and 'accept' it. In order to learn this lesson in the memoir, Wilson has to make herself extremely uncomfortable. She seeks treatment for her anxiety by travelling to an ashram in India run by Dr Ramadas, and Wilson describes it as 'my deeply uncomfortable month' (Wilson 2017, 265). The ashram is built on a swamp so the insects are insufferable, and the constant hum of the generator two fields away coupled with the man snoring in the next room keeps her awake at night. Wilson becomes frenzied by her inability to cope and

fixates on why other people could cope while she struggles, and is strangled by her inability to run away. Dr Ramadas offers a simple remedy:

> He was telling me I had to stay. For a while there, I'd forgotten the importance of this. As we all tend to, I think.
> So I stayed. I sat in the grimness. (Wilson 2017, 265)

As she has done before, Wilson acknowledges that this does not seem like the nicest solution: 'Simply reverting back to our Facebook feed or heading to the mall to buy moisturiser seems a far sexier fix' (2017, 266). Though, resisting the urge to consume as a means of dealing with anxiety not only rejects the damaging 'self-help' concept, it also rejects the pull of neoliberalism that demands we constantly take on the role of the consumer. Wilson writes, 'Of course we have to go through the struggle. In the context of Modern Life, fuelled as it is by distractions, such a notion is ludicrous' (Wilson 2017, 266). In this way, using preserved hope to sit in the difficult times, and, crucially, to accept them becomes an act of resistance against Modern Life. Though, Wilson's memoir is promoting anti-self-help and anti-consumerism through a commodity, and crucially, readers will not know these lessons unless they buy the book.

True to anti self-help, the negative notions of difficult times are not avoided but realised and accepted as a part of life. Further, these difficult times are presented as opportunities for self-realisation and introspection, which ultimately encourages readers to accept the contingencies of life and their place within them. As Wilson explains:

> When we choose to go grim and lo-fi like this, like a fifteen minute power nap on a log in the dirt and rocks with ants crawling all over you, or a toddler playing happily in a muddy puddle, we lower our usual expectations, so that the simple joys – sunlight, the stillness, the glow of the open fire, a turd being pushed uphill – become wonderfully apparent. With lower expectations there's less imperative to make things perfect. (Wilson 2017, 269)

What Wilson is speaking back against here is a certain weight of expectation to measure up to a standard of normalcy determined by neoliberal distortions of success and upward mobility. Similarly, Worden argues that writers 'employ memoir to represent the often

hidden reality of limits in our contemporary moment' (2020, 137). Exploring limits to memory and sympathy are typically expected in works of memoir, but for Worden, the exploration of limits to 'economic growth', 'upward mobility', or 'individual desire and initiative' are symptomatic of memoir in neoliberal culture (2020, 137). What Wilson explores here is the limits imposed by the 'good life' and perceptions of 'normalcy' in what people should be capable of. For Wilson, at the end of her journey to enlightenment and acceptance she comes to understand that 'it doesn't matter. None of it matters. And if it all can matter less, the anxiety abates (Wilson 2017, 272). Ultimately, what Wilson has presented here is a path to empowerment for her readers and a guide to survival through neoliberalism which comes with the opportunity to thrive, if the individual commits to do that work, and to buy the book.

Conclusion

What I have emphasised through my analysis of Wilson's *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* is that this issue of anxiety, especially as a symptom of life under neoliberalism, is a complex problem, and its complexities exceed Wilson as a subject. The ultimate function of Wilson's memoir is not to solve a problem, as this problem resists solution, instead she hopes that the book might start a conversation that may lead to collective action. In the meantime, Wilson offers a set of tools and possibilities for living with anxiety during these times based on personal experience, in essence, a survival guide for neoliberalism. Further, by reading the characterisation of Modern Life in Wilson's book as neoliberal life, I have discussed how neoliberal culture coaxes certain autobiographical representations and performances from Wilson, such as the redemption narrative. Ultimately, this exposes how Wilson talks back to Modern Life by pointing out the failings of neoliberalism while preserving hope that individuals, through personal willpower, can change the prevailing system and not just survive neoliberalism but thrive despite it. Wilson's next book *This One Wild and Precious Life*, published in August 2020, continues this moral project and self-help as it sees her hiking around the world, meeting wild voices and experts, and following in the footsteps of philosophers and poets to arrive at what she feels is the true path through despair.

Through discussing the rise of memoir and the rise of the self-help industry together the intrusion of neoliberalism into our very consciousness starts to come in to focus. Further, the power of memoir as cultural product is realised as it participates in the moral reorganisation of the neoliberal systems. I have argued that the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility participated in its own redemption cycle to rise anew as anti-self-help

which redeems the project of morality under a neoliberal system. Neoliberal life narrative and Australian popular memoir emerged out of the immense popularity of the memoir boom/lash cycle to dissolve the threat of nonnormative voices that responded to, and made recognisable, collective histories of gendered and racial violence. Instead, this neoliberal formation of life narrative focused on generic selves that overcame generalised trauma through pluck and individual willpower. Though, significantly, audience preferences for redemption narratives, although working to discredit other nonnormative voices, does not completely exclude them. In the next chapter, I analyse the popular and award-winning memoir of Vietnamese-Australian Anh Do, and consider the ways in which he, as an ethnic 'Other,' uses the redemption narrative to gain access to the popular market. As I discuss, the redemption narrative that Do performs in his memoir, echoes the themes of personal responsibility and self-acceptance that permeate Wilson's neoliberal survival guide. While this might seem to support of Wilson, it actually troubles her premise: Do is a comedian who primarily trades in self-deprecating humour where he, and his ethnicity, is the butt of the humour. As the next chapter contends, the redemption narrative takes on different and interesting dimensions when read through the self-deprecating comedy of a nonnormative subject like Do.

Chapter 4 — 'What A Great Country!': Exploring Identity and ideal stereotypes in The Happiest Refugee

Setting the Stage: The Asian-Australian Migrant Writing Tradition

Vietnamese-Australian Anh Do has made a career turning stories from his tough migrant childhood in Australia into jokes. Do's comedy is self-deprecating and ironic; he is the butt of the humour and he invites his audience to laugh at him. Most Australians also know Do from his appearances on television, from the primetime 'improv' comedy show *Thank God You're Here*, to the celebrity reality television show *Dancing With the Stars*, or Do's own travel show *Anh Does Vietnam*. Do's trademark wide-toothed grin welcomes readers from the cover of his 2010 memoir *The Happiest Refugee*, but a rickety fishing boat on which his family first travelled to Australia broods in the background. The cover blurb proclaims: 'The extraordinary true story of a boy's journey from starvation at sea to becoming one of Australia's best loved comedians' (Do 2010, front cover). As I discuss in this chapter, Do's memoir presents his genuine story of multiple traumas followed by multiple triumphs throughout his childhood and career in Australia. However, the runaway popularity of Do's memoir, as it bolstered sales far beyond other Asian-Australian migrant celebrities, signals some potentially troubling preferences in the market and the readership for particular kinds of migrant stories. Do's memoir uses neoliberal tropes of overcoming and success in the context of the migration story, where happiness becomes the achievement of assimilation and this is further coded to neoliberal ideals through money, success and fame.

Migrant life writing in Australia is haunted by a contested literary history, as Wenche Ommundsen explains: migrant life writing was not identified by major literary critics until the 1980s and, even then, it received 'vocal opposition from parts of the critical mainstream, castigating both writers and critics arguing that any kind of "special pleading" for minorities detracts attention from the question of literary value' (Ommundsen 2011, 508 emphasis in original). These concerns regarding the literary value of migrant writing culminated in a 1991 *Australian Book Review* article by Robert Dessaix, titled 'Nice Work If You Can Get It': 'the reason so much migrant writing is marginalised is that … it's often not very good' (23). In 1995, Australia witnessed the scandal of Helen Demidenko's Miles Franklin award winning hoax *The Hand That Signed The Paper* (1994). Demidenko's novel told the story of her family's history during the Russian occupation of Ukraine, which Demidenko claimed validified the book's anti-Semitic plot because it was based on a true story. Helen Darville

(now Dale) created and performed the Helen Demidenko persona as the proud daughter of Ukrainian immigrants with her long, dishevelled blonde hair, peasant style dress and broken English (a broken English that was also performed in the dialogue of the novel). Crucially, it was her migrant persona that authorised Demidenko's novel and allowed her, and her publisher, to successfully market it as a migrant narrative based on a true story. But the novel, the story, and Helen Demidenko were all a hoax. The *Courier Mail* newspaper exposed that Dale was not related to Ukrainian migrants at all, she is the daughter of English immigrants and, at the time, she lived a middle-class suburban life in Brisbane (Knox, 2005). Critics of migrant writing used this hoax as vindication for their stand against its emergent popularity in the Australian market, but as Ommundsen notes, even well-meaning critics worried that authentic migrant writing would be perpetually tarnished by the scandal of the Demidenko hoax (2011, 508).

Scandals like the Demidenko hoax remind us not only of the strong links between migrant life writing and identity, but also of the cultural, and sometimes political, motivations of the market for migrant life writing in Australia. From the end of the Demidenko affair to the publication of Do's memoir in 2010, the market for migrant life writing, particularly by Asian Australians, experienced a resurgence. This resurgence was due, in part, to the political climate in Australia. In the late 1990s, conservative politician Pauline Hanson fuelled anxieties about Asian immigration with her speech in parliament about the 'Yellow Peril', then the 'Children Overboard' refugee crisis in 2001 ignited further anxieties about 'boat people' (Ommundsen 2011, 508-509). Further, the global market for diasporic life writing from Asia began to boom under increased focus on conflict in the Middle East. The result was a wave of Asian diasporic life writing that explored the conflicted identities of migrants and expressed their cultural politics in increasingly universal and Westernised ways. This trend was not limited to Australia. For example, the 'Asian boom' of women's life writing (also called 'Chinese Chick Lit') from Asia appears to have been spurred by global conflict, in which Western fantasies of saving the 'other' recontextualised romantic notions of migration as women's liberation, like British-Chinese woman Jung Chang's global sensation *Wild Swans* (1991). As Ommundsen argues, no group of migrant writers has rejected such fetishization of Asian migrant writing with more complexity or literary flair than Asian Australian writers, who resist the victim mentality that romanticises other popular migrant writing (2011, 509). For example, Chinese-Australian Alice Pung blatantly rejects the expectations of the popular market in her 2006 memoir *Unpolished Gem* by stating flatly:

'this story does not begin on a boat. Nor does it contain any wild swans or falling leaves' (2006, 1; back cover). Ommundsen explains that Pung writes an Australian 'wonderland' that is both reminiscent of the Western fantasy of *Wild Swans*, but also troublesome (like its namesake 'Alice in Wonderland') with the discovery that Pung's family history is riddled with 'political turmoil, human atrocity and leaky boats' (2011, 505). Pung, here, is tapping into the popular market defined by works like *Wild Swans* while simultaneously asserting her difference. As Ommundsen argues, Pung rejects the popular 'Chinese Chick Lit' Asian narrative while demonstrating that such stories nevertheless inform her life and her writing, which allows her to tell her own version of that popular story (2011, 505). Similar resistance to the pull of the popular migrant story appears in other Asian-Australian works such as Nam Le's short story *The Boat* (2008), and Shaun Tan's wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006). These works demonstrate that during recent decades Asian Australian authors have used literature as a site where Asian Australian and migrant identities can be negotiated without obscuring their often traumatic political and cultural contexts. Works like these of Asian Australian migrant life writing created an Australian market that was prepared for, even anticipating, a popular feel-good migrant narrative in Do's *The Happiest Refugee*.

Prior to the publication of his memoir, Do was interviewed in the 2008 Asian-Australian autobiographical anthology *Growing Up Asian In Australia* edited by Alice Pung. Do, as well as his younger brother Khoa Do, feature in the section of the anthology titled 'Tall Poppies' where high achieving Asian-Australians are interviewed about their successful careers. The two Do brothers are accompanied in this section by the likes of Quan Yeomans of the Australian rock band Regurgitator, graphic novelist and animator Shaun Tan, former Lord Mayor of Melbourne John So, and the first regular Asian-Australian presenter on children's program *Play School*, Joy Hopwood (Pung 2008, 251-283). Pung explains in her Introduction to the anthology that she has 'subverted the term *Tall Poppies'* and that her interviewees are 'not included because they are "model minorities," but because they express, with great depth and generosity, what it is like to persist in pursuing one's passion, to surmount racism and overcome adversity' (Pung 2008, 4). The model minority narrative that Pung references here is a neoliberal formation. Peter Bloom explains that the fundamental neoliberal logic of personal responsibility functions as a kind of self-management by determining an individual's value by their ability to conform to certain definitions of success, productivity and normalcy (2017, 5-6). Significantly, the model minority narrative champions the individual by idolising those minority individuals who achieve wealth, education, and

fame as good role models, like Do. However, as I argue in reference to the wellness industry in Chapters 2 and 3, such idolisation through individual success stories works to obscure the societal, political and cultural obstacles to the 'good life' or 'normal life' in favour of personal willpower and self-sacrifice. With the diverse careers and successes of her 'Tall Poppies' (actors, musicians, politicians, comedians etc.) Pung offers an alternative to this model minority narrative of 'working hard, studying hard, and conforming to the expectations and ideals of the dominant culture' (Pung 2008, 4; Fukui 2014). Throughout this chapter, I discuss how Do's comedic neoliberal style works simultaneously with and against this model minority narrative to preserve the hope of individualised agency, even as the social and political terms of neoliberalism render that agency increasingly powerless.

In the wake of its publication in 2010, *The Happiest Refugee* became a catalyst for discussion especially among Asian-Australian literary, academic and creative communities. Responses to both the memoir and Do's subsequent popularity appeared in such literary journals as *Meanjin*, *Overland* and *The Griffith Review*, the academic work *Diasporic Chineseness after the Rise of China* (2013) and more mainstream magazines like *Frankie*. These reviews for Do's memoir began to reveal a trend: these writers/critics took issue not with Do himself but the way that this particular story had been taken up by the wider culture, as the standard by which every other migrant story must be measured. For example, in a piece of satire for *Frankie* magazine 'The Refugees are Coming', author Benjamin Law, writes: 'We must avoid listening to their stories of rape and famine, murdered siblings and starved children, because then we might actually feel something' (2011, n.p.). Law goes on to single out Do as one of 'our most beloved Australians', a refugee, but 'one of the *good* ones' (Law 2011, n.p. emphasis in original). Later, Maria Tumarkin, in her 2011 article for *Meanjin* 'Stories Without Borders', critically questions what the 'secret' of *The Happiest Refugee* is. The memoir's popularity surpassed other works of its kind in the market by appearing consecutively on best-seller lists for as many as 12 months since its publication in September of 2010, and won three awards in 2011: The Australian Booksellers Association 'Bookseller's Choice' award, the Australian Independent Bookseller 'The Indie Book of the Year' Award, and was awarded the Australian Book Industry Awards (ABIA) 'Book of the Year'. While Tumarkin has nothing but praise for the heart-warming story and insists on its validity in the landscape of Asian-Australian migrant writing, she is ultimately troubled by the soaring popularity of Do's memoir. Specifically, Tumarkin concludes that while not all migrant stories will be 'feel-good or funny, or brimming with against the odds triumphs …

we'll have to find just as much space for those stories as we've found for The Happiest Refugee' (2011). Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu in his chapter for *Diasporic Chineseness after the Rise of China* (2013) claims that the popularity of Do's memoir is a manifestation of Australia's attempts to protect itself from criticism:

> If a nation lives in such fear of criticism, meant for its own good and improvement, it is likely to welcome book titles like *The Happiest Refugee* and reject titles like *Impotent in Australia*, the latter of which was a true reflection of my early days in Melbourne. If a poet is stripped of the right to speak his mind and is expected to only sing praises, the way Anh Do does, there is no freedom to speak of … the message is unmistakable enough: you've got to demonstrate your past misery in vivid detail … or show your present gratitude. (Ouyang 2013, 37-42)

Ouyang's concerns of Australia's censorship of critical Asian-Australian voices are echoed in Pamela Graham's article on *Growing Up Asian in Australia* where she writes that Alice Pung was warned 'that readers directly confronted with explicit references to Australia's history of racism would avoid buying or reading *Growing Up'* (2013, 72). Similarly, while Australian author Kevin Brophy suggests of Do's memoir in *Meanjin* that there are 'laugh-out-loud moments that are not really jokes, but situations that expose Australia and Australians to themselves' he comes to reconcile previous concerns of Law, Tumarkin and Ouyang. Brophy concludes: 'This makes for one of those stories that we as Australians can somehow feel blessed to have made possible, warts and all' (Brophy 2014, n.p.). These reviews suggest that *The Happiest Refugee* is a memoir written predominantly *for* Australian audiences, in that it presents graphic trauma coupled with gratitude for successful assimilation designed to reaffirm (in)securities of an Australian audience by shying away from overt criticism or politics.

Although the popularity of migrant life writing in Australia has been growing in recent years, such typical marketing terms as 'exotic', 'migrant', 'refugee' or 'ethic minority' can be reductive. The problematic marketability of culturally exotic life narratives has been well documented by Gillian Whitlock's 2007 book *Soft Weapons* where she argues, in the context of Arabic women's life narratives in America, humane engagement with the autobiographical avatar (the author), is what makes contemporary forms of life narrative such potent yet flawed weapons for cross-cultural engagement (Whitlock 2007, 3). Life narratives can, and do, participate in debates about human rights, social justice and sovereignty (among

other things) but as Whitlock explains these are ‘soft’ weapons: ‘In modern democratic societies propaganda is frequently not the violent and coercive imposition of ideas but a careful manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere and a management of information in the engineering of consent’ (2007, 3). Furthermore, the life narrative market feeds insecurities instilled by the presence of the unrecognisable 'other’ by providing commodified stories through which readers can reinvent imagined securities. Some readers may respond to insecurities by enacting empathetic identification that recuperates stories of radical indifferences into their more familiar frameworks of meaning. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue, via Whitlock, that such acts of consumption of other peoples’ lives enable some to dispel the fear of otherness by containing it (2004, 25). This type of recuperation occurred when Western feminist readers of Iranian authored life narratives, circulated post 9-11, sensationalised Middle Eastern women’s lives and translated their empathetic identification into a Western-inflicted campaign to ‘unveil’ Middle Eastern women oppressed by the burka. In this case, empathetic identification became a means to the reader’s own self-affirmation as an empowered agent, here an ‘assumed’ agent of social change and humanitarian betterment (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 23-26).

The Happiest Refugee reminds us that even memoirs published with the best intentions can be compromised by readers and markets that foster insecurities about the migrant/refugee ‘other’. Key to my analysis of Do’s memoir in this chapter is the complexities of how this memoir circulates and participates in dominant expectations of Asian-Australians as a cultural and commercial artefact which exceeds its author and his (perceived) intentions. Schaffer and Smith argue that life narratives are ‘always compromised’ as an author cannot control how their memoir will be received or interpreted once it is published and the complex insecurities that allow narratives to become compromised are beyond the scope of any one memoir to fix (2004, 27; 31-32). Though, as Gilmore argues this robust discourse of ‘choice’ and ‘responsibility’ does point to the important social and cultural work that the popularity of memoir performs in the public sphere (Gilmore, 101). In this chapter I explore how Do’s performance of assimilation, in which his status as a ‘good’ or ‘ideal’ migrant, is visible in how he rehearses neoliberal definitions of success – money, education, career, and fame. Further, I discuss how Do’s comedic neoliberal style, and his use of humour in his memoir, act simultaneously as a counter and a compliment to the model minority narrative of neoliberal success. Finally, I explore the realisation of Do’s neoliberal selfhood through his use of the *künstlerroman* trope

– coming to consciousness of the artist – to examine happiness as an additional definition for neoliberal success.

The Anh Do Effect: Hybridity, Identity and the Ideal Refugee

The Happiest Refugee circulates in a space where identity is constantly being re-negotiated. As researchers and writers of migrant life narratives have noted, re-negotiating identity in a new country, amongst a new and unfamiliar culture, can leave migrants feeling that they are disconnected from their home country while not fully being integrated into the new country – they are 'neither here-nor-there'. This complex and authentic feeling of disconnection, in and of itself, challenges the cultural assumption that migrant life writing in modern times works to dismantle, that one cannot be both nationalities at once. As Adam Aitken argues, the wild popularity of Amy Tan's fictional novel of Asian-American migration *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) initiated problematic ideas in Asian migrant life writing that the 'authentic' migrant must define themselves in national terms (he calls this the 'Amy Tan Syndrome'; see also the 'Amy Tan Effect' by Deborah Marsden) (2008, 446). For Aitken, 'these depictions of the 'old' wave of diasporic migrant writers dramatize generational differences and appeal strongly to White Western readers' (2008, 445). Further, Aitken explores how 'new' wave migrant life writing, particularly Asian-Australian life writing, rejects Tan's influence by re-contextualising displacement through cosmopolitan multiculturalism as cultural hybridity (2008, 447-449). Though, as Jacqueline Lo argues, the concept of hybridity can be actively subversive in unsettling 'dominant expectations of the unproblematic homology between cultural, racial and national identity' (2000, 156; Law 2009, 19). Ultimately, the balance of hybridity is complex but does not seek to dissolve or obscure the complexities of displacement and traumatic migration as hybridity is not assimilation, instead it foregrounds the complexities in living as a hybrid of multiple nationalities.

Do reflects in his memoir on the discovery that his stand-up comedy routines required a kind of balancing act, he could never just be the 'migrant' guy standing up there pointing out his difference for the sake of laughs. This realisation came during the hardest performance of Do's life, which he writes was a catastrophic scheduling blunder where he had been booked for a gig with an audience of World War II Veterans from Korea and Vietnam. Even the club events manager realised how absurd this booking was, remarking 'Mate, we've got the wrong comedian for the wrong night' (Do 2010, 182). After a nervous

start where an audience member periodically pretends to 'shoot' at Do with a finger gun, Do confronts the situation: '"Sir, you've probably killed a few guys who look like me". Everyone looked on, waiting for his response. It was one word. "Fourteen"' (2010, 182). Contemplating a walk-off, Do instead decides to 'bring forward all the material that would prove to them that [he] was just an Aussie kid' and he slowly wins the crowd over with jokes about housing commissions, Datsuns, footy and kiwis (2010, 182). Do, here, faced with overt racism, uses biography: revealing his lived knowledge of 'working class' Australian stereotypes and he transforms his comedic persona on stage from the 'migrant' to the 'Aussie kid'. As Tumarkin observes, perhaps this 'face-voice mismatch' is the secret of Do's fame, that when those old Veterans closed their eyes 'this Vietnamese kid was actually just an Aussie comedian up there talking about his working-class childhood' (2011, 29; Do 2010, 182).

Do's ability to overcome the challenge of a difficult and racially charged audience results in an episode of cultural convergence with some audience members over a beer. 'So there I was' Do writes, 'having a drink with this guy, Paul, and three other guys came over and joined us. They started telling me war stories about their Vietnamese soldier mates, people like my uncles. It was wonderful to hear my dad and uncles' stories confirmed by Aussie diggers' (2010, 183). There is intimacy here, with the old guys allowing Do access to shared histories of war and suffering which recontextualise the Vietnamese as 'mates' and not the 'enemy' as had been the case before Do came on stage. Further, Do explains:

> I told them that one of my uncles was kind of like a sapper, he'd done some clearing of landmines during the war. 'Anh!' Paul piped up excitedly, 'the first line of Jimmy Barnes' song "Khe Sanh" is "I left my heart to the sapper's round Khe Sanh".'
> What an amazing realisation. All these years, Barnsey had been singing about my uncle and I didn't even know because no one could understand Barnsey! (2010, 183).

Do's family history here intertwines with Australian cultural history and popular culture through Jimmy Barnes as a recognisable Australian icon and rock 'n' roll royalty as the front man of *Cold Chisel.* Additionally, the quip about no one being able to understand Barnesy functions as a recognisable joke while it signals Do's language struggles as a teenager earlier in the memoir. This difficult performance in the memoir, and its after effects, demonstrate

how life narrative can reproduce the intervention of neoliberal ideologies, in this case reading cross-cultural engagement as free and equal. Not as active in the exchange, but as coincidental or even necessary. As Whitlock argues, the effects of globalisation obscure the negative aspects of colonialism as cross-cultural exchange becomes a means for the imposition of Western values and interests (2007, 8). Evidenced here is Do's need to perform his Australianness in order to survive, specifically in this case an audience that can, and have, killed people who look like him. Subsequently, Do seems to be performing a certain kind of Australian working-class masculinity, which I call the 'working class man': This glamourises the struggle but is grounded in lower-income, Australian, stereotypes of hard-work, stoicism (not complaining) and alcohol as a reward. Similarly, in the next chapter I argue that Jimmy Barnes performs a 'working class man' style of masculinity as a method of survival against domestic abuse and violence from teenage gangs. Additionally, I argue the 'working class man', here, is similar to Worden's 'hustler' that he identifies as a trope in African American literature and rap music, where the 'hustler' leaves the ghetto to become successful and wealthy, but the conditions of their ghetto upbringing continue to define them. For Worden, the hustler and the ghetto are ways for thinking about individual enmeshment in neoliberalism and the fantasy of rebellion against it (2020, 19; 85). Do too, invokes the 'working class man' and 'hustler' sentiment, by performing an individualised model minority success story Do appears to exceed his limitations as a minority but, as evidenced by cultural exchange above, he is perpetually defined by his Vietnamese-Australian minority status. Significantly, Do's performance of assimilation, masculinity, and his Australianness assists the entrance of his memoir into the popular market.

Widely recognisable symbols of Australianness, like footy and Barnsey, are littered throughout Do's memoir but their juxtaposition with Asian stereotypes signals how Do traverses a fine line between 'Us' and 'Them'. For example, Do includes amusing anecdotes from school about being laughed at while trying to deliver a speech in his broken English, but also for winning awards in Mathematics, and being first chair on the Chess team despite not knowing how to play Chess (2010, 47-48). As Masako Fukui argues in her article about 'model minorities' in Australia, cultural traits attributed to Asian-Australians by the model minority narrative like valuing education, stable family backgrounds, and a strong work ethic 'not only ignores the historical, linguistic and ethnic diversity that is Asia, but perpetuates a narrow essentialism that merely reinforces stereotypes' (2014, n.p.). Further, Tseen Khoo in *Banana Bending: Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian Literatures* explains this

phenomenon: as perceived outsiders and Others, belonging, for Asian-Australians, is always contingent on being 'good migrants' (2003, 18-21). As Khoo argues, 'Australian civic acceptance is often conditional upon repeated and acceptable versions of that difference' and contradictorily, once that difference is absorbed through assimilation 'they are no longer suitable subjects upon whom hegemonic society can confer tolerance' (2003, 21). Further, as Fukui notes, a 'good migrant' implies that there is a 'bad', which is where neoliberal myths of the model minority, the ideal refugee, and the proper subject become significant, a divisive wedge fraught with danger (2014, n.p.).

Fukui discusses Taiwanese-Australian Christine Ko's visual art which uses large-scale but low-budget installations to interrogate Ko's identity and probe the idea of 'double marginalisation', a liminal space, inside a liminal space, defined by marginalisation by ethnicity as well as class. For Ko, neoliberal multiculturalism has created a 'monoculture' of wealthy Chinese-Australians, which she feels alienated from, not being of a wealthier migrant class. What resonates with Fukui most is Ko's idea of compound marginalisation, because she too feels alienated from other Asian-Australian migrants and she calls this the 'Anh Do effect':

> Remember the Vietnamese-Australian comedian's bestselling book *The Happiest Refugee* (Allen & Unwin, 2010)? Just look at the cover. Big, cracked-open-with-joy smile, great teeth, and the boat as the backdrop. Ah, the boat. The boat is such a powerful symbol of the perilous migrant journey and the moral fortitude needed to survive it. I have no boat. Which is to say, I have no triumph over adversity, no compelling grandiose narratives in my migrant story. (Fukui 2014)

Fukui identifies here that she has no boat, and therefore cannot reach the heights of Do's success, because her story doesn't fit into the mould of an uplifting and inspiring triumph over adversity attributed to the 'good' migrant. Further, Fukui points to the equality fallacy within the model minority narrative by noting that her mediocracy in comparison to Do paints her as a 'bad' migrant because she has not also reached his heights of success. Do's role as one of the 'good' Asians to which Fukui refers is visible in how he rehearses neoliberal definitions of success, like getting his law degree, buying his mother a house, and finding fame as a successful comedian.

Khoo argues that the good/bad binary could be just as insidious here in Australia, as in other parts of the world, because Asian-Australians are using it to police members of their own community. For example, when Chinese-Australian siblings Benjamin and Michelle Law published their books of deliberately-in-your-face witticisms called *Sh*t Asian Mothers Say* (2014). Khoo notes in an interview with Fukui that the Law siblings received harsh criticism from some sections of the Asian-Australian community for 'trading in stereotypes that make Asians look bad'. While Fukui notes that she didn't find the 'Law brand of maternal irreverence particularly funny' either, she argues astutely that saying it 'makes Asians "look bad" is a loaded judgement that vilifies the authors for deviating from the stereotype of the "good" Asian, as if there's only one way to be Asian-Australian' (2014 n.p.). Further, Fukui explains that as this hostility of difference filters into public discourse it 'gains legitimacy by reshaping race, which is one of the ways that the Asian model-minority narrative maintains its divisive power' (2014 n.p.). Clearly, the model minority narrative is problematic, like its foundation in the neoliberal logic of personal responsibility, individual stories of success are idolised as evidence of 'good' Asians, while those who encounter various social, political and cultural obstacles are simply 'bad' Asians. In the next section I discuss how Do performs assimilation through the model minority narrative, while his self-deprecating comedy packages his personal trauma for an Australian audience. Specifically, I discuss how Do's humour works in his memoir to expose the model minority narrative as an 'expectation' by which the audience becomes the butt of the humour.

Getting the Joke: Self-Deprecation as a Survival Strategy

Memoir, like stand-up comedy where comedians perform comedy routines as 'themselves' using material from their own lives, foregrounds the act of writing the self through narrative which creates a persona which can be interpreted in multitudes of different ways by different readers. However, unlike memoir, comedy is understood primarily as a performative act designed for entertainment where expectations of authenticity aren't usually placed on comedians. Conversely, these expectations of authenticity are placed on memoir and complicate readers' abilities to understand the narrative before them as representative, or much less as a kind of performance. Scandals of truth-telling or truth-tampering have long since haunted the genre, so much so that Gilmore argues scandal and judgement have become an integral part of how memoir is consumed in modern times. The existence of the 'Anh Do Effect', as well as negative responses by Asian-Australians to Do's memoir described in the

previous section are rooted in Do's claims about his happy life as refugee. Not because they are fabricated, but because they are not deemed adequately representative of the experience of other Asian-Australians. For this group of readers, the performative aspect Do's persona in his memoir is obvious, and is interpreted as dangerously misrepresentative of a minority, in that it makes light of traumatic migration and foregrounds success as both an achievable and expected trajectory for Asian-Australian migrant life in Australia.

However, for the dominant mainstream Australian readership of Do's memoir, Do's authentic and uplifting narrative of professional and emotional success in life fuses reality and performance in such a way that his happy assimilation is hardly interpreted as a performance at all. Significantly, Do's style of stand-up comedy uses self-deprecating humour and fuses reality and performance together in such a way that the performative aspect retreats behind a wall of laughs. Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby's revolutionary stand-up comedy show *Nanette* (2018) is useful for thinking about comedy, and life narrative, as a construct, but also for analysing the complicity of audiences in trauma as entertainment. *Nanette* is revolutionary because Gadsby, very deliberately, deconstructs comedy as part of her set and exposes that the use of self-deprecation when you are already deemed worthless is just further humiliation (Valentish 2018). Further, Gadsby exposes the complicity of the audience in that deprecation and shows how trauma is consumed and commodified by laughs that re-establish the audience's problematic (in)securities. As fellow comedians Sara Schaefer and Sabrina Jalees comment of *Nanette*: Gadsby 'talks about how being in the margins *requires* that you concern yourself with the feelings of the audience to make them comfortable with your very existence. For her, it's not even a choice … She makes us ask: Who is defining what's funny? Who is being allowed to speak? What perspectives are we including?' (Schaefer and Jalees 2018).

One of the most ingenious aspects of *Nanette* is, as Gadsby works toward the most painful and shocking material, she lobs occasional straightforward jokes at the audience – her grandmother told her that Mr. Right could be just around the corner: 'I've been approaching every corner with caution since then' Gadsby quips – making the audience her unlikely partner in dismantling the allure of comedy altogether (Ryzik 2018; Gadsby 2018). This is an act of smuggling in trauma through comedy under the guise of laughs, and an example of how Gadsby works to negotiate the uncomfortable feelings of the audience as they are made to bear witness to her trauma. Do's 'what a great country' quip, which he repeats throughout

the memoir, works in a similar way to subvert uncomfortable feelings of his audience. For example, when Do reflects on his parents' ludicrous working conditions for their sewing business, this great country becomes the butt of the joke:

> The hours they did were absolutely ludicrous. But for groups of refugees who came from a communist regime where you had almost no means of making a living, they were in paradise. They were incredibly grateful they had the opportunity to be rewarded for their efforts, and worked accordingly. What a great country!' (Do 2010, 36)

Here, Do's observation of Australia as a great country is a matter of perspective, the perspective of a refugee who came from nothing and is just happy to be rewarded at all for their hard work, despite these terrible or even illegal working conditions. Do's ironic quip points to Australia as a country that appears greatly opportunistic as it benefits from the exploitative labour of migrant workers, all while reaffirming the securities of a white Australian readership – 'what a great country!'. In *Nanette*, Gadsby explains that while a story has three parts – beginning, middle and end – a joke only has two, set up and punchline. There is, therefore, no satisfying conclusion to a joke, the audience's laughter notwithstanding (Gadsby 2018; Ryzik 2018). Similarly, the 'what a great country' quip exposes irony in Do's observations but, importantly, leaves them hanging with no satisfying conclusion, which invites Do's observations about some of the worst aspects of migrant life to be read as something worth laughing at.

Mary Luckhurst and Jen Rae, in their article discussing diversity agendas in Australian stand-up comedy, explain that Do's tragic story of immigration and his construction of the persona of a grateful, happy 'immigrant clown' are staples of his successful comedy routines (2014, n.p.). One of Do's most legendary routines is the story of his family's boat journey to Australia:

> There were forty of us on a nine metre fishing boat. On day four of the journey we spot another boat. As the boat gets closer we realise it's a boatload of Thai pirates. Seven men with knives, machetes and guns get on our boat and they take everything. One of the pirates picks up the smallest child, he lifts up the baby and rips open the baby's nappy and dollars fall out. And the pirate decides to spare the kid's life. And that's a good thing cos that's my little brother Khoa Do who in 2005 became Young Australian of the Year. And we were saved on the fifth day by a big German merchant

> ship which took us to a refugee camp in Malaysia and we were there for around three months before Australia says, come to Australia. And we're very glad that happened. So often we heard Mum and Dad say—what a great country. How good is this place? And the other thing—kids, as you grow up, do as much as you can to give back to this great country and to give back to others less fortunate. (Do appearing on *ABC1* radio show *Talking Heads*, 2010)

Do's comedy is a direct style of gallows humour with a propensity to darkness, in which he consistently draws on personal trauma from his life for his routines. Furthermore, Luckhurst and Rae muse that it must be a testament to Do's prowess in stand-up comedy that 'his audiences did not perceive the toll of the loss of his birth country; the grinding poverty; and the pain of his father's alcoholism, violence and survivor guilt until the publication of Do's ironically titled memoir' (2016, n.p.). Luckhurst and Rae describe here how Do's dark and self-deprecating humour, when coupled with his persona, works to smuggle trauma to his audience, though they perceive that Do may have done too good of a job, and that by smuggling his trauma it is obscured by laughs.

Do's use of self-deprecating humour and irony in his memoir is made more complex by how this style of humour functions against and negotiates with Asian stereotypes. Significantly, other members of Do's family are also positioned as the subjects of this deprecating humour, which is laced with irony, and exposes Do's memoir as a representation intended for a specifically Australian audience. This is best demonstrated in his memoir by his introductory description of his father Tam, almost in the style of caricature, which focuses on Tam's othered features during an act of heroism on a train in Saigon:

> 'Oi!' comes a voice from the back carriage. Not, 'Excuse me', or 'Stand back', or anything noble like that. Just a very common and working-class 'Oi', and it emanates from the fifty-five kilogram frame of a skinny, twenty-one-year-old Vietnamese boy, with a flat nose, wonky teeth and a mop of hair that looks like he's been sleeping on one side since he was five. He's not particularly handsome, not tall or striking, and his voice isn't deep or resonant. In fact he sounds a little squeaky. But what he is, is loud. And confident. And full of 'every-one can get stuffed.' (Do 2010, 3)

Do's description of his father here focuses strongly on difference, specifically how Tam is not 'handsome, or tall or striking, and his voice isn't deep or resonating,' but, importantly,

neither is Do, so this standard of heroism to which Tam is measured is technically invisible but inferred as typically, masculinely Western. Do's description of Tam here echoes Monica Chiu's reading of Gene Yang's representation of the character Chin-kee in his memoir *American Born Chinese* as 'a buck-toothed, yellow-faced high school student speaking in pigdin English and sporting a queue in a twenty-first century classroom' (Chiu 2014, 1). Chiu argues that the irony of Chin-kee's representation is lost on Chinese readers who overlook this irony in favour of criticism levelled at Yang's irreverent representation of the much beloved Monkey King character from the sixteenth century classic *Journey to the West*. In Yang's work The Monkey King is transformed into Chin-kee, a process through which Yang uses The Monkey King as a lens through which to reflect on his own experience as an Asian-American. For Chiu, Yang's overt stereotypical representations of Chin-kee are simultaneously deployed and subverted in order to expose to American readers how Chinese people are received, and therefore perceived by Americans (2014, 1; 30). Tam, like Chin-kee, is a figure upon which Asian stereotypes are inscribed that expose how Australians perceive Asians, but also how certain insecurities are negotiated through representations of Asians to Australians.

What popular life narratives like *American Born Chinese*, *The Happiest Refugee* and *Nanette* expose is that the othered author is always required to negotiate the assumptions, (in)securities and feelings of their, usually Western, audience. Though, even when authors have the best intentions, the author cannot control how their narrative will be perceived. For example, even amongst the overwhelmingly positive reviews of Gadsby's *Nanette*, Queer Jewish freelance writer Peter Moskowitz in his review for the online magazine *The Outline* discussed what he views as 'The "Nanette" Problem'. Moskowitz argues that *Nanette* locates the problem of queerness not within the exploitative structures that might implicate her audience, but within the individual and, crucially, 'the audience is not challenged in any meaningful way to act' (2018, n.p.). Specifically, Moskowitz argues that Gadsby's concluding monologue about anger as a 'toxic, infectious tension' that she 'wants no part of', ultimately lets the audience off the hook by transforming justified queer rage into 'a fault within herself, and by extension all of us' (2018, n.p.). Ultimately, Gadsby, like judgements levelled against Do by Asian-Australian readers, is charged with not going far enough: 'Gadsby hasn't changed comedy, she's just let cis and straight people in on the joke' (Moskowitz 2018, n.p.). Though, what Moskowitz seems to miss in his review is the reality that Gadsby's popularity comes at a cost, in order to reach certain audiences her trauma, and

by association her difference, must be packaged in a way that is legible to those audiences. Do too negotiates these forces of popularity, in order to 'get in' with his Australian audience he performs assimilation as a racial and neoliberal representation of life, one that at once counters and compliments the securities of his audience. That's what they expect, and that's the joke.

Realising Neoliberal Selfhood: Individuality and Happiness

As I outlined in Chapter 3, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis crippled global markets resulting in the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility undergoing a shift away from professional success, and instead towards concepts of physical, mental, and spiritual wellness. Cabanas and Illouz argue that this discourse of happiness, which is pervasive in neoliberal societies, 'has been strongly inscribed and entangled within social structures of accountability, consumption, management, surveillance, care, measurement, and decision-making on a global scale – even infiltrating the most intimate spheres of life and transforming those same structures that it has wormed itself into' (2020, 67). Additionally, as Cabanas has noted elsewhere, 'the great percentage of people who report being "satisfied with their lives" in countries, both developed and developing, is at odds with the increasing rates of depression, stress, anxiety, suicide, unemployment, insecurity, economic instability, and political discontentment in those same countries' (Cabanas 2018). Conclusively, for Cabanas and Illouz, the appearance of happiness in neoliberal society is often more desirable than the actual feeling of happiness and satisfaction. In this section I discuss how the use of 'happiness' in Do's memoir, read in the neoliberal terms outlined here, acts as a barometer of neoliberal selfhood and perceived normalcy. Moreover, these shifting neoliberal logics of personal responsibility, as they pertain to happiness, position Do's career choices not as a departure from neoliberal selfhood but instead as a reconciliation of an improved and therefore empowered form of neoliberal selfhood through realised individuality and happiness.

Gilmore calls the *künstlerroman* 'one of the most durable antecedents in the history of life narrative' by which it finds it place, and literary power, in both literary and celebrity memoir (2011, 123). Further, Gilmore argues that both literary and celebrity forms preserve the hope of individualised agency by use of the *künstlerroman*, in that these 'give readers reason to imagine that memoir may yet give readers and writers not simply the pleasure of a

gaze behind the curtain of fame, but a rich engagement with autobiographical form' (2011, 124). As noted by Wendy Brown in her article 'The End of Educated Democracy', the privatisation and free market logic that have become dominant under neoliberalism led to a thorough instrumentalisation of personhood. For Brown, humans are understood as 'human capital' whose total existence is comprised of economic relations which makes incoherent the idea of an engaged citizen (Brown 2011, 23). As Worden explains further, neoliberal style as a form of memoir functions as both a counter and compliment to this neoliberal logic, as a 'structure of feeling that allows the subject to imagine individualised agency yet projects agency in political and social terms which neoliberalism renders increasingly moot as they are incorporated into market logic' (2020, 71).

Do uses the trope of the *künstlerroman* as a platform on which to build the realisation of his neoliberal selfhood through his pursuit of happiness. As Gilmore notes, many readers associate the *künstlerroman* with James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 'in which the rigors of childhood yield the artist his perspective, his subject, his true life' (2011, 124). Thus, the lessons of childhood are integral to any *künstlerroman*, and this is also true for Do whose childhood is riddled with trauma, both from the initial boat journey from Vietnam but also his father's survivor guilt which manifests as alcoholism, violence and eventual abandonment of the family. As such, Do grows up with a keen awareness of societal and familial expectations, not only as a migrant child that is encouraged by his parents to 'give back to this great country', but also as an oldest son who feels he must protect and provide for his mother and siblings in the absence of his father. The solitary nature of Do's burden of expectation is never more evident than when a concerned teacher, upon noticing that Do's home address had changed six times, school fees were behind by four or five semesters and Do kept falling asleep in class, suggests that he should apply for special consideration to help get into university. Do is furious and becomes paranoid that people will take sympathy on him, 'Anh is poor.' 'Poor Anh, his mum doesn't have any money.' 'Don't you feel sorry for the poor refugee?' (Do 2010, 109):

> I remember on more than one occasion saying to myself, *I'm so sick of this. As soon as I'm old enough I'm going to earn loads of money and buy Mum the biggest freakin' house in the suburb and we'll all live there together and it will be our house and whole world can go and get stuffed.* (Do 2010, 109)

Do's determination to prove that he doesn't need help, or more specifically to challenge negative racial stereotypes of refugees as poor, a burden and requiring sympathy not only pushes him to excel but also to test the boundaries of expectation. As Do reflects, in school he was told: 'you have two options if you want to make loads of money: become a doctor, or become a lawyer' (2010, 109). Clearly, at this point in Do's childhood he feels as though the accumulation of wealth through pursuing the correct career is his only opportunity to live up to the expectations set out for him as the provider for his family but also as a 'poor refugee'.

These experiences of financial and emotional insecurity of Do's childhood clearly influence his career ambitions towards law until his realisation of neoliberal selfhood. Do realises that he does not have to sacrifice his responsibilities to his family and can still challenge negative migrant stereotypes by choosing a career based on his desire for happiness. Ultimately, when Do is offered a job after a recruitment retreat for the law firm Anderson Consulting where he realises 'once and for all' that he really doesn't want to be in this environment because he 'really hated it', these burdens of expectation collide with Do's developing individuality and desire for happiness (Do 2010, 136):

> On the one hand I wanted to jump for joy; I knew my family would never be poor again – I'd just gotten a job that paid well enough for us to live a much better life. On the other hand I knew I was going to hate it. (Do 2010, 137)

Do writes that he chose to switch careers ironically out of laziness, since he learns from a professional comedian that he can earn a comparable wage to what he was being offered by Anderson Consulting and work just four hours a week instead of sixty (Do 2010, 137-138). Although, Do comes to realise quickly that this four-hour working week is not realistic for a new comedian, instead for the first year he has to work like he is 'possessed', do 'six or seven gigs a week', and work for 'free, for $50, $20, a slab of beer, a cheeseburger – anything really' (Do 2010, 139). In this way the trope of the *künstlerroman* positions the challenges of Do's childhood and adolescence as an opportunity for growth and personal development thus providing a platform for the realisation of Do's neoliberal selfhood. Moreover, under the neoliberal logics of happiness and personal responsibility, these burdens of expectation in Do's childhood contextualise his career choice in comedy as empowerment towards happiness and rejection of monetary expectations. Do decides that his happiness is more important than living up to the expectations of his family and wider society, but, crucially, hard work and success remain the defining attributes of Do's happiness even in comedy.

Later Do wins the prestigious Harold Park Hotel's Young Comedian of the Year Award, which could be read as a pinnacle of success within a neoliberal context as this award springboards the rest of his career as a professional comedian (Do 2010, 140).

One of the main projects of neoliberalism is to locate all success and failure within the individual, as such the hyperindividualism of memoir provides fertile ground for the expression of individualised agency. Read as a *künstlerroman*, Do's memoir expresses his individualised agency by his freedom not only to make the decision to follow comedy instead of law, but also his ability to follow through with that decision. Crucially, his success in comedy is located within him as the individual and is presented as the reward of personal willpower and the realisation of his neoliberal selfhood. As Do writes:

> I've always found that if you apply yourself at the right time with the right intensity you can accomplish just about anything. So many times in my life I think my naivety about what you supposedly *could* and *couldn't* do helped me make big leaps that others might think were over the top. (2010, 113 emphases in original)

As I have argued in this section, emancipation from Do's burden of expectation as a migrant child or the limitations of what he 'could' do, is crucial to the realisation of his neoliberal selfhood because he emerges as an empowered individual. What Do performs here is a representation of migrant life where the hope of such individualised agency and freedom to make those decisions required for success are preserved while neoliberalism renders this kind of agency effectively powerless. The realities of migrant life in neoliberal times are such that every act of success, whether under neoliberal definitions or not, is an act of overcoming adversity and rising above unrealistic expectations levelled by the dominant culture. Do's pursuit of happiness here is not so much a departure from neoliberal definitions of success, but instead the responsible act of an empowered neoliberal individual.

Conclusion

Asian-Australian migrant life writing in Australia has a rich history and celebrates the existence of Asian-Australians and their plentiful contributions to Australian culture. *The Happiest Refugee* trades on this increasing interest in exotic lives, spurred on by global conflict and mass migration, and rides a wave of popularity in other life narratives of migrant lives and experiences. Although, as I have noted, Do's memoir reached the heights of popularity that far outstretch other Asian-Australian migrant life writing that carved out the space for this particular memoir to enter the market. Waves of reviews from Asian-

Australians considered this memoir to pander strongly to the interests of a white Anglo-Australian audience. So much so that Fukui coined the 'Anh Do Effect' to describe the distance felt by moderately successful Asian-Australians at the heights of success achieved by Do with his book, his comedy and television career. As I have argued, Do performs assimilation in his memoir: his neoliberal style works as both a compliment and a counter to the neoliberal definitions of success championed by the model minority narrative. Further, Do's status as the 'good' migrant of the model minority narrative is visible in how he rehearses neoliberal definitions of success through money, education, career and fame.

The Happiest Refugee presents Australians with the kind of benevolent story that they ostensibly most like to see about themselves. Do's representation of a successful migrant life through his memoir reconfirms Australian readers' securities about unthreatening and grateful 'good' migrants. This is the nature, but also the risk, of popular memoir: that audiences, generally, read the available narrative in ways that most appeal to them. As I argue, Do's use of self-deprecation and irony in his comedy, both his stand-up and the humour presented in his memoir, exposes troubling expectations of Australian audiences to migrant life. I have noted how Do's comedic neoliberal style, and his use of humour in his memoir, act simultaneously as a counter and a compliment to the model minority narrative of neoliberal success. However, it appears that the popularity of Do's memoir has done little to make space for other Asian-Australian migrant memoirs in the popular market, his performance may have been *too* convincing and has narrowed access to the market to only unrealistically exceptional migrants. In the next chapter, I consider how another migrant subject, Scottish migrant and rock icon Jimmy Barnes, is able to transform his problematic 'masculine' identity into the potential for political intervention and social justice. Unlike Do, Barnes does not masquerade as an 'exceptional' migrant celebrity, he struggles with anxieties of 'measuring up' to celebrity expectations and exposes his flaws in an act of public catharsis, judgement, reconciliation and redemption.

Chapter 5 – From a Boy to a Man: Transformations of Identity through *Working Class Boy*

Introduction

When Cold Chisel appeared on "Australian TV Week's Countdown Awards" in February of 1981, lead singer Jimmy Barnes was fast becoming one of the most popular musicians in Australian rock and roll history. The band's album *East* had been the biggest selling album of 1980 and they were nominated for 10 coveted Countdown Awards, winning the right to perform at the made-for-TV event. Cold Chisel took this as an opportunity to show their displeasure that radio stations and the popular ABC television 'top of the pops' music show *Countdown* so far refused to play their song *Khe Sanh* because of the lyric: 'their legs were open, but their minds were always closed' (Adams 2011). Regaled as a moment of 'Chisel gold' by fans and music journalists alike, this performance involved some clever freestyling of lyrics by Barnes, Ian Moss smashed his guitar (which Countdown tried to cover up) and Barnes left the stage saluting with his trademark bottle of vodka after ranting 'Eat this' (Adams 2011). Australian music journalist and legendary host of Countdown, Molly Meldrum, was horrified, remarking 'And I thought they were happy to receive the award' (Adams 2011). This kind of stage performance where band members destroy their equipment, drink alcohol on stage and rebel against authority is typical of the rock music genre, and Cold Chisel fans both love and expect it.

Throughout Barnes' career is a trail of controversy, empty bottles, trashed venues and smashed music equipment. Though, simultaneously this public image of Barnes as the Rockstar has become conflated with Australia's 'Working Class Man', a national symbol of aspirational masculinity. The term 'Working Class Man' originates from a song of the same name, which was originally released as a Barnes solo album titled *For the Working Class Man*, in 1985 (Jenkins 2007, 303). The song lyrics epitomise a particularly Australian style of masculinity that privileges the hard-working men of Australia's industrial age; what Barnes calls a 'steel town disciple' (Barnes, 1985). Barnes sings about a man who works 'hard to make a living', 'runs like a cyclone', 'did his time in Vietnam', is a 'simple man, with a heart of gold' who saves up all his overtime pay to marry his sweetheart: 'oh, he's a working class man' (Barnes 1985). Barnes remarks that although many fans thought the song was written about him, it was really about his audience: 'staunch, honest people, who work and who care' (Jenkins 2007, 303). Significantly, Barnes cannot control the reception of his song (much less

his memoirs), fans read it as autobiographical and thus, for them, the 'working class man' becomes part of Barnes' celebrity persona. Even if his aggressive antics as a rock musician or his personal story, as we learn in his memoirs, does not live up to that label. Since the song's release in 1985, 'working class man' has become a part of the Australian vernacular as emblematic of the qualities of the quintessential Australian man; staunch, hard-working, loyal, honest and enjoys a beer at the end of the day. Though the term also invokes cultural memory and nostalgia for a bygone 'golden' age of manufacturing; good men, doing good honest work that built this country.

'Working class man' is subsequently a term of endearment that champions attributes that coincide with those of traditional neoliberalism, which Peter Bloom describes in *The Ethics of Neoliberalism* as hard work and loyalty to the workplace followed by promises of wealth, success and happiness (2017, 19). As Tony Moore and Mark Gibson argue in their article 'Beyond Bogan: What Became of Australia's Working Class?' Historically, the Australian working class 'were seen as agents of progress and modernity, of making the world not just fairer but run better – because they ran everything, they made things' (2018, n.p.). Moore and Gibson's description here embodies what Bloom calls the 'ethical capitalist subject', discursively produced by neoliberalism, who is 'personally responsible for making their society, workplace and even their lives more ethical' (2017, i). The 'working class man' is not just a symbol of masculinity, it is, more accurately, a narrative about Australian masculinity rooted in cultural memory, nationalism, class and the celebrity image of Barnes: a way of *being* a 'working class man'. Significantly, the foundations of masculinity, class and neoliberalism on which the working class man is built are not static, they constantly reproduce over time within the cultures and societies in which they are produced. For example, Moore and Gibson describe a systematic introduction of economic reforms over the last 20 years in Australia that effectively 'gutted' the manufacturing industry, this is culminated with the closing of Australian automotive manufacturer Holden (General Motor Company) in 2017 (2018, n.p.). Crucially, as manufacturing plants continued to close throughout the country, their workers, largely middle-aged men with technical qualifications or years of valuable experience in manual trades, were suddenly unemployable. The working class man became displaced, anxious, emasculated and even angry. Gibson and Moore argue such developments have not necessarily destroyed the working class but have prompted a re-imagining of the 'working class man' in the post-industrial age through how the working class represent themselves in popular culture (2018, n.p.). As I discuss in this chapter,

Barnes' memoirs offer access to his personal traumatic experiences and recasts such confessions as an act of healing and redemption, it is his path to becoming a better man. Simultaneously, invoking the symbol of the 'working class man' in the titles of his memoirs suggests that Barnes may not just be telling us *his* story, he may also be telling a 'working class man' story.

Crucial to a re-imagining of the 'working class man' is a redemption narrative of overcoming trauma or disadvantage, which runs parallel to and feeds Barnes' identity transformation through a narrative of personal redemption in his memoirs. Andrea Waling in *White Masculinity in Contemporary Australia: The Good Ol' Aussie Bloke* argues that a shift has occurred in Australia in which some traditionally masculine attributes that were once considered positive are now considered to be negative (2020, 178). Waling maps this shift alongside increasing cosmopolitanism and decreasing industrial jobs from the 1990s to the 2000s. Some of the attributes that Waling identifies as problematic, and thus emblematic of 'bad' masculinity, are aggression, hyper-masculinity, sexism, patriotism, heavy alcohol consumption, violence and being 'working class' (2020, 177). Significantly, Waling explains what she calls 'moral hero who triumphs over tragedy narratives' which can revamp traditional conservative, hegemonic and conforming ideals about proper masculinity (2020, 69). These narratives embody a 'working-class sense of heroism' and focus on stories of 'men who have overcome physical and psychological challenges in their lives that then contribute to their sense of masculine identity' (Waling 2020, 69). As Judith Butler's work in *Gender Trouble* and later *Bodies That Matter* suggests, the repetition of gender performance opens up possibilities for change, but also for ongoing constraint and regulation. Significantly, Butler examines gender as an 'act': 'a regulatory practice that produced the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls' (Butler 2011a, 200; 2011b, xi-xii). With Cold Chisel, and in his solo career, Barnes performs a style of masculinity synonymous with the genre of rock music and the image of the Rockstar: raspy screams, aggressive stage performances, offensive language and alcohol and drug dependence. These attributes are synonymous with Barnes' celebrity and, significantly, constitute the behaviours that he will come to understand in his memoir as elements of a masculinity that he now judges as toxic. Thus, when read as a redemption narrative, *Working Class Boy* emerges as more than just a childhood memoir of a 'working class man,' but the story of *becoming* a 'working class man' through a process of confession and self-help. In

this way, Barnes' memoir intervenes in narratives about traditional Australian masculinity while simultaneously reimagining the working class man as a neoliberal success story.

In 2016, HarperCollins published Barnes' first memoir titled *Working Class Boy*, which was quickly followed by his second memoir titled *Working Class Man* in 2017. Barnes' first memoir is a confessional coming-of-age story detailing Barnes' childhood emigration to Australia from Scotland and a life growing up in the shadow of violence, alcoholism and poverty in the industrial town, and spiritual home of Holden, Elizabeth in South Australia. Cold Chisel is gestured to at the end of the memoir, when Barnes references one of the group's early band names 'Orange'. By contrast, *Working Class Man* is more of a rock music memoir and in it, Barnes documents his fame with Cold Chisel, name-dropping famous producers and bands and reflecting on the constant partying and substance abuse of the rock and roll lifestyle. However, dark themes of 'running away' and survival that permeate *Working Class Boy* continue in its sequel as suicide attempts, broken relationships, drug addiction and the death of Barnes' mother punctuate the account of fame and celebrity.

These two memoirs became blockbuster bestsellers, both sold over 100,000 copies each in their first year of publication and were awarded Biography of Year in 2017 and 2018 respectively at the Australian Book Industry Awards (McMillen 2019). Subsequent to the popularity of his memoirs, Barnes has also emerged as an advocate against domestic abuse. He has appeared on current affairs programs, including the high-profile ABC panel show *Q&A* and Channel 10's news program *The Project*, talking about 'toxic masculinity' and lamenting the epidemic of violence against women in Australia. Barnes' memoir, which details his personal experience and recovery as a child victim of domestic abuse, is timely and even urgent within the context of a domestic violence epidemic and crisis of toxic masculinity. Some members of the public have even called for Barnes to run for parliament, something Barnes rejects because he thinks he would be 'too blunt' for politics (Keane 2019). Barnes clearly has a powerful public image as Australia's re-imagined and redeemed working class man and, in this chapter, I examine how his bestselling memoir *Working Class Boy* achieves the (re)construction of this public image and allows Barnes adjacent powers to address masculinity in the public sphere.

A suite of related cultural products (the documentary film, the Stories and Songs tour etc.) were produced and circulated following the publication of Barnes' two memoirs, and as these products draw directly from the memoirs they also act as marketing tools. On 23rd

August 2018, the film *Jimmy Barnes: Working Class Boy*, directed by Mark Joffe, officially hit cinemas across Australia where it set a record for the biggest box office returns for an Australian documentary. The film earned nearly $500,000 on its opening weekend and reached 1.14 million viewers in a later free-to-air television broadcast (McMillen 2019). Joffe's documentary fuses the dark, gritty reflections of Barnes' childhood with emotive musical performances as it follows Barnes from Glasgow to Elizabeth. Barnes is also filmed visiting physical sites of significance in the memoir (childhood home, hangout spots, gig venues etc.) and Barnes offers anecdotes from the memoir in the form of conjured memory. At the same time Barnes performed in stage shows where he talked about his life in sold-out national tours described as 'more subdued musical performances' but again draw directly from the two memoirs (McMillen 2019). Whitlock, in her article 'Salvage: Locating Lives in the Migration Museum' argues that Barnes' performance on the Stories and Songs tour where he fuses extracts from his memoir with his life experience and songs 'animates his memoir as a breaking story in contemporary life narratives of childhood and migration' (2017, 437). Also, Whitlock argues that the remediation of this memoir into a speaking and musical performance transforms the experiences that Barnes reproduces into an intimate form of collective memory: 'This performance is cathartic not only for him but also for the audience. What is staged here […] is an ethics of recognition, through recollection, repentance, reconstitution and reconciliation' (Whitlock 2017, 437). While collective memory is a powerful reading force for the memoir, what Whitlock identifies here is the power of consuming experience in a physical public where feelings are performed as well as felt. Barnes demonstrates, through remediation of his memoir and the intimate performance of feeling, how audiences are intended to consume his life story and by extension, his renewed public identity.

Although Barnes has clearly channelled his autobiographical life-story into various products, he rejects commodification as a motivation for his new public image: 'It wasn't premeditated, it wasn't a "career move" – it was something I had to do for myself' (quoted in McMillen 2019). Barnes' focus here on the more personal motivations for writing his first memoir are revealed in the 'Acknowledgements': he explains that writing *Working Class Boy* was a cathartic process that took several decades. First, he tried to write it in the 1990s, a version fuelled by the copious drugs and alcohol he was still consuming and that 'makes light of the worst times' in Barnes' life, and he 'can't even bear to look at it now' (2016, 360). His second attempt was in 2000, which Barnes thought was better, more honest, but the laptop on

which he was writing was burgled from his hotel room and never recovered. Ultimately, Barnes realised that he has to face up to the past, and started therapy to help with this, but the catalyst for the memoir is watching the dark South Australian murder film *Snowtown:*

> I was suddenly dragged back to my childhood. Don't get me wrong, we weren't serial killers – well, not that I know of anyway. But everything in the movie looked like where I grew up. It looked like our street. In fact, it looked like our house. The floodgates opened and I couldn't hold back the past any longer. It just washed all over me. So I began to write.' (2016, 361)

The idea of memoir and life narrative as a therapeutic self-help, both for the writer and the reader, is a familiar and popular trope of the genre. Subsequently, these popular tropes also tie in with the idea that the desirable authentic self, in this case Barnes' recovered and redeemed self, is available through a process of intensive labour, self-discipline and self-realisation. Here, memoir acts both as authentication for Barnes' redeemed self and his story, but also the technology through which Barnes was able to achieve that redeemed self. The resulting shift in Barnes' public image – from the violent, aggressive alcoholic of the 1980s to the survivor and advocate, which is described to have taken place as a result of writing his memoirs – became a popular topic of discussion in Australian newspapers.

Multiple reviews of *Working Class Boy* and related opinion pieces on Jimmy Barnes were published following the publication of his first memoir but writers for *The Australian* and *The Guardian Australia*, particularly, commented on how Barnes' public image has shifted from the 'blokey bloke' to the survivor as a result of his recovery (McMillen 2019). Greta Parry writes in *The Guardian* that Barnes has always given men permission to express intense emotion without breaking the masculinity contract, by drunkenly singing and screaming with him, even as the Cold Chisel song 'Flame Trees' dismisses emotion as 'sentimental bullshit': 'who needs that sentimental bullshit anyway?' (Parry 2018). Through this, Parry identifies that 'the interplay of repressed pain and misguided stoicism' expressed by Barnes both in his music and his memoir, though rampant across Australia, is both useful and problematic. Ultimately, Parry reads the transformed Barnes as signalling 'less a new beginning than a natural evolution' as Barnes has 'always been hurting with his fans and offering ways of coping, and now he's offering ways of healing' (Parry 2018). Subsequently, award-winning music journalist Andrew McMillen writes in an article for *The Australian*

newspaper that, 'even for those paying close attention in the past three years, that change has been remarkably sudden':

> Barnes has welcomed us to survey the contents of his life, good and bad. He has invited judgement on the behaviours and choices that have guided him into unhealthy patterns and situations. He has offered himself up to us wholesale, - apparently without qualification or much in the way of censorship. Long viewed as one of the blokiest blokes in the nation's popular culture he has abandoned the stoic, unreflective approach shared by many peers of his era and instead spent nearly a decade in therapy, asking himself questions about his fundamentals as a human being. Who am I? What am I afraid of? How did the events of my boyhood shape me as a man? And what – if anything – can I do to unlearn those lessons and reshape myself into a better, kinder person? (McMillen 2019)

McMillen's description here begins to illuminate why some reviewers assume that fans of Cold Chisel will be disappointed by *Working Class Boy*; because it's not a story about Barnes as fans assume to know him. Significantly, Barnes has abandoned the traditionally masculine traits of stoicism in favour of taking personal responsibility for his emotional pain by going to therapy, asking himself the hard questions and confessing his unhealthy behaviours in his memoir. David Free's review in *The Australian* even goes as far to say that 'the identity of the author is incidental, and in some ways even distracting. After all you don't open a book by Jimmy Barnes expecting a classic of Australian autobiography' (2016). Free's comment on the uncomfortable dichotomy between the celebrity Barnes and his 'classic of Australian autobiography' draws on the assumption that celebrities are incapable of producing 'good' life writing and exposes the contested space in which celebrity life writing circulates. Anh Do and Magda Szubanski, whose memoirs are examined in Chapter Four and Chapter Six, are also subject to these kinds of backhanded compliments by 'pleasantly surprised' reviewers of their memoirs. More than suggesting celebrities can't write, these reviewers are suggesting that celebrities are ill-equipped to write about *life*, to reflect on it, to offer insight, to overcome physical and emotional challenges. It is assumed that celebrities don't experience 'real' lives and therefore can't be relatable to an ordinary reader. As Katja Lee explains, celebrities as public subjects have limited abilities to control their own identity within that public, as the meaning of a celebrity subject is negotiated by multiple participants like fans, industries, professional reviewers etc. (2014, 87). Lee goes on to argue that, although

celebrity writers can be aware of, and respond to, the established meanings of their public identity, it is ultimately readers who are implicated in shaping these texts.

For *Working Class Boy*, readers are likely knowledgeable of Barnes' reputation as a masculine status symbol, but those same readers may also be invested in the intimate and private sphere of his childhood as the site and source of truth. Additionally, readers are inevitably influenced by their own politics, assumptions and expectations of a text, and these become particularly complex when the reader is a fan. Mixed reviews of *Working Class Boy* on the social reading site *Goodreads* reflect the turbulent space in which celebrity memoir circulates. While some readers are drawn to the redemption story, where Barnes rises above his traumatic childhood to survive, others dismiss it as repetitive and uninteresting. Tanya writes, 'I picked up this book as a fan of Barnsey and Cold Chisel, and I guess expecting a story of the man behind the band, how they came to be, anecdotes from the road, that type of thing' however she praises the memoir as 'Heartbreaking reading, and a book that was difficult to put down' (*Goodreads* 2016). However, Nena writes, 'If I'd known a second book is to be released I wouldn't have bothered with this one and just read the second', she claims that the whole memoir was 'repetitive' and 'could have been condensed into two or three chapters' (*Goodreads* 2016). Erin's review is similar, she writes 'all the stories were the same in the end and it became rather repetitive … in a world of sex and drugs – I'm much more interested in the rock n' roll' (*Goodreads* 2018). What these reviews on *Goodreads* reveal is that many readers were expecting a typical Rock memoir, though whether that expectation is informed by their own understandings of Barnes as a celebrity subject or the memoir's advertising focusing more on Barnes than the content of the memoir is unclear. Significantly, the redemption story as a popular structure is carried over to the sequel *Working Class Man*, which fuses music memoir of the famous Rockstar life with a redemption story. Typically, there are fond memories of Barnes' time in Cold Chisel, the sold-out shows, famous friends, great parties, drunken hazes and memorable relationships. Although, Barnes' recovery from drug addiction, coming to consciousness as a solo artist and the death of his mother are the driving forces of the narrative. Reviews on *Goodreads* are also overwhelmingly positive for *Working Class Man*, though some reviews lament that they wanted more of the harrowing and intimate stuff from the first memoir (Goodreads, 2020). What is demonstrated by these reviews, and the various cultural products that make up the paratext, is that this memoir is engaged in a complex cultural space which reveals how memoir and its audiences, work to construct and reconstruct identity in the public sphere.

Like other popular memoirs examined in this thesis, my reading of *Working Class Boy* foregrounds the role of performance and persona in memoir. While providing a personal, traumatic story of recovery and redemption Barnes also writes of becoming the 'working class man'. This chapter examines the blockbuster popularity of Barnes' first memoir *Working Class Boy*, and particularly how the confessional, revelatory and intimate content of this memoir contributes to Barnes' shifting identity in the Australian public. Confession, as it is understood in life narrative under religious terms that equate the act of confession with redemption and forgiveness, is an integral part of Barnes' identity shift. Subsequently, the redemption narrative of Barnes' recovery also acts to reaffirm his masculinity as a reformed and redeemed 'working class man' that finally lives up to the expectations of his fans and the wider Australian public. As I discuss in the sections that follow, by locating Barnes' childhood within cycles of violence and poverty, the memoir provides new context under which to understand Barnes' cycles of substance abuse and violence as an adult. The memoir is a survival narrative framed as self-help and confession, in this way Barnes' alcohol consumption, hyper-masculinity and propensity to violence become misguided coping mechanisms that Barnes now comes to read as toxic masculinity. In this chapter, I read the memoir through a therapeutic lens as self-help, which makes visible how Barnes' survival story is also underwritten with neoliberal mythologies that champion the willpower of the individual. Further, while the memoir is coded as Barnes' individual story, he simultaneously demonstrates intimate understanding of the systemic cycles of poverty and violence that the individual must escape in order to 'get lucky' and survive, which suggests that this is not *just* Barnes' story. Adjacently, I discuss how this popular memoir's engagement with increasingly visible social issues of domestic violence and toxic masculinity, from the viewpoint of personal experience, allows Barnes a position of an authority on these subjects and grants him the power to speak publicly.

Surviving the Working Class

At its core *Working Class Boy* is a story of survival, this theme recurs constantly throughout the memoir both as the driving force behind Barnes' escape from the abuse of childhood but also as a contextualisation for Barnes' often violent and sometimes criminal behaviour (Barnes 2016, front cover). James Dixon Swan (who would become Jimmy Barnes) grew up in Cowcaddens in the inner-city slums of Glasgow, Scotland. Whitlock explains that 'years of war, depression and poverty had slowly been dragging Northern Britain into the gutter, and

Barnes recalls that the end of the ship-building industry in Glasgow was the end of employment for more than half of the population' (2017, 429). The Swan family paid ten pounds to migrate by boat, on the *Strathnaver*, to South Australia the 'land of opportunity' and eventually to Elizabeth in the outer northern suburbs of Adelaide marketed as the 'City of Tomorrow' in 1963. Today, Barnes invokes these memories of industry collapse, widespread unemployment and poverty in his song 'Shutting Down our Town' (2019) about the end of car manufacturing under Holden (the Australian arm of General Motors Company) in Elizabeth. Barnes' song also points to the irony that even 60 years after Barnes first arrived, housing and retail developments still call Elizabeth 'The City of Tomorrow'. In the music video that accompanies 'Shutting Down Our Town' the role of the survivor is prominent and it begins with a stark reminder: 'October 20, 2017: The Holden factory in Elizabeth SA closes its doors. Forever,' accompanied by news broadcasts that hail the 'end of an era'. The video is full of historic marketing clips, footage from the manufacturing plant, Holden Toranas racing at Mount Panorama, Bathurst, the hero of Holden Team Racing Peter Brock, and Holden employees wiping away tears as they walk out the Elizabeth factory gates for the final time (Barnes 2019a). Although the end provides a hopeful reminder as 'survivors', restored vehicles spanning over 60 years of local production, are driven through the packed streets of Adelaide and finally past the imposing structure of the empty factory. Here, survival is entangled in historic social and cultural memory, the end of Holden is not just the end of industry, or the loss of jobs and security for Elizabeth, it signals the loss of a quintessentially Australian way of life that 'sticks' to the surviving vehicles. In *Working Class Boy* it becomes evident that these types of social and cultural memory also 'stick' to Barnes, to the 'working class man', to masculinity, to normalised gender violence, and as I argue, the memoir relies on this memory to find a receptive audience.

From the outset Barnes' life is marked by violence: if you so much as step on the wrong street in Glasgow you'll get your teeth kicked in, the men are violent, the women are violent, everyone is poor and the adults like to drink (Barnes 2016, 7-11). Barnes believes that the Glaswegian style of violence follows him throughout the rest of his life, and even as the young family moves to Australia the violence only gets worse. Home becomes a warzone, the streets of the northern suburbs are cold and dangerous, there's never enough money for food and Barnes is forced to navigate his journey to manhood alone. Survival, here, is only understood under the neoliberal distortion of personal responsibility as a choice, as hyper-focus on the individual obscures any wider systemic factors surrounding that choice (Bloom

2017, 6). The role of the survivor is first mentioned in *Working Class Boy* is on page two of the Prologue, Barnes is telling us about his older brother John, about his father, and about himself:

> Even my big brother John told me, "I'm afraid of no man. I'm afraid of nothing that breathes."
>
> Now I know John was lying. He was lying to me, to himself and to the rest of the world. John was surviving. He was so scared that he was dangerous. Dad was the same. Afraid and dangerous. Especially to those people who were closest to him.
>
> Just like me. (Barnes 2016, 2)

In this way Barnes is identifying the similarities between the stories of his father, his brother and himself as examples of 'survival'. Usually, as Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale argue, the act of surviving actions the discursive shift from victim to survivor and this transformation occurs logically throughout the progression of survivor speech (2010, 199-200). Crucially, Barnes only understands himself as a victim from his position in the present, in the historical context of the memoir the abuse and violence he suffers are normalised. Additionally, John and Barnes' Dad do not personally identify as victims, it's only now that Barnes reads their 'scared' and 'dangerous' behaviours as 'surviving.' In this way, the reader is encouraged to consider all three men as victims of a style of masculinity where men posture bravery and stoicism to obscure their fear and violence. This section thus provides a frame through which to read the male members of Barnes' family: they have each participated in acts of dangerous and violent 'survival', but this behaviour is also seen as traditionally masculine in its representation of bravery, strength and stoicism.

There are two different yet connected narratives in *Working Class Boy*, the chronological story of Barnes' childhood which is represented in its historical and cultural context, and the story of Barnes' redemption as an adult where he revisits and re-experiences his childhood from a new perspective. While these two narrative perspectives are both signalled by the autobiographical 'I', this is split between the child voice 'Jimmy' who speaks from the past, and the adult narrator 'Barnes' who speaks from the present. This narrative device gives the impression that Barnes is processing these memories 'as they happen,' and, like the reader is sitting on an extended therapy session. While reading *Working Class Boy*, the reader not only sees the events of Barnes' life play out through

Jimmy's eyes, but they also know what Jimmy is thinking, how Jimmy tries to make sense of the horrors he lives in and crucially, they might even experience what Jimmy is feeling. A particularly disturbing, but powerful, example of this occurs when Jimmy, just a young schoolboy no more than ten years old, is first introduced to sex by accidentally witnessing a gang rape:

> There in the shadows was a group of young guys, grabbing at a young girl with no clothes on. They looked like animals, snarling and baring their teeth at one another and pushing each other out of the way to get at the girl. She wasn't fighting them off. She just lay there saying nothing, staring straight up at the sky. I couldn't work out if this was supposed to be fun or not but I knew I didn't want to keep watching. And I definitely didn't want to get spotted by the bigger guys. (Barnes 2016, 135)

Here, the reader re-lives this moment as Jimmy experiences it, he is confused and struggles to communicate what he sees without any frame of reference through which to understand it. Jimmy is afraid, not only of the uncomfortable feelings conjured by what he is witnessing, but of the potential beating he might get from the older boys if he is spotted on the rooftop. Evidenced here is just one of the ways in which life narrative and use of the child voice work to package trauma in ways that allow it to seek a witness who will hear it. Gilmore explains that memoirs depicting trauma, as opposed to trauma testimony in juridical or legal contexts, often present trauma in ways that balance representation of trauma grounded in personal, emotional experience, without negating its impact (2001, 132). Further, Schaffer and Smith, via Whitlock, explain that readers consume trauma through frameworks that reaffirm their imagined securities, that is, in ways where they are not directly implicated in that trauma (2003, 23-24; Whitlock 2007, 3). Jimmy's difficulty in articulating his trauma creates distance between such trauma and its reader by internalising it as 'his' personal trauma, which does not ethically implicate the reader. Simultaneously, the impact of Jimmy's trauma is preserved through an uncomfortable dichotomy between Jimmy's innocence as a child and the adult trauma that he is forced to witness.

In the memoir boom, autobiographies of childhood that represented traumatic childhoods – for example, those depicting child abuse – were widely read and became popular. The association between autobiography and childhood trauma has brought the genre both acclaim and notoriety. At best, these autobiographies of childhood trauma have been praised for elevating child abuse into the public consciousness and acting as tools for

advocacy; at worst, these books have been criticised for being exploitative, unethical and even voyeuristic in their representation of child subjects (Douglas 2010, 3). For example, Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas discuss how Margaux Fragoso's courageous memoir *Tiger, Tiger* (2012) of childhood sexual abuse was dismissed by some reviewers as softcore pornography and eroticised paedophilia (Cardell and Douglas 2012, 44-45). Fragoso's memoir stands apart from other memoirs depicting child sexual abuse because she explores, and represents, the complex emotions she felt as a child during her 15 years of abuse. The comforting and socially expected good/evil binary is thus challenged by Fragoso's honest admissions that she 'loved' her abuser, which forces readers to confront the consoling frameworks through which they view trauma and abuse from a distance (Gilmore 2017). Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, though not concerned with sexual abuse, draws on the tradition of the 'survivor narrative' – life narratives that recount trauma, attempting to go beyond therapeutic ends to toward making political statements about social injustice (Martin Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale, 213). McCourt stakes out territory for telling stories about childhood poverty and intergenerational trauma – particularly how he is affected by his mother Angela's trauma. His narrative presents a way through intergenerational trauma. Yet, however transgressive and empowering the text may be, survivor narratives such as McCourt's – circulating in mainstream domains – inevitably invest in dominant neoliberal paradigms for representing survival (resilience, work ethic, gratitude) (Douglas 2010, 75).

Memoirs of child abuse are confronting because they disrupt cultural conventions of what a childhood is and should be. Particularly in relation to childhood: 'The appearance of survivor narratives … of an experience that has both been denied by and sanctioned within Western culture, necessarily fractures received constructions of childhood' (Lovrod 1998, 23). Barnes' memoir makes visible a social and cultural framework in which violence, poverty and cycles of intergenerational abuse define his childhood experience. Barnes grew up in the shadow of a violent and drunk father, his parents screamed at each other, broke glass and fought every other day. Barnes and his siblings had holes in their shoes, old and ragged clothes, and relied on the kindness of friends and neighbours to get more than one small plate of mince and potatoes a day. Further, Barnes divulges that he has been the victim of sexual assault during some of his parents' wild parties: 'I can still feel the touch of drunken strangers … as they tried to touch or kiss me. I wanted to be as far away from our home as I could get' (Barnes 2016, 142). Barnes seeks refuge staying with a friend, until the friend's older brother comes home and wants to show them how men practice sex. Barnes is

too young to understand what's happening, but he knows he isn't safe: 'I remember this man trying to fuck me' (Barnes 2016, 142). For Barnes, danger is everywhere, there is no one to protect him, and places that are supposed to be safe are repeatedly proven to be more dangerous than walking the streets (2016, 143). Crucially, Barnes learns that he has no choice but to only rely on himself, thus reinforcing dominant neoliberal paradigms for representing survival that focus on individual strength and resilience.

Douglas argues that autobiographers have commonly used their autobiography as a platform for exploring social history, particularly the difficulties faced by children in the social world. The mid-1990s saw the publication of three notable childhood autobiographies that have commonly been thought of as a catalyst for the 'memoir boom' that followed; Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club,* Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, and James McBride's *The Colour of Water*. These memoirs are distinctive because they all represent a low socio-economic experience of childhood, and each depicts trauma. Each of these memoirs also follow the neoliberal redemption arc in the form of 'rags-to-riches' stories where childhood trauma gives way to success in adult life. These memoirs represent the effects of adult dysfunction – in the form of alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, mental illness and rape – on the children that witness this dysfunction and become implicated within it. Karr and McBride were praised for their lack of 'self-pity', though notably McBride's memoir was commended for its exploration of racial identities and its celebration of McBride's resilient mother. Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, which tells the story of his miserable Irish childhood, became one of the literary success stories of the 1990s. McCourt's memoir is presented as the accessible story of a 'real life' rags-to-riches narrative construction of childhood from the child's perspective (Douglas 2010, 9-10). Barnes' harrowing memoir of childhood trauma, abuse and neglect follows this template for the popular and acclaimed childhood autobiography.

Following the popular structure carved out by other best-selling childhood memoirs, Barnes' childhood is described through poverty, violence and abuse, and crucially, although Jimmy is implicated in these systemic factors, he maintains a lack of self-pity and fosters resilience for his survival. For example, when Jimmy describes his relationship with his father through the metaphor of a dog on a chain, he explains a cycle of emotional distance in which he himself participates. The family move from the Finsbury Hotel to Seaton Park in Adelaide's northern suburbs and Jimmy's father gets a job from an Italian builder who lets them stay on the worksite in a house that is scheduled for demolition. The worksite is

guarded by a large Alsatian that is constantly kept on a chain and never given human contact; the dog turns at anyone that comes near it. Anyone except for Jimmy's father:

> As I said before, my dad was charmer. Dogs weren't the only things that fell under his spell. People were the same. Everybody liked him. And he had time for everyone – everyone except Mum and us kids. I could never work out why he was like that. We idolised him. We sat around and waited for any attention he was willing to show us. A lot like that dog actually, only our chains weren't quite as obvious. (Barnes 2016, 67)

Here, Jimmy draws on the scary Alsatian and the image of the chain to make sense not only of the emotional distance he feels from his father, but also that constant yearning for his father's attention that he seems not be able to escape. Additionally, this example describes a traditionally masculine mode of survival grounded in bravery and charm: Barnes' father is the only person 'brave' enough to approach the dangerous dog, and 'charming' enough to gain it (and everyone else's) trust. Subsequently, although withholding attention from his family is problematic, it too is implicated in this model of survival as it brings focus back to the individual as the driving force of survival. Though this hurts Jimmy now, this model of survival is one that he will come to emulate as he grows older and realises that the key to survival lies in his individual willpower and resilience.

Jimmy struggles to find his voice as a survivor, but this is partly a narrative device that immerses Jimmy, as the child voice, in the past represented as the as-it-happens present. 'Jimmy' is a mechanism through which Barnes therapeutically comes to understand that his memories, and their reconstruction through memoir, constitutes survivor testimony. The memoir presents a clear link between child Jimmy and adult Barnes, which authenticates not only Barnes' survival story but the redemption story that is accessed through confession of the survival story as a method of self-help. Crucially, the child Jimmy, the adult Barnes and even the later troubled teenage Jimmy coexist in the narrative, providing opportunities for the reader to occupy the consciousness of each 'version' of Barnes. This enhances the memoir's authenticity as readers can see and vicariously experience Jimmy learning and maturing, while Barnes as the narrator never claims omnipotence and acknowledges his mistakes. Janice Haaken argues that the circulation of diverse trauma narratives can only deepen our understanding of the complexities of being a 'survivor'. As Haaken writes, 'we need to claim as much cultural space as we can for meaningful debate, for exploring the ambiguities and

uncertainties that emerge as … [survivors] struggle to find their own voices, past and present' (117; Douglas 2010, 130). When Barnes writes about his first understandings of physically violent domestic abuse, Jimmy's voice fades away to Barnes' recollection from the present:

> Dad didn't hit us, as far as I remember. Mum was the enforcer of the family. I don't remember seeing Dad hit Mum either, but I know he did. It was probably so fast and deadly that we looked away and missed it, thank God. But some mornings I would get up and there would be Mum with a black eye or a fat lip, sitting alone in the kitchen crying while Dad was unconscious, snoring on the bed in their room, sleeping it off.
>
> It seemed in those days that it was normal for husbands to hit their wives. All Mum and Dad's friends seemed to do it at some time. Their wives would turn up on our doorstep with black eyes, crying to Mum, saying, 'That's it. This is the last time. I'm never goin' back. He'll never lay a hand on me again, I swear to God'. They always went back and the violence never stopped. (Barnes 2016, 140)

Barnes goes on to explain that 'this was all wrong' and further explains that as kids, because they witnessed this violence at home, they were learning to solve their problems by hitting (Barnes 2016, 136). The notion that this appeared to be happening everywhere is crucial because it invokes a social and cultural memory for Australians that domestic violence is just a part of 'private' life. Douglas explains that individuals are socialised by cultural products, like popular memoir, 'to incorporate certain views of the past and incorporate these views into their own lives via collective memory' (2010, 23). Although, as interpretations of the past change, so does cultural memory. For example, these memories expressed in Barnes' memoir are not exclusive to Barnes, many readers have similar memories and come to believe that Barnes is telling 'their' story (Goodreads 2019). This narrative is presented within a framework of normalcy which is widely recognisable within Australian cultural memory and this continues to complicate advocacy against domestic abuse today.

Not one of 'those' boys

Life narrative has a long history of engaging with and providing support to social justice pursuits, life stories participate in circulating testimony and evidence against wrongs within testimonial networks that produce contexts that victims must grapple with. Gilmore explains that in understanding a testimonial network as a circulatory system in which life story

negotiates ideologies, politics and judgements that move in search of a witness is also to engage with how those audiences that bear witness also travel (2017, 60). After all, as Barnes' memoir demonstrates, what used to be considered normal and was validated as traditionally masculine behaviour, is now considered dangerous and toxic – not because the behaviour has changed, or even that men have changed, but because the network of judgements and testimony that circulate around gendered violence is shifting. To explain further, I use antidomestic violence advocate and victim Rosie Batty's public persona and her memoir *A Mother's Story* (2015) to discuss how the terms through which a witness to trauma will be known are not always within their power to control.

Australian journalist Jess Hill in *See What You Made Me Do*, responding to the domestic violence epidemic, describes the usual cycles of judgement that victims of domestic abuse navigate in their search for an adequate witness: 'Focus on *some* people leads us to believe that domestic abuse only happens to certain types of women' – why did *she* stay? What did *she* do to deserve it? (Hill 2019, 5). Further, Hill explains that when confronted with domestic abuse, our culturally ingrained impulse is to revert to a logical binary: 'if your partner abuses you, you should leave. If you don't leave, there's obviously something wrong with you' (Hill 2019, 51). Hill's explanation here points to how discourses of judgement, carried through the categories of truth and lies, infiltrate testimonial networks. Gilmore explains that a by-product of histories of coercion in both truth and lies is testimonial affect; the sense that truth is located in speech and can be destroyed by attacking the body from which that speech comes forth (2017, 76). The logical binary that Hill identifies where women who stay in abusive relationships are reduced to pathology, is an example of testimonial affect at work. Batty is a particular kind of domestic violence victim because when she personally addressed the media following her son's murder and details of her abuse became national news headlines, she transcended the usual way that domestic violence victim stories are consumed and seek adequate witnesses.

The news broadcasts, interviews and the memoir that worked to construct Batty's public image circumvented the usual cycles of judgement, there was never anything 'wrong' with her, or by extension any domestic violence victim. Batty's public persona sought not only to amplify the message that domestic violence is never the victim's fault, but also to summon an empathetic and supportive public. As Gilmore argues, the propensity to blame the victim in these circumstances is consistent with the neoliberal distortion of responsibility

as victim-blaming, which obscures the context surrounding a specific victim. 'Generally, victim blaming seeks to degrade individual women's capacity to receive sympathy, understanding and justice by shifting focus and responsibility away from perpetrators and on to victims' (Gilmore 2017, 10). Through the intimate details in her 2015 memoir, *A Mother's Story,* Batty emerged as a victim who resisted judgement by being blameless; she maintained control of her finances, she never lived with her abuser in a house that she didn't own, she called the police when he attacked her, and, as a mother she fiercely defended not only her abuser's right to be a father but his love for their son. Batty didn't *stay*; she moved away multiple times and her abuser always followed her, stalked her, and eventually, he even broke in. Batty's memoir sought to dispel many myths regarding domestic abuse, particularly that these relationships are always physically violent. The memoir reveals that the abuse Batty suffered was largely emotional and psychological, and like many victims she did not recognise that this constituted 'abuse'. Crucially, Batty's memoir worked to amplify her testimonial message and to make critical interventions in the public: victims were encouraged to seek help, people who recognised these patterns of abuse in others, friends or family were encouraged to reach out and support these victims.

Whitlock's concept of the ideal victim is useful for thinking about how testimonial networks move, but more importantly how particular victims who present their victim/survivor stories in particular ways get taken up by audiences, become popular and contribute to political action. Whitlock's ideal victims in her work *Soft Weapons* are cross-cultural as she examines the publishing phenomenon of 'veiled bestsellers,' that is, memoirs by middle eastern women oppressed by the burka, that swarmed the Western market in 2002 and became international bestsellers (2007, 51-52). For Whitlock, ideal victims are those that Western audiences *want* to read because their memoirs construct a crisis where these women need saving or 'unveiling' by Western culture, thereby reaffirming the reader's imagined securities and justifying Western invasion and war in the Middle East (2007, 52). I read Batty, for example, as an 'ideal victim' in her memoir because the representation of her victimhood circumvents the judgemental networks that seek to blame women for being abused. For readers, Batty is a 'good' victim, and therefore deserves their sympathy and support. Readers are also educated and empowered by Batty's memoir as it dispels mythologies that surrounded domestic abuse at the time of publication, while appealing to her readership for support and action – these victims also need 'saving.' Subsequently, when read as a redemption narrative *Working Class Boy* presents Barnes as such an ideal victim, he

confesses his actions as a victim-turned-perpetrator in order to seek judgement and redemption from his readers – *he* needs saving. Like Batty's memoir, *Working Class Boy* also educates readers by using Jimmy's child voice and first-person perspective to bring readers into the world of an abused child who, because of his environment, grows into a scared, dangerous and violent young man. Barnes as the innocent child victim is led down the wrong path by others around him who model masculinity as being tough, emotionless and violent. Significantly, his memoir depicts the adult Barnes using his past trauma as an opportunity for growth, healing, redemption and change. As the story of a reformed man who uses his own willpower to exceed the devastating circumstances of his childhood to become a successful Rockstar and uses his celebrity powers in the public to advocate for change – this is the kind of story that Australians *want* to read.

While *Working Class Boy* is coded in ways that reveal Barnes' individual story, a survivor story, he simultaneously demonstrates an intimate understanding of the systemic issues (poverty, violence and intergenerational cycles of abuse) that the individual must escape in order to survive. This identification of the systemic limitations to survival, while historically accurate for Elizabeth, also contains neoliberal mythologies that are not historically present. For example, Barnes cites low wages for most families in Elizabeth, coupled with alcoholism as contributing to widespread violent incidents in the area. 'The factories paid just enough to feed the families and if they were frugal enough, and if they didn't drink at all, they might just scratch out a life' (Barnes 2016, 82). Read within a framework that makes visible the neoliberal redemption story, this systemic analysis reveals neoliberal codes of personal responsibility; the workers and their families are positioned as responsible for being frugal enough and abstaining from alcohol in order to live a 'good' life. Similarly, these neoliberal codes remind us that the 'working class man' – just like the 'good' life that these workers aspire to – is a myth. Read under the neoliberal distortion of choice, the 'working class man' is made a hero by exercising personal responsibility in his commitment to hard work, self-sacrifice, sobriety and stoicism. Further, those workers who do not perform attributes of the 'working class man,' by spending irresponsibly or drinking to excess, are made individually responsible for the poverty in which their families live. There are other factors that contribute to the Swan family's poverty, like the expense of having to feed and clothe six children coupled with a lack of employment opportunities for women. However, within this framework it is Barnes' father who is tasked with the responsibility to

carve out a life for his family, irrespective of the awful working conditions. He *has* to emulate the 'working class man' if he wants to survive and live a 'good' life.

Masculinity and shame are terms that are often not associated with each other or uttered in proximity, but as this chapter demonstrates, shame is a particularly pertinent affect which is prominent in Barnes's memoir, particularly as Jimmy matures through adolescence. Hill notes that American psychoanalyst Helen Block Lewis first associated shame with violence in 1971 when she argued that men commit violence on their intimate partners through 'humiliated fury' (Hill 2019, 112). Crucially, shame is not just a feeling that we have done something bad, shame is deeply rooted in identity formation as the feeling of *being* bad. This notion of the bad self is repeated throughout Barnes' memoir as he navigates adolescence, negative influences from his upbringing as well as certain cultural influences encourage this feeling in Jimmy that *he is* bad. Hill argues that male shame is structured around 'one unbreakable rule: do not be weak. To *be a man* is to be strong, powerful, and in control' (2019, 115). Jimmy often notes that he desperately avoids 'looking' weak to his friends and justifies his violent actions by putting them into a survival framework - 'if I don't beat this kid up, they'll beat me up' (Barnes 2016, 281). In his teenage years Jimmy comes to understand masculinity as violent and hyper-masculine by emulating his friends. Masculinity here is defined by the working class culture of Elizabeth, and appears to be altered only by Jimmy realising his individual agency and leaving Elizabeth to pursue a career in rock music.

Megan Brown in *American Autobiography After 9/11* examines how the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre contributed to an American crisis of masculinity rooted in widespread anxieties about personal and national identity, national security and gender relations (2017, 66). In particular, Brown argues that memoir is 'a particularly useful site for examining the nexus of masculinity, normativity and anxiety because the genre already raises questions about subjectivity via first-person narration and issues of authority and authenticity' (2017, 67). Significantly, in *Working Class Boy* 'Jimmy' is a site where the 'private' discourse of masculinity and its relationship to individual identity is circulated in order to repeat, police and help produce norms of subjectivity. Barnes, simultaneously, is transforming his masculine identity in the present; from the anxious, hyper-masculine and violent model in Jimmy to the re-imagined 'working class man.' A man who revamps traditional masculine values of hard work, honesty and self-sacrifice into the new, emotionally literate, empowered and redeemed 'working class man' of our current neoliberal

age. Furthermore, the problematic masculinity that Jimmy performs, when read as a redemption narrative, reveal neoliberal codes of personal responsibility and empowerment that position such masculinity as necessary for survival. Significantly, Barnes critiques the 'toxic' masculinity that enables Jimmy's survival while simultaneously benefitting from it because it has also enabled *his* survival, *his* success and now *his* redemption.

Shame seems to emerge more prominently in Barnes' teenage years, when previously as a young boy Jimmy had been ashamed of his old, dirty clothes and went to lengths to hide his poverty from those around him. Although, as violence becomes an increasingly accepted and encouraged part of life as a teenager growing up in Elizabeth, Jimmy begins to lash out at others or harm himself. Significantly, Jimmy finds himself in a cycle of shame that seems impossible to escape:

> I tried to be like all the other guys and it made me feel even worse about myself. I already felt worthless so this just made things more unbearable. I was a loser, and I was behaving like one, more and more. I couldn't live with myself so I would just numb myself as much as I could, whenever I could. (Barnes 2016, 260)

Here, shame seems to stem from a place of morality, Jimmy has the emotional and philosophical insight to know better but feels his conformity to 'bad' behaviour is necessary for survival. Ultimately, the price of his survival is a constant cycle of crime, violence, shame and substance abuse. Crucially, as Hill explains, violence in men is often triggered as a response to feelings of shame – often in the form of 'compromised masculinity' – and the response to shame in men is to overwhelm it with a feeling of power (Hill 2019, 112). Significantly, at this point, towards the end of the memoir, Jimmy begins to realise that power lies in his individuality, not in trying to be 'like all the other guys'. Further, when read under a neoliberal framework of empowerment, Jimmy's choice to become a musician also overwhelms his shame with a feeling of power: the power of his individual agency. Shame, here, when read under the redemption narrative, becomes a manifestation of the distance between teenage Jimmy and Barnes' authentic self – the newly reimagined 'working class man'.

Daniel Worden in *Neoliberal Nonfictions* describes the figure of the 'hustler', ubiquitous in African American literature and rap music, as the 'ideal subject of neoliberal economics – the entrepreneurial individual unfettered from any organization or regulation' (2020, 68). Life narratives, thus, when documented through the trope of

the hustler present a stylised narrative of individual success by accumulating wealth and overcoming disadvantage. Significantly, like other memoirs examined in this thesis such hustler narratives can be argued to circulate within a social imaginary where ordinary readers defeat trauma/disadvantage and become successful, wealthy and happy. Further, Worden argues that individualism and empowerment are key to the hustler, as their personal experience presents both enmeshment within neoliberalism and the promise of individual success (2020, 19). Unlike the loyal worker of the traditional 'working class man' image, Barnes' reimagination focuses on the individual power of the 'working class man' to carve out a life for himself by adapting to the new neoliberal order. Crucially, this reimagination also feeds our reading of Jimmy's survival, by performing aggressive masculinity while working hard to become a successful musician. Subsequently, this new 'working class man' frame is how we are encouraged to understand the new, reformed Barnes who not only confesses his trauma and violent behaviours in an act of self-help but uses memoir to explore these feelings publicly in order to help other victims and contribute to a public discourse of 'toxic masculinity'.

Conclusion

A memoir that has succeeded in the current neoliberal life narrative market, written by a celebrity author with a reputation to both redeem and redeploy, *Working Class Boy* does not impose stringent ethical demands on readers. Instead, the memoir focuses on Barnes' relationship to his self and not his relationship to others. Barnes' memoir provides an important opportunity for Barnes to make an intervention in his public image. As I have argued in this chapter, Barnes uses his memoir to simultaneously disrupt and reinforce cultural nostalgia around the 'working class man' figure: the factory worker who is stoic, honest, hard-working and enjoys a beer at the end of a long day. In his memoir, Barnes locates his teenage behaviour as traditionally masculine, but under the lens of self-help and confession these behaviours are recast as a survival narrative which the adult Barnes retrospectively comes to read as toxic masculinity. Barnes' memoir offers personal experience that supports what he has comes to espouse in the public: that young boys who are victims of domestic abuse grow up modelling 'toxic' codes of masculinity because these have been reinforced through childhood as the only way to be a man. Further, reading this memoir

through the therapeutic lens of self-help makes visible how Barnes' survival story is underwritten with neoliberal mythologies of personal responsibility and empowerment that champion the willpower of the individual. Further, while the memoir is coded as Barnes' individual story, he simultaneously demonstrates intimate understanding of the systemic cycles of poverty and violence that the individual must escape in order to get lucky and survive, which suggests that this is not *just* Barnes' story.

The success of Barnes' autobiographical pursuits has provided a platform from which he has launched advocacy against toxic masculinity and domestic abuse, but it has also provided a springboard for his already successful music career. *My Criminal Record* released on the 31st of May 2019 is Barnes' newest album where he touches on the same themes that ground his memoirs; inner-demons, cracked-apart families, and the harm you, and they, can cause. Reviews muse that the tracks on *My Criminal Record* 'nail both character and emotion' in a way rarely seen by Barnes in his career, Bernard Zuel writes in *The Guardian*: 'not a prolific or particularly driven songwriter, Barnes' weakest albums have not necessarily foundered on his own stories: he's not been much of a storyteller' (2019). Clearly, the act of writing a life narrative, and indeed facing the trauma of his past, has allowed Barnes to use his life experience towards positive ends. Writing *Working Class Boy* allowed Barnes to stop running from Elizabeth, which opened opportunity for Australia's 'working class man' to tap into cultural angst, and emotional pain, at the death of the manufacturing industry – evidenced in 'Shutting Down our Town'. Further, 'My Criminal Record' and 'Stolen Car' purport Barnes addressing his anger and shame in emotionally healthy ways, instead of resorting to violence, which supports Barnes' re-imagining of the 'working class man' as a neoliberal success story.

Chapter 6 – The Reckoning of Australia's Sweetheart

Introduction

Magda Szubanski is a household name in Australian comedy and perhaps best known for her role as Sharon Strzelecki, the netball-obsessed, unlucky in love, second-best friend of Kim on the wildly popular 2000s Australian sitcom *Kath & Kim* (2002-2007). Szubanski is also known for her role as the adorable Mrs. Hoggart in *Babe* and for her string of comedic personalities born on improv comedy television shows *The Comedy Show, D-Generation, Fast Forward* and *Big Girl's Blouse*. Szubanski, born in Britain to a Polish father and Scottish mother, first felt 'solidly Aussie' after her performance on *D-Generation* as comedy character 'Lynne Postlewaite'. Szubanski explains that Lynne was inspired by writers Andrew Knight and John Alsop, who told her about the world's least obliging concierge they once had to endure in a London hotel. Szubanski writes: 'I began to appreciate the beauty of a catchphrase. Lynne's was, "Tired, tired, tired, I said love, I said pet, I said please." As the show gained an audience people in the street would quote the line at me' (Szubanski 2016, 240). Despite her popularity, Szubanski's memoir *Reckoning* reveals dark secrets that many did not expect from Australia's sweetheart of comedy: 'If you had met my father you would never, not for an instant, have thought he was an assassin' (Szubanski 2016, 1). Magda's father, Zbigniew Szubanski (better known as Peter), was only fifteen when Hitler invaded Poland and the war began. He joined the fighting as soon as he was able, and after assisting others to escape genocide during the Warsaw Uprising Peter would never again be able to return home to his family. As a young man he lived as a fugitive, surviving Prisoner of War camps across Europe, reaching the salvation of Britain, and eventually the shores of Australia with his wife and children (Szubanski 2016, 2-6). Peter spends his life trying to come to terms with what he had done during the war, and Szubanski grows up under this shadow of intergenerational trauma, while also coming to terms with her sexuality.

Szubanski's *Reckoning* is not like the other popular 'celebrity' memoirs examined in this thesis, while this memoir is structured with a redemptive plot, the journey through which Szubanski reaches her redemption is, importantly, only very loosely tied to her celebrity. In previous chapters, I have discussed how memoirs such as Jimmy Barnes' *Working Class Boy* or Anh Do's *The Happiest Refugee* tie redemption to their celebrity in such a way that achieving celebrity becomes the rewarding outcome for overcoming their childhood traumas. For Szubanski, a celebrity status as one of Australia's most beloved television actresses and comedians is largely immaterial to her personal process of redemption, which she refers to in

her memoir as a 'reckoning'. Certainly, Szubanski's career and her celebrity status play an important role in how she comes to understand the deepest complexities of herself. However, her journey towards this understanding and acceptance of the self is the driving plot of the memoir. For Barnes and Do, celebrity is achieved as a result and reward of their redemption (i.e. their 'success' and 'survival' in neoliberal terms), and so significantly, at the narrative end of their respective memoirs. Szubanski, however, is a celebrity when she is still thirty years away from her 'reckoning', a status achieved halfway through her memoir's text. Significantly, for Barnes and Do, celebrity is fantasized within a neoliberal framework of personal responsibility as a reward for hard-work and upward mobility, and Szubanski's alternative chronology works to destabilise this fantasy. Further, Szubanski's celebrity does not grant her the answers that she so badly seeks, rather, the stakes seem to only get higher. Towards the end of her memoir, Szubanski writes of one incident in a Sydney airport after she got 'famous': 'I couldn't help but feel dogged by that horrible hollow feeling that the wrong 'me' had shot to fame' (Szubanski 2016, 249). Read as a quest for Szubanski's authentic self (the real 'me') *Reckoning* dismantles the neoliberal fantasy of celebrity in favour of the more personal story of Szubanski's disentanglement of her intergenerational trauma, her sexuality and her identity.

Celebrity memoir is often marketed as exposing the private 'real' lives of celebrities and offering a look behind the curtain of fame – readers feel like they are getting an exclusive and privileged look inside celebrity life. *Reckoning* is a typical celebrity memoir in that it offers a 'behind the scenes' scoop on Szubanski's life and exposes some of her darkest moments, ultimately illuminating Szubanski's private life for public consumption. Cameron Woodhead's review of *Reckoning* in weekend newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald* observes that because she is 'such a key figure in Australian comedy that any memoir she cared to write would be a major publishing event. What no one could have predicted was that this reflection on her life would be so sensitive and searching, colourful and vividly composed' (2015). What Woodhead is identifying here is this reader-based assumption that, despite much evidence to the contrary, celebrity memoirs are commercially produced and therefore are not eloquent, or sensitive, or colourful and rarely delve into the more private areas of one's life. As Woodhead points out, a keen sense of interest in Szubanski's life and career by Australian readers would have guaranteed a well-performing memoir in the marketplace. Athough, what elevates this memoir to a new height of popularity (and a win at the Australian Book Industry Awards) is that it provides, instead of simply markets,

something new about Szubanski as a person – that she doesn't feel like a celebrity at all because of her weight, her anxiety, her sexuality and her family history. The vulnerability and sensitivity of Szubanski as a memoirist fosters intimacy: this memoir is a space where the boundaries between private and public, celebrity and non-celebrity, begin to fluctuate.

Theatre critic Woodhead's review of *Reckoning* in *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper suggests that although Szubanski's story is a personal one, it is steeped in Australian histories of violence based on gender or sexuality that also occupy the space in which it circulates. These histories are part of cultural memory for many Australians, and *Reckoning*, rich with first-person perspective and memories of such violence, forces readers to confront those violent histories and how they might be implicated in the normalisation of such violence. Woodhead writes, 'Szubanski's journey from a Catholic schoolgirl deeply in the closet to a famous actor coming out on national television, is in some ways emblematic of Australia's progress towards a more accepting society, one that celebrates difference' (Woodhead 2015). Szubanski's personal story in *Reckoning* of finding her strength, and strength inherited from her ancestors, to publicly accept her gay identity here comes to stand in for Australia's acceptance of difference. As Gillian Whitlock might argue, *Reckoning* has been co-opted by Woodhead's reading into propaganda designed to reaffirm Australian's imagined securities about being an accepting society (2007, 3-4). Szubanski's memoir is certainly a story about Australia, but it is the intimacy and openness in the memoir's representation of Szubanski that positions her as someone who has authority to offer a reflection that will be perceived as honest. For example, Szubanski describes in her memoir a history of violence against gay and lesbian people:

> It is hard to remember how scary it was. Those were still dark days for gay people. Homosexuality had only been decriminalised in Victoria in 1980. Gay bashing was not uncommon. Friends of mine had been spat on, beaten up and hospitalised. I had been jeered at in the street, called a fat ugly dyke who needed to be 'straightened out'. (Szubanski 2016, 242)

Szubanski is a voice in this public debate; she revealed her sexuality for the first time on a national television news and current affairs program, *The Project*, in 2012, at the height of the same-sex marriage debate. She subsequently appeared on the *ABC's* public affairs panel-based talk show *Q&A* as a representative for gay rights. In a 2016 interview about her memoir for UK Newspaper *The Guardian*, Szubanski suggests that while it's comforting to

see young LGBTIQ couples holding hands in public or getting married Australia still has a long way to go: 'I don't think the damage done by external and internalised homophobia has been processed yet. We've gone from a discourse of shame to a discourse of pride, with nothing but a parade to get us through. You don't undo millennia of shame and persecution overnight' (Szubanski in Cain, 2016).

Most reviews of *Reckoning* published on social reading website *Goodreads* are filled with praise and describe how readers sometimes laughed and mostly cried their way through Szubanski's memoir. Though, despite the overwhelming positive responses, reviewers seemed divided about the focus of the book. For example, Vidal and Rebecca write that they expected a story about Magda and her career and lamented that so much time was spent 'rambling' about her 'family history' that they found 'boring' (*Goodreads* 2015; *Goodreads* 2019). Other readers, notably Murrel and Ita, believed that Szubanski spent far too much time dwelling on her sexuality, they found this repetitive and felt these passages intervened in what was otherwise a great read (*Goodreads* 2017; *Goodreads* 2019). While Roslyn and Ebury-Thomas lament that they didn't quite get the 'intergenerational trauma thing' and charged Szubanski as a narcissist for parading her father's trauma as her own (*Goodreads* 2019; *Goodreads* 2017). This divide in responses is significant because it exposes much more about the preferences of the Australian reading public than any failures of the memoir. Indeed, as Julie Rak explains, any study about popular memoir needs to take into account what readers and publishers understand a memoir to be, and therefore what is expected from a book when it is produced and read (2013, 16-17). Further, as Rak notes, celebrity became one of the most important ways that individuals not only understand themselves but understand others to be *like* themselves. Most discourses of celebrity are dependent on this democratic logic, although it also becomes connected to the idea of glamour and the idea that celebrities are not like other people until too much is revealed about them (Rak 2013, 32; Gamson 2001, 159-63). The economy of exchange between public and private, focused on the figure of the celebrity, means that celebrities can engender fascination and disgust at the same time (Dyer 2004, 10-13). As these reviews on *Goodreads* show, *Reckoning* traverses the boundaries of expectation between celebrity memoir, literary memoir, family history, and political commentary. Ultimately, *Reckoning* strikes an effective balance between these different forms, showing that popular memoir can diverge from generic rules without sacrificing its value both as a work of memoir and as a commodity.

Like Barnes' *Working Class Boy*, explored in the previous chapter as an example of representing the life the celebrity subjects as 'ordinary' or 'just like us', *Reckoning* appears to be part of a shift in celebrity memoir publishing that moves away from 'name-dropping' or 'place-dropping' stories that extend the fantasy of celebrity into a private-made-public performance. Celebrities and their publishers are starting to trade on the public interest in gritty, 'real life' stories made popular by the memoir boom with initially positive results. What is it about Australian reading publics now that make these kinds of celebrity memoirs so popular? While the answer to this question is not straightforward, there are insights to be gained from thinking about the kind of neoliberal society that Australia is today, and particularly its obsession with the individual. Celebrity memoirs like these humanise the celebrity subject by intervening in the fantasy that surrounds them; celebrities are presented as regular people who overcome trauma and insecurity in order to become a celebrity. Indeed, as Eva Sage Gordon argues, celebrity life writing can often be understood as an attempt by the celebrity to take control of their identity, an identity that is intrinsically shaped by the public and therefore also participates in shaping the public. Significantly, Gordon uses disability scholarship to explain that celebrities become dehumanised not only through the process at which they are understood as 'special' by other's around them, but also how their lives and identities are turned into objects (2019, 242-243).

Daniel Worden argues in his book *Neoliberal Nonfictions* that memoirists working in neoliberal times move from 'self to structure' (2020, 128). For Worden, memoir is a particularly powerful genre in which to use what he calls the 'documentary aesthetic'; a form where the personal is framed as inevitably caught up in structures that exist *outside* of the form in which that personal self is constructed/contained (2020, 3-4). For example, memoir, by use of the documentary aesthetic, 'engages in juxtaposition, offsetting emotion and personal experience with the structures that produce their possibilities' (2020, 9). Specifically, Worden explains that the representation of humanity, as in general humanity, within life narrative is a 'function not of identification and recognition but of the cruel distance between self and structure' (2020, 144). For example, the vulnerability, awkwardness, anger and despair expressed by Szubanski in the memoir makes visible her humanity (the representation of self seems just like us), but it also makes visible the neoliberal structures that produce those vulnerable and intense emotions. Szubanski in the memoir is depressed, anxious and displaced from her fat, gay, Polish-Scot-Aussie authentic self, this makes visible the ways that the neoliberal 'structure' of personal responsibility

produces those negative emotions by convincing her that she is not only wrong, but that it's her fault. *Reckoning* differs from the memoirs of Do or Barnes because while neoliberal structures are made visible in these memoirs, the distance between Do and Barnes and such structures is obscured by their escape from the structure. *Reckoning*, on the other hand, not only makes the structure visible, it reveals the distance between self and structure and makes the intense emotions experienced by Szubanski in the memoir (because of that distance) *meaningful* because they have implications and power beyond the scope of the memoir. Szubanski, as she is presented in the memoir, *seems* to be a 'good' neoliberal subject and role model because of her celebrity, upward mobility, and self-sacrifice towards finding her authentic self.

Responding to the Neoliberal Moment: 'Fat Memoir' and the Quest for the Authentic Self

In *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary,* Kylie Cardell argues that contemporary Western individuals are presented, for example, by authors of self-help guides to journaling, as haunted by a sense of inauthenticity and disconnection from the self which renders activities such as taking time to write and record your own story into both acts of self-care and elusive commodities (2014, 29). In place of lack, the authentic self – that is the ideal of real, honest or natural self – has emerged as one of the most powerful fantasies of contemporary life (Potter 2010, 4). At its core, the idea of an authentic self is a profoundly neoliberal formation. It hinges on the concept of individual self-management, that the authentic self can only be reached through recognising a lack in the self, and the subsequent hard work of a journey of spiritual or personal self-discovery. Subsequently, the authentic self is also underpinned by notions of the inauthentic self as damaged or incomplete and therefore in need of fixing; failure to achieve the authentic self is understood as a failure of the individual. Significantly, in popular memoir the authentic self often seems like a product, something that is attainable if one works hard enough, labours long enough, or sacrifices enough. As I discuss in the previous chapter, Barnes achieves the status of a 'redeemed man' (i.e. his authentic self) through the sacrificial process of confessing his childhood in a therapeutic act of self-help. Translating the desire to attain the authentic self to real life is complex and often impossible. Indeed, the authentic self, like the good or ideal subject of neoliberalism, turns conscious self-management into a habit thus constantly searching for and addressing lacks in the self. In this chapter I will discuss how Szubanski's quest for her

authentic self is positioned in *Reckoning* as the key to her recovery from intergenerational trauma and ultimate self-acceptance.

The idea of consumption becomes contested in *Reckoning* when it is read through neoliberal logics as this reading exposes consumption as a problematic 'cure' for Szubanski's personal, spiritual and emotional problems. Significantly, recovery scripts for intergenerational trauma typically involve a return to the 'site' of the original trauma. In Szubanski's case, she travels to Warsaw, Auschwitz and Pawiak: 'In Poland I started crying and I couldn't stop. I started crying that day at Pawiak and I cried myself to sleep every night I was there' (Szubanski 2016, 215). Szubanski is in her early twenties when she visits Poland for the first time, though she knew of her Polish heritage before this, her father had sheltered her from much of their family history. In Warsaw, Szubanski is forced to confront the realities of her past and attempts to reconcile herself to her Polish family. Though, at this point Szubanski is anxious that she does not personally measure up to her relatives or the legacy of bravery and survival in her family name. Later, she also travels to Ireland:

> Was this the gift of my Irish inheritance – the ability to survive loss, but at the cost of loving easily? This, presumably, is the legacy of many other families too. But when I began to sob uncontrollably – inexplicably – it was for *my* family. For my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents and beyond. And for Mary Jane's ten nameless children buried in the cold Irish earth. And maybe also for myself. Because I wondered, in that moment, if this was why I have never had children of my own. (Szubanski 2016, 339-340)

For Szubanski, travel is an act connected to her idea of recovery, and this is a privileged idea in many ways as she has the capacity and means to travel. As Peter Bloom explains in *The Ethics of Neoliberalism*, neoliberal logics of empowerment and personal responsibility frame the act of recovery, as well as having the time and money to pursue such recovery, not as a luxury but as an ethical obligation that one owes to oneself (2017, 13). Read this way, Szubanski's use of travel as recovery becomes a source of individual empowerment, as the conditions of her celebrity that enable her to travel are obscured by her 'choice' to travel, to prioritise her personal recovery. Significantly, Szubanski reconciles her previously unknown Irish family history on the popular reality celebrity television show *Who Do You Think You Are?* Not only does this appearance allow Szubanski access to professional historians who work on the show, it is also a commercial product designed to elicit an emotional response

from both the celebrity subject and the viewer watching at home. Consumption – of travel, history, recovery and self-insight – is read, under the lens of therapy, as an essential step towards the reconciliation of Szubanski's family trauma and recovery from her own personal demons. However, as Janice Peck argues in her 2016 study, *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era*, understanding consumption as a means of self-empowerment or recovery is problematic because market logic hinges on perpetuating desires that can only be met via consumption (220-222). In this way, consumption takes on a spiritual sheen where the act of consuming encompasses one's commitment to themselves and living their best life. As Peck argues, under this guise the individual becomes solely responsible for creating their own circumstances by thinking positively and making good choices regardless of the material conditions in which they live. In this way, the individual is discouraged from questioning larger material realities, be it the realities that threaten their happiness or those that threaten the happiness of others (2016, 222; 38). Here, consumerism that may otherwise be understood as crass or empty materialism takes on that spiritual element which obscures not only the ways in which individuals like Szubanski are privileged, but also any troubling factors that may motivate other privileged individuals to seek out spiritual enlightenment in the first place (Williams, 620). Crucially, read through a lens of therapy and enlightenment, travel casts recovery as a certain kind of search for the self, one enabled by the structures of capitalism, privilege and celebrity. Significantly, this search for the self is external to Szubanski, she reaches out to different places and different people to try and find herself.

Reckoning is the search for Szubanski's authentic self, the 'real' her behind her insecurities but also behind her celebrity image, therefore she must find it through an alternative model of authentic selfhood. Szubanski embarks on an interior search for self that is expressed bodily, in her work as an actress/comedian, but also as a part of growing up. Other popular memoirs examined in this thesis could be considered as aspirational neoliberal tales of heroes who use their traumas as opportunities for personal and professional growth. This is, after all, the kind of trajectory that readers in neoliberal times should aspire to emulate. Comparatively, what is presented here by Szubanski reads less as an aspirational tale than a kind of neoliberal fable: a cautionary tale of the dangers of giving others (her father, her teenage peers, her coworkers, even her fans) too much power over one's construction of self. Szubanski reveals throughout her memoir how she has twisted and contorted her self-identity in an attempt to fit the expectations of those around her, which ultimately leads her further away from her 'self':

> I was not feeling what I was supposed to be feeling. I was like a nervous hostage who's been held captive for fifty years: institutionalised. Accustomed to the confines of my closet. The door had swung open, but I daren't walk free … Over the next few days the peaks and dips of the roller-coaster became steeper. I had no resilience. I was as brittle as an osteoporotic bone. Everyone kept saying, 'You are the perfect woman for the job. The public loves you. If anyone can pull this off, you can.' God knows, I said those things to myself. But it wasn't the public I didn't trust. It was myself. (Szubanski 2016, 359)

Further examples of Szubanski reflecting on her shifting identity occur when she recollects her time at school, such as when she studies science religiously in order to make her father proud, although she prefers creative subjects. Later, as a teenager, she dresses and acts like 'Sharpie' (a type of punk subculture popular in Melbourne) to impress a girl that she likes. During university, she joins feminist clubs that help her feel empowered and find her voice but continues to hide her sexuality. Early in her comedy career, Szubanski relies on costume and make-up to transform into other people and never draws on her own life. Then, when she achieves television success, she becomes an ambassador for Weight Watchers and loses weight. All of these experiments in identity are ultimately found to be hollow, when Szubanski reflects on her time with Weight Watchers her authentic self starts to peek through: 'Despite what people may have wanted, I became a different person … It was like a magic trick. The shape shifter who played around with costumes, make-up, identity, had transformed in real life. Was this the real me?' (2016, 332). Ultimately, these experiments in identity do not stop until Szubanski discovers that the fat, gay Polish-Scot-Aussie self that she has been hiding from is her authentic self. And indeed, fatness is something that Szubanski comes to see as a kind of armour for her 'self,' a source of protection and empowerment.

Reckoning is what Kathryn E. Linder would describe as a 'resistant and positive fat-memoir' in that it represents the fat body as powerful and healthy instead of weak and in need of a cure (2011, 221). In her 2011 study of the fat memoir as autopathography (defined by Couser as 'an autobiography of illness') Linder analyses six memoirs published in the mid-2000s by women about their weight loss journeys. Linder discusses how these authors perceive their fat bodies as not their 'real' selves, that their goal thin self is their authentic self, and she argues that this thought process is reductive as it assigns failures of life to being

fat while all success is attributed to being thin (2011, 222). *Reckoning* challenges these fat-as-defective ideals in a number of ways, firstly, Szubanski is presented as 'in control' of her weight and being fat as a conscious choice (she actively loses weight twice in the memoir only to find that she doesn't like her thin self and promptly stacks all the weight back on). Secondly, her success is in no way linked to her weight, in fact she is at her most successful when she is at her fattest. Thirdly, her weight is contextualised as more of an empowerment tool rather than a crutch or a defect:

> And, despite what people may have wanted, I became a different person. I became aware of myself as a decorative object: a bauble. I felt I had to live up to the stylised version of me that people saw on the magazine covers. A friend said of the *Women's Weekly* cover, 'It looks like you, but it's not you. It's not the you I know.' (Szubanski 2016, 332). It was exhilarating. But I also felt the unbearable lightness of my own being. I am used to having a lot of ballast, a serious gravitational mass. This new me felt insubstantial. I felt displaced. Like I might just float away. And terribly sad, and afraid that this would be fleeting.
>
> Which it was. (Szubanski 2016, 333-334)

Szubanski's reflections on her weight in *Reckoning* can be read here as an impasse to traditional neoliberal notions of the 'sick body' and as mounting a challenge to this misconception. Further, the realisation that Szubanski's authentic self *is* fat (i.e. the way that she already is) resists the neoliberal idea, grounded in personal responsibility, that the 'authentic self' is a never-ending project. Like disease, unemployment or mental illness, fatness is understood through traditional neoliberal logics as an indication of a defective individual subject, particularly one that fails at appropriate self-management through willpower. By recontextualising her fatness as self-acceptance and linking the successes of her career and her authentic self to her fat body, Szubanski offers a counter-narrative to damaging neoliberal perceptions of fatness and disease as defective.

Szubanski's experiments in adolescence of being overweight as a kind of conscious empowerment lays the foundations for *Reckoning's* strongest challenge to neoliberal logics of success and personal responsibility: Sharon Strzelecki. Sharon is Szubanski's netball-obsessed 'second-best friend' character on popular Australian comedy television program *Kath & Kim* (2002-2007). Significantly, Sharon is flawed; she is anxious, co-dependent,

overtly promiscuous and visibly obese and until the publication of *Reckoning* Szubanski had not spoken publicly about how personal a character Sharon is:

> People frequently ask me where Sharon comes from; I often wonder myself. In truth Sharon is the most vulnerable part of me. I suspect that vulnerability has always been present in my work but it found its most perfect expression in Sharon. It was around this time that I started to top the Q scores, an independent measure to determine what and who the public finds familiar and appealing. Basically, a huge scientific popularity contest. And I had won it. If only the outcast, lonely me of my teens could have known. Mass communication is a fascinating thing. Powerful and mysterious. It is where the collective unconscious rise and meets. It is where souls touch. (Szubanski 2016, 308-309)

These passages reveal that Sharon, and perhaps by extension Szubanski, particularly with all of her quirks and flaws is one of the most relatable characters in Australian television history. Significantly, Szubanski locates Sharon's fatness and vulnerability in her popularity and worries later in the memoir whether a significant change in her appearance and confidence would mean the loss of Sharon (2016, 331). Significantly, Szubanski reads Sharon as a symbol of her own elusive authentic self, suggesting that the 'real' her has always been there and has been key to her comedic success whether she knew it or not. Here, neoliberal logics of personal responsibility, which determine that disease and fatness are obstacles to the good life, are revealed as aspirational and yet unattainable neoliberal mythology. Worden argues that memoirists working in the neoliberal times of today 'move from self to structure in modes that gesture to possibilities for subjectivity both beyond and within neoliberal culture's limits' (2020, 127-128). While Sharon is indeed a personal character for Szubanski, using Sharon to interrogate her professional success reveals the limitations of neoliberal structures. Sharon is a popular and relatable character *because* of her vulnerabilities, and this is key to the authentic self that Szubanski seeks. In the next section I examine the Bildungsroman presented in *Reckoning* and focus specifically on how Szubanski realises and subsequently hides her sexuality. Further, I discuss how Szubanski's shame and silence about her sexuality, while enabling survival, disrupts her quest for the authentic self by obstructing her self-acceptance.

Bildungsroman and the 'coming out story': Sexuality and survival through silence.

The 'coming out story' presented in Szubanski's *Reckoning* develops in the style of what Meredith Miller calls the 'twentieth century gay, lesbian and transgender bildungsroman', a precursor to the modern 'coming out' story (2019, 247). For Miller, these earlier published stories of coming out, 'suggests all those qualities of youth instability and becoming that typify the Bildungsroman' (2019, 244). Further, as a literary form and trope that mediates both the reader's and writer's relationship to the historical real, these stories say more about culture and modernity than they do about the individual. As Miller argues, this subset of Bildungsroman is a space that mediates the relations between individual desire and socially determined identities, where newly-formed and forming identities are presented in opposition to a hostile social order (2019, 239-241). Further, Miller draws on Foucault's discussion of the emergence of the self against the social machine to argue that 'the centrality of sexual identity in modern culture arises from its very situation as the interface between individual desires and social structures' (2019, 240). Elsewhere, Megan Brown in *American Autobiography After 9/11* explains that a fundamental project of neoliberalism is turning people into successful self-managing citizens – by which they understand societal norms and constantly measure themselves against those norms to regularly improve themselves (2017, 9). In this way, the techniques of silence, which Szubanski uses to protect herself and hide her sexuality, can be read as successful self-management. Szubanski, as a young woman, becomes aware of her sexuality in a time when gay, lesbian and transgender people are still considered as sexually dissident, and as a threat to the established heterosexual social order in Australia. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, homosexuality had only been decriminalised in Victoria in 1980 when Szubanski was around the age of 21, but as she explains in *Reckoning* decriminalisation does not equate to acceptance. Following the success of *The Comedy Company* show on Channel Ten late in 1988, Szubanski and some of her colleagues are invited to work on a new show for the Seven Network called *Fast Forward*. Although the popularity of *The Comedy Company*, and especially the cast members becoming household names around Australia, piqued Szubanski's anxiety:

> Was that what I wanted? To be invited into the living rooms of the nation? How could I do that when nobody knew who I really was, when the idea of homosexuality made many people feel sick? (Szubanski 2016, 246)

Here, almost a decade after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Victoria and even as Szubanski is a famous comedian on television, the hostile social order that threatens her identity as a gay woman remains a dominant force that keeps her silent. In this section, I discuss how the Bildungsroman, through which Szubanski shows herself as opposed by the hostile social order, makes space for the eventual reconciliation of individual, sexuality and nation. Simultaneously, I examine Szubanski's use of silence as a form of desirable neoliberal self-management where she sees fault in her sexuality, and her 'self', and attempts to measure up to societal norms by performing 'normalcy'. Much like how Szubanski approaches her intergenerational trauma, which I expand on in the next section, her adult remembering of her childhood and process of self-acceptance to her eventual coming out is presented with a sense of urgency. The proximity of the publication of *Reckoning* in 2016 and the Australian same-sex marriage postal survey in 2017 suggests that this memoir had wider implications for the LGBTIQ community. Significantly, Szubanski leveraged her celebrity persona, complete with the intimate vulnerability expressed in her memoir to lend support to the 'Vote Yes' campaign centred around the postal survey. The scenes of Szubanski's journey to understanding her sexuality predominantly take place in Australian settings, and in her youth. *Reckoning* locates Szubanski's coming out story within Australian settings thereby understanding LGBTIQ sexuality, which is excluded in heterosexual discourse, as just another normal part of growing up in Australia.

Central to this discussion of the Bildungsroman presented in *Reckoning* is the understanding that childhood, as it presented retrospectively in memoir, is not so much a record of memory as it is a re-presentation of childhood. Kate Douglas in her 2010 book *Contesting Childhood* considers autobiographies of childhood – an overarching term for texts written about childhood where the protagonist and the author are understood to be the same person – as tools of cultural memory: 'Cultural memory is the innumerable ways in which so-called individual memory is socially and culturally shaped – for example, by institutions, cultural myths and traditions. Cultural memory also encompasses challenges to official or historical memory - for instance, facilitating the emergence of new or counter-memory' (2010, 7). Douglas considers the ways in which autobiographies of childhood function to both 'corrupt' and 'protect' childhood. Autobiographies of childhood are products of, and confrontations with, cultural memory – the collective ways in which the past is remembered, constructed and made intelligible within culture (Douglas 2010, 20). These issues of truth, memory and representation become particularly potent when discussing autobiography and

memoir of childhood written by adults as there is often a vast temporal distance between the time of remembering and the time being remembered. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter on *Working Class Boy,* Barnes' focus on the emotional experience of his traumatic childhood places exceptional power and authenticity in his use of the child voice to describe that trauma. Significantly, this consistent use of the child voice casts readers into the settings of the past, but also the emotional consciousness of the child. This affective connection, where readers feel with the young Barnes as he re-lives his trauma, contributes to the relevance and impact of those child experiences in the present. Comparatively, although Szubanski's childhood is certainly important for the logical chronology of her memoir, Szubanski reflects on her childhood experiences as an adult from the present time of writing.

Szubanski's childhood is represented through the lens of events in the present, by her adult voice describing growing up in rural North Croydon in Victoria, where the bush was the mythological 'end of civilisation' (Szubanski 2016, 52). This narrative point of view is signalled by Szubanski's mastery of language, her ability to knit the fragments of her childhood together in a single thread and her wise reflections from the present:

> Like a self-saucing pudding, I was pretty put on set-and-forget. And I was a cheery child. 'Never any problem,' Mum says. Bright, perky, sociable. A quick study. But there as something else that my mother detected in me. 'This one's for the world,' she said. She always said she knew I would be famous. (Szubanski 2015, 32)

Here, the adult reader is invited to occupy a knowing space by recognising the significance of the child life being narrated, as well as his or her own (perhaps similar) childhood. Douglas explains that nostalgia can be often misunderstood as a mode that idealises childhood, as there is a tendency to look back on certain childhoods as a kind of 'golden age'. Indeed, as Douglas writes, 'nostalgia is more than a longing for a lost past; it is an overt longing for a past that may not have existed' (2010, 94). Certainly, *Reckoning* complicates this idea of nostalgia as an idealisation of childhood as Szubanski reflects on the mistakes of her childhood as well as wider society and passes judgement on them from the present. This presents continuity between the childhood being narrated and the adult voice presenting the narration. Additionally, this kind of narration foregrounds the constructed nature of Szubanski's re-presentation of her childhood and begins to expose how Szubanski manages the intricacies of voice and silence, reality and creativity, and self and structure within the memoir.

In locating her childhood and young adulthood alongside larger socio-cultural events (the women's movement, Sharpie culture, violence against the LGBTIQ community, for example), Szubanski creates the impression that this childhood has been reflected upon, contextualised, and contained within the memoir. As such, *Reckoning* presents physical and temporal sites for nostalgic remembering such as the home, the family, the suburb and the era (1960s-1980s). Additionally, in using recognisable Australian/Victorian socio-cultural events as the frame for her personal Bildungsroman of coming out, while reflecting on this from the knowing position of the present, Szubanski exposes how life narratives of childhood don't just rewrite and re-present childhood, they also reinterpret culture. Some examples of this reinterpretation of culture occur when Szubanski reflects on some of her firsts particularly her first childhood crush (Marcia Brady from *The Brady Bunch*) as the realisation of her sexuality and of her difference. Szubanski understands that she is not 'normal', but this point of abnormality contained in the realisation of her sexuality at this point in the memoir is seen as a threat. For example, by reading *The Brady Bunch* as a technology that leads to neoliberal self-management by presenting 'proper' selfhood, it is revealed as both troubling and satisfying. Marcia Brady, while an object of desire that exposes Szubanski's abnormality, can be used as a cover and a way to train herself to act 'normal': 'I redoubled my efforts to Marcia Bradify myself, to squeeze my weird Polish-Scottish-Gay square peg into the Brady round hole' (Szubanski 2015, 78). In this way, Szubanski's individual agency is signalled in the memoir as a reward that can only be accessed if she is 'normal', which reinforces neoliberal self-management. However, Szubanski is never *really* normal, which reveals neoliberal self-management as a system in which the self is constantly in need of improvement. Later in the memoir when Szubanski is at university she is enthralled by 'the sense of agency' and 'of coming together to change things' when she attends a protest again uranium mining (Szubanski 2016, 164-165). As an abnormal, gay outcast Szubanski had never experienced the insatiability of collective agency much less individual agency before this point and she is hooked: 'My true passion, in retrospect, was the mob' (Szubanski 2016, 165). These crucial 'firsts' in Szubanski's young life juxtapose her personal emotions and experience (shame, fear and exhilaration) with the structures that produce these possibilities. So, as Worden notes, neoliberal ideology prioritises individual agency over collective belonging, and Szubanski in the memoir resists this notion by elevating collective belonging of 'the mob' over the possible realisation of her individual agency (2020, 10). The retrospective nature of this realisation for Szubanski is crucial, because she has collective

agency yet no individual agency. Crucially, Szubanski exercises her voice when she is surrounded by the support of others, but the personal issues that she must confront alone are haunted and protected by her strategic use of silence.

For a while, Szubanski is comforted by society's insistence that her sexuality is just a phase, but as her feelings and attractions intensify her sexuality becomes a source of deep shame to her that she is desperate to conceal. At her Catholic girls' school, she becomes a class-clown and hones her acting skills through performing impressions of her teachers: 'In terms of schoolyard politics, the class-clown status is a form of diplomatic immunity. At long last I was safe' (Szubanski 2016, 159-160). Earlier, in an ill-fated attempt to get a friend from Croydon High School to return her affections, she morphs from the academic dux of her Catholic girls' school into a Sharpie (a local term for a kind of punk) (Szubanski 2016, 125-127). These experiments in identity during Szubanski's adolescence become key elements in how she later copes with her sexual identity in adulthood, a time when silence and performance are used to shield Szubanski's private life from the public. However, the personal and emotional consequences of this silence and performance are deep and in their own way threaten the survival that she so desperately clings to. Towards the middle of the memoir, when Szubanski is graduating from high school, she describes standing in the locked bathroom of her family home, silently contemplating suicide. The reality of her sexuality is too obvious to ignore, and adulthood is imminent, so she practices omitting the 'lesbian' signifier as a method of survival. It is 'a word. An awful ugly word. A name. A label' (Szubanski 2015, 145). Szubanski doesn't want to be this 'thing', so much so that she would risk her survival rather than risk her silence. Here, Szubanski's deep emotional pain makes visible the social structures that demand her silence, she believes that in order to enter the world of adulthood she must become a lie:

> Just as my father would rather have died than lose his leg, for me, disapproval and isolation, the consequences of people knowing I was a lesbian, were a fate worse than death. I cemented my soul to a false self. It wasn't that I lied – I *became* a lie. (Szubanski 2016, 146-147)

Szubanski's use of silence, or omission, as she deals with understanding her sexuality echoes the ways that victims respond to and repress their trauma as a way of healing, but crucially silence here is used a means of survival. Similarly, this idea that Szubanski has to become a 'lie' and 'false self' in order to perform normalcy exposes the fallacy of neoliberal self-

management, but also of neoliberalism's 'authentic self'. The 'authentic self' of neoliberalism is seen as a reward for successful self-management, but self-management is a system that positions the self as in *constant* need of improvement (Brown 2017, 36-37). Szubanski performs what she believes is expected of her, she self-manages, but *her* authentic self doesn't measure up and it never will. Szubanski's Bildungsroman, and particularly her realisation and acceptance of her sexuality, presents similar themes to her father's struggles in the years after he escaped Warsaw, Poland, during the Holocaust of WWII. Both narratives involve the use of a silence as a means of survival, particularly rejection of the tainted identity (be it Polish or lesbian) and performance of a different and more acceptable persona in its place. As I have discussed in this section, the Bildungsroman is a form that makes visible how Szubanski learns, and comes to consciousness, about herself and her sexuality, but also about the world around her. Szubanski's various experiments in identity are a cornerstone of the coming-of-age story, but the stakes in *Reckoning* are higher; should she get it wrong the results are perceived to be disastrous or even fatal. Through the Bildungsroman, Szubanski not only realises her sexuality, she constructs, experiments with and practices a persona built on silence and performance to conceal her sexuality from the public and ensure her survival. Crucially, at this point in the memoir, the redemptive power of self-realisation and self-acceptance of Szubanski's *personal* authentic self that is so typical of popular memoir, and that Szubanski will discover at the end of the memoir, is littered with danger and threatens the very survival of that self. In the next section I discuss how Szubanski and her father, by virtue of constructing alternative personas through performance and silence, circumvent and reveal the limitations of neoliberalism's authentic self as an aspirational marker of identity. Further, I discuss how Szubanski's disentanglement with her intergenerational trauma passed on from her ancestors, dismantles her silent persona and provides the strength through which she performs her redemptive self-acceptance.

From Poland to The Project: Intergenerational trauma, Holocaust writing and silence

Szubanski's memoir begins with her attending the funeral of her father where she is surrounded by old Poles who lament: 'All the old warriors are dying' (Szubanski 2016, 3). This comment instils a sense of urgency in Szubanski's remembering by exposing the perils of histories left unremembered: 'entire civilisations vanish, swept away like twigs in a tidal wave, taking all of their wisdom and achievement with them' (Szubanski 2016, 4). The precarity that Szubanski recognises in her father's silence here, and particularly the danger of

losing the history contained within that silence, is also present in hers. She doesn't know it yet, but her silence threatens the loss of histories of violence based on gender and sexuality, even the emotional violence Szubanski inflicts on herself, that are so valuable to her eventual redemption. From the setting of the funeral, Szubanski as the adult narrator signals to the reader that this will be a story not only of her childhood and coming-of-age but also of the history and reckoning of her Polish father, Zbigniew, known as Peter. From the outset of Szubanski's memory project the reader is confronted by her personal insecurities, Szubanski wonders if she can or even if she is allowed to tell this story, and to witness her father's unspoken history:

> My father wanted to forget history. He had lived through an awful lot of it; he had no desire to go back. But all the old warriors are dying, and their stories die with them. Someone has to bear witness, but am I the right person for the job? Do I have the stomach to gouge beneath the scabs and clean the wound? Is healing even possible? We were tugboats in the river of history, my father and I, pulling in opposite directions. He needed to forget. I need to remember. For him, only the present moment would set him free. For me, the key lies buried in the past. The only way forward is back. (Szubanski 2015, 12-13)

From this point the progression of Szubanski's personal narrative becomes intertwined with the collective narrative of her family history, signalling that her personal trauma may be linked to her parents' collective trauma of the Holocaust and Irish poverty. As such, writing testimony is often a way to organise the experiences of life, and the lives of others, in order to make sense of them and their function in the present (Waxman 2007, 158). Though, Szubanski is clearly uncomfortable with her role here as both the arbiter of collective memory and the witness to collective trauma. As Aarons and Berger argue in their study of third-generation Holocaust testimony, these kinds of guilt and anxiety are commonplace for second and third generation survivors of the Holocaust. As the memories and lives of the first-generation survivors fade through time the next generations often feel responsible not only for carrying the burden, lest it disappear forever, but also reconciling the experiences of the first-generation (2017, 3-6).

Similarly, in her 2006 book *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* Zoe Waxman explains that survivors of the Holocaust 'feel inextricably linked to their traumatic past. For them, as perhaps for their children and even their

grandchildren, there will never be an end' (2007, 89). As the child of a survivor of the Holocaust, Szubanski is haunted by her father and grandparents' trauma and while she feels this in deeply personal ways, she can only witness or experience it through the accounts of others. As such, there are temporal, geographical and emotional distances between Szubanski and this traumatic memory, which contribute to her complex feelings of guilt upon meeting such memories with significant emotional responses:

> Like a thief, shame crept into my soul and took up residence there. Although I couldn't name the feeling then, it was as Jean Genet said: *Crimes of which a people is ashamed constitute its real history. The same is true of man.* I absorbed things entirely and allowed them to sink into the centre of being, to become my identity. I was a half-Polish girl with a Polish name on an island in the Pacific. The Poles' shame became my shame, fused to my soul. And I decided that I did not have what it took to be truly good. (Szubanski 2015, 95)

Here, readers are reminded that Szubanski carries her Polish name as a site where collective trauma, collective memory and her personal identity collide. Clearly, the gravity of such memories weighs heavily on Szubanski throughout her life as she wonders whether she will ever live up to the expectations linked to Holocaust survivors. Waxman argues that there is no universal survivor experience, and further, the term 'Holocaust survivor' much like the concept of the Holocaust itself, 'conceals the diversity of experience that it seeks to represent' (2007, 89). As the temporal space between the lived experience of the Holocaust and the time of writing those experiences expands, the Holocaust as a concept becomes steeped in the political forces of cultural memory. For example, there is a tendency to universalise the Holocaust so that it comes to stand in for incidences of genocide and ethnic cleansing which obscures the unique experiences contained within it. Further, Waxman notes that the most common motivations for writing about Holocaust experiences is to preserve memory. As such, insisting on the uniqueness of Holocaust experiences recontextualises the act of writing and remembering as more of a duty than a cathartic or therapeutic release (Waxman 2007, 153).

Readers learn through Szubanski's memoir that when her father is pressed on certain details of his time in Warsaw he often responds with silence, or repression: 'You do not talk about such things'. Initially, this is seen as an understandable trauma response, Peter's silence and avoidance comes to represent the trauma, and particularly his inability to speak of it.

However, as the memoir progresses, the reader, along with Szubanski, comes to realise that Peter's silence is not as simple as it seems:

> My father was no stern patriarch, he was chatty and expansive. But then suddenly he would clam up. 'No. You do not ask about such things. You do not talk about them'. It was like swimming in a warm river and then hitting an icy cold patch. Through the fog you would glimpse the outline, the shores of madness. And somewhere along the way I began to harbour a sickening and irrational suspicion – had my father colluded with the Nazis? (Szubanski 2016 289-290)

> He tried to make us strong like him because if we succumbed there was only one possible course of action. He would have to do his duty. He would have to kill us. He was toughening me up so that he wouldn't have to kill me.
> This, then, is the stone of his madness. In the depths of my father's soul there was a tiny part – cold and diamond-hard – reserved for his children. (Szubanski 2016, 365-366)

Silence, for Peter Szubanski, is not just a means of his own survival, it also serves as protection to ensure the survival of his children. Although, while Peter believes that his silence is justified and even necessary, Szubanski's memoir exposes the dangers that emerge when others attempt to fill in those silences. Szubanski created her own narrative in place of her father's, she worried whether her father was a Nazi colluder and a traitor, but she also internalised her pseudo-narrative that she is weak, that her father is ashamed of her. Repeatedly, this pseudo-narrative of Szubanski's weakness reveals the neoliberal structures of personal responsibility that produce it; because she is different, emotional, and vulnerable that she is a bad person.

In childhood memoirs that deal with intergenerational trauma, particularly Holocaust or Stolen Generation memoirs, maternal tropes and the figure of the anguished mother and the vulnerable child appear to traverse cultural borders far more easily than the figure of the troubled father (Kennedy 2008, 165). However, the paternal tropes present in *Reckoning* are typical of popular memoirs that explore issues of survivor guilt as father's are seemingly more active participants in not only the trauma but also its escape. For example, in Chapter Four I argue that the expectations that Vietnamese migrant Anh Do internalises from the difficult relationship with his father are the platform from which he builds his career and recognises his authentic self. Significantly, Do reconciles his intergenerational trauma as an

integral part of his individual strength and resilience, and that he will use to succeed in comedy. Like Do, Szubanski requires the strength and resilience of her ancestors and she must reconcile this as a part of her identity in order to access the personal 'authentic self' that she seeks. For example, Szubanski's relationship with her father is represented as emotionally distant and cruel, while he is simultaneously charming and protective, so much so that Szubanski will do almost anything in the hopes of gaining his elusive approval:

> I adored my father. But as I grew older I hated him for this with an absolute rage. Impotent fury beyond fury, in those moments *I* could have killed *him*.
> He beat me because he wanted to teach me a lesson. He beat me to teach how to keep fighting against an opponent even when there is no hope of winning. But mostly he beat me because he needed to. He needed to discharge the pent-up killer energy inside him. So periodically he would perform a ritual bloodletting, and I was the sacrifice. He had lost everything – the war, his family, his country. He needed to win at something.
> Afterwards, he was invigorated, enlivened. He would puff up like a little bantam. He was testing me, finding the limits of my character. I knew even then that my father had learnt many useful lessons from the war – how to survive, how to outwit – but not how to be merciful. (Szubanski 2015, 105)

Peter is clearly haunted by his memories of the Warsaw Uprising in Poland, and his survival instincts seem to extend, however well-intentionally, into his role as a father and Szubanski struggles to handle this both as a child and as an adult daughter. Significantly, Peter's silence challenges Szubanski's ability to accept herself, because at this point of the memoir she desires his approval over her own. In the memoir, Szubanski shares with the reader her experiences and overcoming of multiple traumas; from her crippling self-doubt and anxiety about her weight to the intergenerational trauma she inherits from her Polish father and her Irish ancestors on her mother's side.

Throughout *Reckoning* Szubanski explores intergenerational trauma through her relationship with her father, agonising over the morality of how he could be a cold-blooded assassin and still be a good man who chose to do the right thing. Except for generalisations, Peter addresses Poland and his personal past through silence, which leads Szubanski to impose her own narrative on his silence. For most of her life Szubanski fails to meet the complex and often unreachable standards set by her father, that she mustn't be weak or

emotional and mustn't waste the 'god given gift of a good brain' (Szubanski 2016, 118). Although this strains their relationship and contributes to Szubanski's crippling anxiety, she continues to idolise her father and desperately wants to make him proud by proving her strength, bravery and intelligence in those pursuits that he values. Szubanski wonders if faced with similar circumstances as her father and grandparents in Poland whether she would have the strength to break her own personal silence and do the right thing. Later, towards the end of the memoir, on Valentine's Day of 2012, Szubanski comes out of the closet live on Australian television on the current affairs program *The Project* at a time when the Australian public are debating the potential legalisation of same-sex marriage. For Szubanski, her public coming out is a reconciliation of her intergenerational trauma because it is a show of acceptance and understanding not only for her forebears but also for herself. Conclusively, Szubanski reconciles her anxieties that being different and accepting her sexuality does not make her a bad person, as some bigoted commentary by the Australian public would have had her believe. Instead, her drive to do the right thing when faced with adversity carries on the positive traditions bequeathed to her by her father.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how Magda Szubanski negotiates with and 'reckons' with the struggle to achieve an authentic identity. Similarly, Szubanski also works to understand that the 'authentic self' is a tainted term. Under neoliberalism this is a mechanism for turning self-management into a constant and exhaustive project where the self is always in need of improvement. Initially, Szubanski subscribes to neoliberal ideas of self-management and these enable her survival by hiding her sexuality in a performance of normalcy. Simultaneously, she comes to realise that a value judgement is in place where only certain kinds of 'self' or subject are ever 'right'. In this way, *Reckoning* provides both a counter and compliment to the neoliberal concept of people as perpetually productive and self-managing human capital. Indeed, Szubanski reached the height of her career as a comedian and actress when she was in therapy for crippling anxiety, coming to terms with her family's intergenerational trauma, hiding her true lesbian sexuality and at her fattest. Her most beloved and popular character, Sharon, encompasses this tangled web of Szubanski's personal vulnerabilities and simultaneously offers a counter-narrative to this concept of self-managing human capital as the champion of neoliberal times. As such, *Reckoning* counters

such concepts of the quest for the 'authentic self' as neoliberalism's measure of a good and ideal subject by presenting Szubanski's authentic self as everything she thought she shouldn't be; happily overweight; comfortable in her sexuality; brave enough to make her multitude of vulnerabilities public; and successful enough that none of these things jeopardise her popularity. *Reckoning* offsets Szubanski's vulnerability, emotions and personal experiences with the neoliberal structures and myths that produce them which reveals Szubanski, as presented in the memoir, as an object within a neoliberal system. Significantly, this reveals how the social imaginary within which this memoir functions (where 'ordinary' people defeat trauma and achieve celebrity) can also function as a vestige of neoliberalism.

Reckoning demonstrates how popular memoir is constructed to respond to powerful neoliberal ideology that is shaping markets and products, as well as our own sense of normalcy. Szubanski's use of silence and identity performance as survival makes visible the neoliberal structures that produce and police the norms which determine her as a dissident lesbian. Szubanski's vulnerabilities are consistent with 'ordinary' humanity and her representation of which intervenes in the fantasy of celebrity as elite or uncaring about the struggles of ordinary people. Through her insistence of her own flawed humanity, Szubanski is able to gain some control over her celebrity identity and this is the key to her success. Szubanski's representation of vulnerability also allows *Reckoning* to speak on behalf of the larger LGBTIQ community whose tumultuous history and triumphant overcoming are also contained within the memoir. By locating Szubanski's coming out Bildungsroman within settings that are nostalgically Australian, *Reckoning* presents the process of coming out within a framework that encourages understanding and renders this process as 'normal' instead of dissident. This journey of self-acceptance is intrinsically linked to Szubanski's relationship with her father and progresses alongside Szubanski's acceptance not only of her father as simultaneously an assassin and a good man, but also her Polish family history. Such explorations and reconciliation of her intergenerational trauma helps Szubanski to understand that she can also be a 'dissident lesbian' and a good person. Though, perhaps more importantly, Szubanski comes to realise that her father's consistent silence, instead of a measure of his disappointment in her, insisted on own her strength, bravery and intelligence, which encourages her to do the right thing.

Conclusion – Popular Memoir and the Pandemic

Australian popular memoir is more than just entertainment, or an exhaustive repetition of down-and-out stories made good, or even some trick by publishing houses to sell self-aggrandising monologues by celebrities and well-known people. Popular memoir is engaged with the publics in which it is created, and it reflects the wider cultural, social and political forces at work in Australia today. A modern fetishization of the individual, fuelled by neoliberal ideologies, both underpins the blockbuster sales of popular memoir and works to dismiss it as a one-dimensional commercial product designed only to generate profit. Readers were convinced by Belle Gibson's book *The Whole Pantry*, a product underwritten and authorised by her popular online identity and through her instamemoir @healing_belle*,* that she knew better than medical experts; that she had cured her cancer through consuming a clean, natural diet; and rejecting conventional medical intervention. Similarly, readers of Sarah Wilson's memoir *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* were persuaded that she had discovered, through enlightenment and self-sacrifice and without medical intervention, that unconditional self-acceptance is the cure for anxiety. Read through a framework of self-empowerment which makes visible the redemption stories structuring these life narratives, the individual rejection of institutions and medical advice reveals personal experience as the arbiter of truth; Gibson and Wilson know better than doctors about *their own* bodies.

Prior to the exposure of Gibson's scam, these life narratives seem very similar and make similar uses and claims in relation to agency, empowerment and the individual that are typical of wellness memoir. After all, the wellness industry establishes certain kinds of personal experience authentic and powerful, one that empowers readers emulate wellness memoir and consume wellness products. The wellness industry, also, proliferates in online spaces like blogs and social media that are assumed to be more democratised, accessible and authentic than legacy publishing which, by comparison, appears highly regulated. While life narratives online are still relatively new, online identity hoaxes and the platforms that enable them are becoming increasingly scrutinised by readers who demand greater honesty and authenticity online. In this way, some of the expectations of authenticity and authority that readers expect of legacy publishing begin to traverse online spaces. For example, Wilson's memoir is authenticated by her *I Quit Sugar* blog, where she presents as the expert on quitting sugar because of her personal experience, while her memoir uses verifiable psychological theory and input from experts. Crucially, wellness memoir circulates in the same social imaginary as popular memoir, where ordinary people defeat trauma and become

wealthy, successful and happy. Though, as wellness is a philosophy built on neoliberal logics of personal responsibility and self-management, wellness memoir frames this social imaginary as less a fantasy than an attainable goal. Gibson and Wilson both accessed wellness celebrity through the gate of the redemption narrative, as women who have overcome traumas and empowered themselves to heal by rejection of traditional medicine. The initial success of Gibson's scam suggests that the wellness celebrity, and the redemption narrative on which it is built, may not be as 'authentic' as some readers expect. Gibson created a persona that conformed to reader expectation for subjects of wellness memoir, which suggests what is expected and what is judged as 'authentic' by readers and publishers in the wellness industry is not authentic at all. Still despite Gibson's failure, the redemption narrative and the wellness industry persist; Wilson has even been contracted by her publisher to write another memoir due for publication in September 2021.

Wellness memoirs like Gibson's and Wilson's demonstrate how cycles of judgement are embedded in the reading publics of popular memoir that protect and redeem the redemption story as a viable structure. Leigh Gilmore explains that redemption narratives centre around an individual, the generic 'I', who overcomes generalised traumas through their personal pluck and individual willpower. In the context of the wellness memoir, redemption narratives, then, are built upon, and market, the neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility where all success and failure are located within the individual. The individual is simultaneously tasked not only with the management of their own lives and bodies but with the longevity of their countries and communities. Significantly, these communities are predetermined, and contain people with similar visions of what a 'good' life is meant to look like. When a redemption narrative is compounded into a scam, such as Gibson's, they come dangerously close to exposing the fallible mythology of personal responsibility on which they are built. Wellness memoirs are particularly interesting here because they circulate within a neoliberal fantasy that reads the 'good' life of wellness as a universally good life that is attainable to all.

The fact of Gibson's wellness memoir as a scam is crucial here. Gilmore explains that memoir, through its continued popularity but also because of a string of high-profile hoaxes, has been tainted with ready-made judgements that link memoir to narcissistic endeavour. These judgements not only throw out scam artists and hoaxers as 'bad' individuals they can also be mobilised against any text to dissolve nonnormative voices, for example, that expose histories of racial and gendered violence in the redemption narrative. As memoir is

fundamentally understood as confessional, the confessional pact established between the writer and the reader compels not only confession from the writer, but judgement from the reader. As I have argued in relation to the Gibson scam, when the affective connections fostered by an intimate community of readers were severed by Gibson's exposure as a fraud, the swift mobilisation of that judgement offered new affective connections between outraged readers. In this way, readers who feel scorned by 'bad' memoirs and 'bad' individuals are empowered by cycles of judgement that perform anew the redemption narrative, and which redeems the narrative structure for it to be used again. Though, judgement is not always universal, and public scandal can tighten affective bonds, resulting in communities that thrive on their 'otherness' or perceived exceptionalism. Here, the wellness industry establishes a certain kind of celebrity as powerful and authentic, one that conforms to the neoliberal logics of personal responsibility, self-empowerment and self-management. The wellness industry, and by association wellness celebrity, has become 'tainted' by scandal leaving the popular market to seek other powerful, authentic and successful celebrity subjects that present self-determination and overcoming as redemption. After all, redemption and judgement cycles are not exclusively about who is right or wrong, they also determine what kinds of subjects and stories have power and for how long.

Not all judgements in this cycle are negative, the same cycle can hail certain memoirs and their writers as idols. Redemption narratives are an integrated feature of Australian popular memoir and as this thesis argues, these function within a social imaginary where ordinary people overcome generalised traumas and achieve celebrity, happiness and success. The famous comedian, actor, rockstar, or wellness guru is read under the neoliberal idea of capitalist idolisation as a good role model and their memoirs become exemplars of personal responsibility. Though not an entirely false premise – these memoirs *do* have genuine stories of overcoming traumas and share experiences that could be considered helpful to readers – the distance between the 'ordinary' reader and the exalted celebrity, as they are represented in popular memoir, suggests that this idolisation can only ever be cruelly optimistic. By implication, readers of popular memoir want to be successful and happy like their idols, but their affective and optimistic attachments to generalised redemption narratives contributes to the repetition of a neoliberal mythology that ensures they are never successful or happy *enough*. In such a reading, Australian popular memoir is a genre doomed to repeat popular and damaging mythologies of self-determination and overcoming as redemption that tricks readers into a perpetually renewed neoliberal system. Yet all is not lost.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, Australian popular memoir also functions within an optimistic social imaginary: ordinary people rise above their circumstances to become famous, successful and happy. A shallow assessment of popular review communities like *Goodreads* or a survey of the dominant perspectives of mainstream critics reveal that, in many cases, this is what readers tend to expect from popular memoir, and what publishers seek to publish. For example, Vietnamese-Australian comedian Anh Do uses self-deprecating humour, the Vietnamese migrant as butt of the joke, as the cornerstone of his stand-up routines and his memoir *The Happiest Refugee*. When this performance is read not so much as humour but as a method of survival, necessary for packaging his story in ways that Australian audiences will respond to, the redemption story becomes a parody. Do's professional rise to success as a comedian, from traumatic beginnings as a Vietnamese migrant, is presented in his memoir as coincidence or good luck. Do *is* genuinely successful and has worked hard to achieve that success, but self-deprecation transforms the *expectation* of the successful redemption narrative into a joke about Australia's unreasonable and unachievable expectations for migrants. Though few readers seemed to actually get the joke. Australian reviewers overwhelmingly focused on Do's story as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and praised him for his humility and evident gratitude. Comparatively, Asian-Australian readers, Do's peers, levelled harsh judgement towards the memoir for perpetuating unrealistic standards for migrants. Japanese-Australian producer for the *ABC*, Masako Fukui even coined 'The Anh Do Effect' to describe the distance between good, exceptional Asian-Australians and everyone else. While Do has shied away from political discussion about migrant experience, the popularity of his published life story shows the power of Australian popular memoir to impact the publics in which it circulates.

The final two Australian popular memoirs examined in this thesis are more deliberately engaged in public issues. Rock-and-roll icon Jimmy Barnes, and adored actress and comedian Magda Szubanski, leverage their public persona and popularity for social justice causes like domestic violence and LGBTIQ rights. Their presence in this sphere of Australian public life has been facilitated by the popularity of their respective memoirs. In 2016, Barnes and Szubanski even appeared on *ABC* current affairs panel show *Q&A*, where they each took turns drawing from their memoirs for political debate in a 'blend of the personal, the practical and the plain obvious' (McMahon 2016). Barnes' childhood memoir *Working Class Boy*, a blockbuster bestseller, tells the story of Barnes growing up in poverty with an alcoholic and abusive father and finally escaping his hometown to become one of

Australia's most famous musicians. Significantly, this memoir operates alongside a suite of related cultural products, such as Barnes' musical and speaking tours and appearances on current affairs programs, to intervene in and espouse advocacy against the national domestic violence epidemic. Reading *Working Class Boy* within a therapeutic framework of self-help that makes visible the redemption story present in it reveals some of the social and ideological codes that Barnes has internalised during his childhood, and which he will eventually come to read as toxic codes of masculine success and achievement. Significantly, Barnes' personal experiences with domestic violence and toxic masculinity, as they are presented in *Working Class Boy*, are evidence for his authority. Australian popular memoir, here, becomes a site where the popular autobiographical forms of confession and catharsis can contribute to a redeemed and revitalised public identity that has the power to engage in public debate about national social issues.

Comparatively, Szubanski's memoir *Reckoning* is structured as a coming-of-age story that reflects on her personal experiences dealing with intergenerational trauma and coming to terms with her sexuality as a gay woman. This memoir was published during a time when Australia was hotly debating proposed changes to the terms of the *Marriage Act* to include same-sex couples. Szubanski's campaign for the 'Vote Yes' side of the debate was conducted across multiple media platforms; she appeared on current affairs shows on television, spoke out on Twitter, and, of course, published her memoir. *Reckoning* is a heartfelt memoir, brimming with Szubanski's trademark emotional vulnerability and sharp wit, where she negotiates with and redecides the terms of her authentic self. We learn that throughout her life Szubanski constructs, experiments with, and practices an alternative identity through which to hide her shame and conceal her sexuality. The vulnerability of Szubanski fosters intimacy; memoir is a space where the boundaries between private and public, celebrity and non-celebrity, can blur. Szubanski's emotional and personal experiences are juxtaposed in the memoir to social, political and economic structures that marginalise LGBTIQ people, narrow the points of access to public debate, and determine who is considered a 'good' person and who is not. *Reckoning* also works to dismantle the fantasy that surrounds celebrity, as Szubanski's redemption story is centred not on her success or career, but on the redemptive power of self-acceptance. Ultimately, this an exciting example of the power of popular memoir at work: it summons a supportive public while negotiating with and intervening in issues of social justice to powerful effect.

In this thesis, I have argued that popular memoir has the capacity to engender sympathy and empathy in readers through affective attachments to traumatic experiences and also to impact conventions of self-representation and self-actualisation that inform a sense of 'normal'. Though what remains unclear is the extent to which the memoirist is a victim of neoliberalism, or an agent of it. Like most other complexities of this thesis, and of memoir more generally, this resists an easy solution. It does seem significant, however, that the attention to neoliberal ideology that can be noted 'within' these memoirs serves to flatten, rather than draw attention to, the differences in the memoir's subjects. Which would seem to suggest that neoliberal ideology's main project of obscuring itself and universalising the successful subject remains. Nonetheless, memoir is inevitably a commercial product caught up in audience expectations and cycles of judgement and markets that search for the next bestseller. If popular memoir has such great potential as a powerful tool of political and public intervention, but it relies on its status as a commodity to achieve that power, then what do we do with it now?

At the time of writing this conclusion, at the beginning of 2021, the world is still grappling with the devastating effects of the global COVID19 pandemic. In the past year we have been forced to adapt to a changing world; schools and workplaces were shut; millions across the globe lost their jobs and livelihoods; whole countries were locked down; and people forced inside their homes for months. In Australia, the state of Victoria made global news when it used the authoritative power of fines and potential jail time to enforce a complete lockdown for a period of six weeks in a desperate bid to control spiking infection rates. Nationally, Australia is dealing with one of the highest unemployment rates in history, millions of Australians continue to rely on the government support payment. Home offices have become a norm, many worked from home while taking care of their children or managing their schoolwork which was also sent online. Gyms and sporting clubs shut down, Australian Rules Football and National Rugby League competitions were postponed, and pubs closed their doors indefinitely. We were anxious, we watched a lot of Netflix, a lot of Youtube, ordered contactless delivery take-out food and shopped online. We were hopeful that things would get better.

Worldwide disasters, market crashes and global pandemics can make visible some of the neoliberal structures and ideologies that may have contributed to those disasters. In the wake of COVID19 lockdowns, the myth of personal responsibility, that tries to encourage

people to remain productive, took on new meaning: 'toxic productivity' (Winter, 2020). This refers to the myth that lockdown gave people more time and more opportunity to do more things, learn new skills or get their home organised often while still working from home. In *Results Wellness Lifestyle*, Emma Selby argues that social media was mostly to blame for the onset of toxic productivity:

> During lockdown there was an influx of social media snapshots, meme moments and general pressure to be more or do more. It's contributed to this emerging message that if we don't come out of this pandemic as a zen master baker who can speak seven languages we have somehow failed. (Selby quoted in Winter, 2020)

Toxic productivity is clearly a manifestation of the neoliberal myth of personal responsibility gone into overdrive and channelled through the glorification of hustle culture. Significantly, personal responsibility here is justified and amplified by anxieties circulated by the pandemic, such as instability in the job market, growing debt and budget deficits. Although, there is a therapeutic element here too: propping up your household budget with a side hustle will make you *feel* better and can be used as a distraction from the anxieties of the pandemic. In my reading of popular memoir as neoliberal, I have argued that the redemption narrative is demanded by times of crisis. Gibson and Wilson emerge in order to satisfy a growing market for the work of wellness warriors, a demand that produces both hoax and authentic subjects in response. Certified celebrity subjects like Szubanski, Do or Barnes do not have to prove their story as in wellness memoir, but are under other market pressures that seek particularly successful celebrity subjects. In this market logic, popular memoir evolves to contain the best elements of these two spheres. Thus, producing a celebrity subject that brings together the relatability and achievability of wellness memoir with the aspirational success and political power of celebrity memoir.

If he didn't exist the market would have invented him, Australia's newest lockdown hero, and one of the biggest everyday celebrities to come out of the pandemic. Comedian, metal band drummer, content creator, surprisingly good cook, and host of the popular Youtube channel 'Nat's What I Reckon', Nat (his character doesn't have a last name). Though a relatively successful comedian pre-pandemic, operating for 10 years on Youtube and with 85,000 subscribers, Nat was not well-known outside of a niche market of metalheads and burnout competitors (Valentish 2020). When Nat's latest comedy tour was

cancelled due to the pandemic, he started a Youtube series which doubled as a campaign against jar sauce and packet food; his catchphrase, 'fuck jar sauce' (Valentish 2020). The series comprises videos of Nat casually swearing and dropping jokes about the pandemic while demonstrating how to cook basic meals from scratch, such as 'End of Days Bolognese', 'Macorona 'n' Cheese', 'Quarantine Sauce' and 'The Crowd Goes Mild Curry' (Valentish 2020; Nat's What I Reckon 2020). Each of these videos earned upwards of 5 million views on Youtube, the 'Nat's What I Reckon' channel now has more than 250,000 subscribers, and Nat's rescheduled comedy tour has been sold out for months (Valentish 2020; Norris 2020). And of course, Nat has written a memoir: released in December 2020, and voted Australia's Favourite Book of 2020 by Booktopia, *Un-Cook Yourself: A Ratbag's Rules for Life* (2020) was introduced by Nat on his social media channels as an 'unhelpful self-help book' (Norris 2020).

Achieving mainstream celebrity during the pandemic, Nat's *Un-Cook Yourself: A Ratbag's Rules for Life* is a prime example of what Australian popular memoir might look post-pandemic. Publisher Penguin Random House describes Nat as 'the tattooed saviour that we didn't know we needed' and promises that the book will be filled with advice on 'how to be a better dickhead with Nat's deep and meaningful guide to life' (Penguin 2020). Unsurprisingly, and like other celebrities discussed in this thesis, Nat's story is not a simple rise to recognition narrative but is also a story of overcoming and redemption. A while ago, Nat had to undergo surgery to remove part of his lung; the recovery process did not go as planned and Nat was rapidly gaining weight, getting very sick and struggling to breathe. His surgery prohibited him from being able to lose weight from exercising, as breathing was still difficult on a good day, so in order to get well Nat had to address what he was eating (Nat's What I Reckon 2020, 145-146). Though, unlike Gibson or Wilson, Nat never subscribes to the controversial claim that food could be used as medicine, in fact he outright rejects it: 'I remember seeing this quacky naturopath who said they could fix my problem in a month if I ate the right food and vitamins. Thank fuck I didn't stick to that – I'd be fucken dead' (Nat's What I Reckon 2020, 144). For Nat, food and cooking are an avenue for psychological and emotional healing, cooking makes him *feel* better.

Food and cooking clearly became an avenue to healing for Nat, but here too is a frame through which to read his comedy, Youtube and 'unhelpful self-help' memoir as more of a healing journey than a commercial endeavour. This may be one of the keys to his success, but Nat is also a relatable character, as Valentish writes: 'there's something weirdly comforting –

benevolent, even – about Nat's grouchy big brother style' citing the fact that Nat speaks in a 'settle down' kind of tone, even when he's arguing about not putting zucchini in Bolognese sauce and that he 'avoids shaming people' (2020). It's significant that Nat's persona has taken on a 'life' of its own and comes to stand in for, and authenticate, the creator/author of Nat. Typical of the popular memoirs examined in this thesis, Nat is not as a simple as he seems, and he is addressing more than just an over-commodification of food and lack of basic cooking knowledge. Nat clearly references the related subcultures of the metalhead and the bogan; both are a deviation from the 'normal,' both occupy a lower class position and both are frequently underestimated in terms of education, talent or potential success. Unlike Gibson, Nat is not creating a fake persona that is deliberately compromised and redeeming himself – he belongs to these subcultures and internalises judgements about class and normalcy in his performances. Crucially, Nat's videos tell a story of accessing a level of success and celebrity that is rarely afforded to someone like him, as an everyday bloke who dropped out of high school and can't hold down a 'normal' job (Nat's What I Reckon 2020, 57).

As Worden explains, the 'hustler' embodies an ideal of neoliberal culture, 'a character that is unfettered by traditional structures but is completely defined by the conditions that have generated them' (2020, 19). Like Barnes' 'working class man,' the hustler is a fantasy through which one can imagine rebelling against the social and economic norms of neoliberalism. Would Nat have gained such widespread celebrity if entertainment markets had not been pushed into YouTube because of the pandemic, or even if people had not been forced into lockdown and needed cook for themselves more often? Nat, read as the 'hustler,' is a figure enmeshed within neoliberalism that turns the fantasy of exceeding its systemic limitations into an obtainable reality. Unlike the other popular celebrity memoirs examined in this thesis that present a rise to success retrospectively, Nat is writing and performing his success as it happens. Though, more importantly, Nat is intervening in the idea of 'normalcy' as a defining factor, as the 'only' way to be successful: his memoir promises to show how 'to be the best dickhead you can be'. Like Wilson, Nat preaches a kind of self-acceptance as the way to exceed the conditions of normalcy and define one's own success in a way that suits them. In this way, Nat suggests being 'normal' and conforming to a universal definition of success is about as bland an unencouraging as jar sauce and pre-packaged food (Nat's What I Reckon 2020, 57-61). Ultimately, Nat resists the commodification of food by showing that convenience foods like jar sauce, that seem easier and better, are in fact just as time

consuming as the real thing and of lower value. Of course, Nat actually likes cooking and therefore is able to make it *look* fun and easy when the task may seem too difficult and time consuming to someone with no experience or confidence in the kitchen. As a life narrative with multiple and simultaneous effects on pre-pandemic and post-pandemic life 'Nat's What I Reckon' negotiates with multiple tensions.

As Kiran Misra writes in *The Guardian*, hustle culture rarely benefits the individual as it is a formation of late capitalism where dependable employment with benefits and a living wage seem increasingly out of reach. Further, the concept of the hustle reconciles structural contradictions and can be weaponised to justify income inequality by promoting the illusion that if you hustle hard enough you can break even too (Misra 2020). So, a show like Nat's where the domestic habitat of cooking is transported via YouTube into a consumable form of entertainment reinforces the neoliberal expectation of the hustle: that every second can be monetised. Additionally, as a subject that references subcultures outside of the established 'normal' Nat universalises the idea of success and celebrity, proving that if he can do it then readers can too. Though, even as Nat critiques the 'normal' system he simultaneously benefits from it as a subject that rose to celebrity under its, as he notes, problematic, conditions. As such, Nat seems to expose and parody the same kind of covert neoliberal 'expectation' that Do parodies in his memoir: that everyone can and *should* be successful no matter their ethnicity or class. More complex still, read within the frameworks of healing and self-help Nat's rise to popularity is seen as more of a coincidence than a career move. Like Barnes or Szubanski, this causality exudes authenticity and authenticates Nat's power to produce a memoir that give us advice on our own lives based on his experiences, because he seems like a genuine person just having a laugh. 'Nat's What I Reckon' circulates within the same social imaginary of ordinary people defeating trauma and rising to celebrity as other popular memoirs in this thesis. When faced with the challenge of the pandemic disrupting his career as a comedian, Nat used what was available to him, a YouTube following and a message about jar sauce, to overcome this challenge and become a celebrity.

Nat reflects the anxieties of the world around him and acts as an example of how one must change and adapt in order to deal with those anxieties and exceed the limitations of the precarious now. In a lot of ways, he is Worden's neoliberal hustler, completely determined and constructed by the world around him, even if he appears to be the opposite (genuine, non-commercial, authentic). Nat has also used the structures of hustle culture, the gig economy and an increasingly virtual/digital world to provide a foundation through which he

rises to celebrity. Subsequently, Nat gains the authority to impart advice to his fans/viewers about how to live their best lives which is grounded in his own narrative of success. His new 'unhelpful self-help' memoir is the kind of popular memoir that will lead us out of the pandemic and help us get on with our lives. As this thesis ultimately concludes, popular memoir is a complex and powerful genre that trades on redemption narratives of self-determination and overcoming. In an increasingly neoliberal world where readers are expected to constantly self-manage and improve their lives towards physical, psychological, spiritual and financial expectations under the guise of 'normality', something has to give. The popular memoir market produces certain powerful and authentic subjects that model ways of recovering from crisis and becoming successful, wealthy, and happy. Popular memoir circulates within this social imaginary where readers too can respond to crisis by becoming better people, recovering from trauma and becoming successful. Ultimately, popular memoir provides hope to a vast collective of readers that seemingly inescapable and exhaustive systems like neoliberalism, or any system or circumstance for that matter, can be exceeded and overcome.

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