

# Post-socialist geopolitical uncertainties: Researching memories of childhood with ‘child as method’

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## Abstract

This article engages continuing discussions in childhood studies on (re)inserting the study of childhood into wider socio-political matrices of power and practices. We present as a potent analytical strategy to do this work ‘child as method’, developed by one of the authors. After describing ‘child as method’, we draw on the *Recollect/Reconnect* project, in which scholars and artists who grew up during the last decades of the Cold War recalled their childhood memories. We focus on ‘the child’ and ‘childhood’ as a position of geopolitical address, formulated by narrators to the reader as revealing emergent post-socialist subjectivities and conditions.

## KEYWORDS

biography, child as method, memory, narrative, post-socialist studies

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, we mobilize ‘child as method’ as an emerging fruitful analytical strategy to explore childhood as geopolitically situated and historically contingent (see also Burman, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Silova et al., 2017a, 2017b; Zhou et al., 2021). Specifically, it is here applied to childhood memories generated in our study exploring socialist and post-socialist societies across timespaces that aim to trouble stereotypical and often biased views about the region, both its

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histories and presents. The study, entitled *Recollect/Reconnect*, explores participants' memories of childhood growing up in or visiting (post)socialist spaces. By post-socialist timespaces we refer to the geographical areas of the former Socialist Bloc and the 'geopolitical diversity and the variety of socialist and post-socialist imaginaries, conditions, and paths among different countries' (Silova et al., 2017, p. 242).

'Child as method' is a transdisciplinary analytical approach that addresses socio-political practices focusing on the positioning accorded to childhood/child/ren. While it shares features with other (constructionist and post-human) critical approaches currently informing childhood studies and social theory, it arises from and has a specific engagement with transnational and post-colonial studies. It aims to situate childhood and childhood studies as central to social and political analysis generally, so demonstrating the necessary intersection between childhood studies with wider socio-political theories and practices. Widespread cultural practices of abstracting children from cultural-political contexts and dynamics have long preoccupied childhood studies (Esser et al., 2016; James et al., 1998; Twum Danso Imoh & Ame, 2012), as individualizing social conditions and warranting the spurious globalization of culturally and historically specific modes of childhood (Burman, 2017; Boyden, 1990). As with other current discussions in childhood studies, including the 'return of 'the child' as a void, as a non-person' in politics (Cook, 2000, 2020, p. 139; Hanson et al., 2018; Spyrou, 2018), the aim instead is to foster attention to the ways these contexts and dynamics interact with meanings associated with childhood and produce childhood both as, and via, material, geopolitical practices.

The name 'Child as method' intentionally alludes to (at least) two other key transdisciplinary post-colonial texts reverberating across cultural studies and migration studies respectively, namely *Border as Method* (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) and *Asia as Method* (Chen, 2010). In particular, it is informed by Chen's discussion of two key elements of decolonization: de-imperialization (seen as a subjective as well as political project to disinvest in colonial ways of thinking and feeling) and de-Cold War (which involves attending to the legacies and ongoing reproductions of the Cold War). 'Child as method' is also influenced by Chen's (2010) discussion of how these epistemological commitments invite specific forms of research design, focus and analysis (inter-referencing and critical syncretism). Also of significance is that a conjoint resource mobilized by both Chen and Burman (2019a, 2019b) is the work of the revolutionary anticolonial theorist and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, as offering a generative psychopolitical and psychoaffective analysis linking subjectivity with the geopolitical. As with *Asia as Method*, 'Child as method', therefore, is less a technical or procedural method, than research analytic or set of epistemological commitments. It takes child as a nodal point in a set of practices, social relationships and institutional arrangements, as a way of reading cultural-political practices, including academic knowledge production. While not committed to any specific model or theory of childhood, 'child as method' works to support the generation of ethically politically engaged and theory-developing, as well as theory-driven, empirical research of the kind we discuss here.

We propose 'child as method' as a particularly congenial resource to mobilize in relation to accounts of geopolitical experience since both are informed by post-colonial and decolonial frameworks (Lugones, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007). Such resources are useful, as in this article and for one type of geopolitical experience, to explore the binary relations and subjecthood of post-socialist timespaces produced during the Cold War (Tlostanova et al., 2016). Via memory stories, narrators' multiple positionings and their 'body-politics and geopolitics of knowledge, being and perception' can be explored as post-socialist subjects (Tlostanova et al., 2016, p. 5). While the project of modernity privileges imperial, colonial and capitalist forms of knowledge production and casts out certain bodies/subjectivities as non-legitimate thinking and

knowing bodies/subjects, combining the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge works to acknowledge plural 'spaces of experience' from which a claim is made and how that particular space plays out in the imagined 'horizon of expectations' in geopolitical relations (Mignolo, 2007, p. 494). We therefore use 'child as method' to scrutinize (post)socialist subjectivities of a narrator's childhood memory, taking as our rationale that these subjectivities might have been previously marginalized or silenced by uneven knowledge hierarchies of power (Silova et al., 2017). The exploration of notions of 'the child' and 'childhood' deployed by narrators highlights positionalities (as children, adults, researchers, etc.) from which the worlds described are looked at. Employing this critical and reflexive analytical angle enabled by 'child as method' is important, since a growing number of scholars in childhood studies draw on childhood memories for the study of childhood and children's experiences (see Hohti & MacLure, 2021; Horton & Kraftl, 2006; Philo, 2003; Silova et al., 2017).

## POST-SOCIALISM AND CHILDHOODS

After the fall of the Berlin wall, expected trajectories for the region aligned towards liberal democratic capitalist development, ignoring and even trumping the differences of the everyday spaces of life and diverse subjectivities' desires to understand history and create their own futures (Atanasoski & Vora, 2018). Neoliberal modernity turned subjects into exotic and invisible Others, who are forever lagging and striving to assimilate (Tlostanova, 2017). Until today, these Cold War legacies also shape knowledge economies (Pickles & Smith, 2007; Silova et al., 2017a, 2017b). Epistemologies of research embedded in national and institutional research traditions create and maintain centres and peripheries in the global knowledge economy (e.g. Chatterjee & Petrone, 2008; Kirtchik, 2012). Theorization, abstract thinking and conceptual work continues to be reserved for the knowledge centres, limiting the roles of scholars from the peripheries often to mere data gatherers or informants (Mudure, 2007; Salecl, 2002; Tlostanova et al., 2016), so marking a further pernicious alignment between the cultural-political inferiorization of majority world scholars and the socio-political positioning of children and young people.

We use 'child as method' to analyse a memory story generated via collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) to give an example of how a childhood memory is framed by the geopolitics of knowledge economy. While multiple possibilities for interpretations are present, our analysis here focuses on childhood as a geopolitical address on the part of the narrator of memories to the reader, and how narrators do the work of cultural as well as temporal estrangement and connection through tropes of childhood. Our aim here is twofold: first, to indicate how 'child as method' can contribute to research in childhood studies by highlighting key conceptual as well as methodological insights generated from situating these meanings of childhood within wider geopolitical relations. Second, this analysis demonstrates the need to go beyond childhood as a singular monolithic entity (to be saved, restored, protected, etc.), and to show how these notions contribute to performing post-socialist subjectivities, as multiple and unstable sets of geopolitical positionings.

## COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY AND ‘CHILD AS METHOD’: CREATING AND ANALYSING CHILDHOOD MEMORY STORIES

Collective biography (CB) as a method was developed by Frigga Haug and her colleagues (1987). In our project, we used a retooled CB in a post-structuralist vein (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gonick & Gannon, 2014) retaining the scrutiny of the assumed and normalized everyday as key to explicating the political structuring of subjectivity. Collective biography is distanced from biographical research that assumes a unitary and bounded individual proceeding through life and who can separate and liberate herself from societies’ power structures. Instead, Gonick and Gannon (2014, p. 6) call attention to how ‘we are discursively, affectively, materially constituted’ at all times, and to the inherent instability of these forces. In this manner, the method works in tandem with ‘child as method’ to resist the individualization of children even as it attends to the specificity of geopolitical contextual influences on adult recollections of childhood experience. Collective biography mobilizes culturalist-materialist readings of childhood that go beyond the ‘lighter’ (Danziger, 1997) constructionist claims which risk resolving into voluntarist individualism. It understands childhood, and how children inhabit this category, as necessarily formulated, and organized within specific and contingent socio-historical and political conditions. As various other authors have indicated, this position enables a way of navigating the structure-agency binary that has traditionally preoccupied childhood studies (Esser et al., 2016; James, 2009; King, 2007).

Collective biography is an approach that works with participants who remember and research their own experiences, thereby collapsing the researcher/researched binary that bolsters prevailing power-knowledge structures and relations. The co-author of this paper is the co-leader of the project and a participant in memory workshops and memory analyses adopting mostly an emic viewpoint. The author is an advisory board member contributing to memory analysis from an etic perspective. CB foregrounds the shared generation and analysis of systematically recalled memories to explore the effects of structural, systemic, discursive and affective processes on the emergence of particular subjects, such as the neoliberal subject, the gendered subject, the academic subject, the child subject or as in our research the socialist and post-socialist subjects (e.g. Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gonick & Gannon, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2016; Millei et al., 2019). The additional viewpoint of a non-participant expert in the analytical strategy of ‘child as method’ adds a form of reflexivity that is highly beneficial for memory analysis in general and the analysis of childhood memories and the geopolitics of power in particular.

When people create memory stories, ‘the past is not directly transmitted to us in pristine form; it comes back to us only in fragments out of which we puzzle together their connections and distinctions, patterns and configurations’ (Keightley & Pickering, 2012, p. 7). In this process, the narrator—both as remembered and as sharing the memory—emerges as a character, acting and telling in richly described and emotionally charged contexts, which—as we hope to show—are both important for our analysis here and politically significant. We understand memory stories ‘as’ events in the past in a similar way as ‘child and method’ is connected with the connecting word: ‘as’. In ‘child as method’ ‘as’ invites consideration of what is included and excluded in the alignments or juxtapositions of terms implied, such as ‘child as freely playing’ or ‘child as innocent’, including questions of recognition, misrecognition and the corresponding symbolic violence perpetrated with inclusions/exclusions on what the child can be and become. Connecting ‘child’ and ‘method’ with ‘as’, as well as connecting ‘memory’ and ‘event in the past’ with ‘as’, indicates a relationship between the two terms but does not imply that they are identical (Burman,

2013). There is thus a necessary incongruence or tension between memories and the events they portray. Therefore, we use the term ‘memory stories’ instead of memories (see more on website <https://coldwarchildhoods.org/memories/>).

Crucially, the narrator also performs this work while creating memory stories of events from fragments, filling any memorial gaps with imagination which, inevitably, also, erase as they also produce competing possibilities of becoming that are especially relevant to narratives of/about children and childhood (Skott Myhre, 2012). Moreover, the position from which tropes such as ‘child as freely playing’ or ‘child as innocent’ are used, or being understood, also topicalize how the viewing position from which such alignments are made are necessarily involved, implicated, or entangled in the creation of the child/memory. The positioning of the listener is like the narrator of the memory who can never have direct access to events happened in the past. The present of remembering and others’ presence while the memory is being told, the narrators’ understanding of the past and, within that, the present of the described event, and possible futures within the memory and towards which the memory story orientates all shape the memory being created. ‘Child’ and ‘childhood’ as referenced in these memories thereby allude to multiple temporalities and becomings, also including those of the present of the telling and so disclose features of the geopolitical positioning and context of the narrator and (imagined) listener.

By mixing the research tradition of collective biography with artistic forms of inquiry, the *Recollect/Reconnect* project explores childhood memories to document and analyse childhoods and societies. Recruiting artist and academic participants from 31 countries, we worked in 6 workshops internationally. At the workshops, memories on prior agreed themes were shared and reflected on, with a particular focus on the sensations, intensities and textures of events, to create a corpus of written memory stories (see Davis & Gannon, 2012; see archive here <https://coldwarchildhoods.org/memories/>). Produced in this way, memory stories belong to the collective and (also following Haug) are written in third person. Using the third person aims to distance the memory from the person remembering and make it more relatable for the reader. The goal of collectively sharing and re/writing memories attempt to strip away nostalgia, sentimentality and a biographically realist/modernist type of story writing that often characterize autobiographical memories, especially of childhood—since modern bourgeois societies have long associated the child with notions of authentic inner self (Burman, 2020; Steedman, 1995). Despite these efforts, as will be seen, many of these elements are still present in the memories stored in our archive, which thus provides a fascinating resource for exploring the way the geopolitical structures subjectivity, in the ‘now’ as well as the ‘then’. This is not to suggest that it is possible to escape any such imbrication within the geopolitical, on our part as co-authors of this article and as participants in the workshops, but rather to help bring analytical focus to those specific resources. Attending to and interrogating discontinuities and fluctuations of identification, and identifying temporal disjunctions structured into the narrative accounts, we suggest, ushers in possibilities of both tracing the construction of and destabilizing culturally and politically dominant modes of subjectivity in ways that are conceptually and politically meaningful—as we suggest—both for childhood studies, post-socialist and memory studies.

## **WORKING EMPIRICALLY WITH ‘CHILD AS METHOD’**

In common with many current models, a key starting point for ‘child as method’ is that child and childhood speak to and of many meanings that childhood carries and that constructions of childhood, including the figure of ‘child’ (Burman, 2020; Castañeda, 2002), function to

produce and constrain those forms of childhood that individual children live and practice. The absence of either definite ('the') or indefinite article ('a') qualifying our discussion of 'child' reflects (on) the problems that each qualification poses—of both normalization and differentiation (that also reflect dominant axes of orientalization and colonialism, see Burman, 2007; Cannella & Viruru, 2004), for as soon as child is qualified as 'the' or 'a', the question immediately arises: which child, from what context/time/class/culture/gender, etc.? Diverse meanings of child and childhood reflect distinct cultural histories and corresponding philosophical positions, and they function far beyond (albeit also impacting very significantly on) the lives of specific historical and embodied children. Built on and from discussions in post-colonial and border studies (Chen, 2010; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), as well as feminist intersectionality and queer studies (Crenshaw, 1991; Gill-Peterson, 2015; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), we argue 'child as method' works well as an analytical lens to explore historicities (and their various lingering temporalities) of post-socialist subjectivities. As Gill-Peterson et al. (2016, p. 495) assert: 'thinking the child *now* also means to move orthogonally from an emphasis on futurity to an interest in the historicity of the present'.

Like childhood studies generally, 'child as method' is concerned not only with the significance of constructions of childhood but also with the consequences those constructions of child and childhood mobilize and organize for others. These others could be caregivers—especially (under current conditions of gendered power relations) mothers and parents (Geinger et al., 2014; Silova et al., 2017); while also presuming, relying upon or interpellating other roles and identities with which children and childhood are interwoven and enmeshed (of gender, class, ethnicity, citizenship status, etc.). In this case, we attend to assumed childhoods referred to by fellow post/socialist participants or notions of childhood invoked or attributed to imagined readers of their memories.

Attending to the positions that child and childhood mobilize for others necessarily involves a practice of critical reflexivity (cf Haraway, 1991, 1997) emphasizing relational, contextual and performative constraints on knowledge production (Bondi, 2009; Pillow, 2003, 2015). Such reflexive concerns are not only intrinsic to the ethical-political framing of any project, but they are also specifically relevant to childhood studies, the more so for being little acknowledged within the methodological literatures. These reflexive concerns invite the interrogation of what kinds of childhood adult reflections generate, and with what (interpersonal and political) impact. In what can be seen as anticipations of 'child as method', Horsley and Penn (2014) highlighted the materially significant role of such reflections in relation to policymaking, while Orellana and Phoenix (2017) and Millei et al. (2018) indicated the imbrication of childhood with other key socio-political axes in relation to narratives of migration and political regime change respectively.

## **ANALYSING A MEMORY STORY: THE PROCESS**

In our analysis of a memory example, we pay attention to the ways in which a hierarchy of knowledge production affects the various subjectivities a narrator presents about childhood and herself as an adult originating from a (post)socialist region and researcher, and in return how memory research also (re)shapes us as human beings and academics. As Chen (2010) convincingly argues, the project of decolonization is not only about decolonizing knowledge, but also about decolonizing 'culture and mind, desire and body' (p. x). In this process, knowledge production becomes directly linked to matters of subjectivity, which means that the transformation of the existing knowledge production processes requires a simultaneous transformation and decolonization of narrator selves (Chen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010). Moreover, as mentioned above,

Chen emphasizes the longstanding and continuing impact of the Cold War as integral to any decolonizing and de-imperializing project.

Thus, in the analysis of a memory story below, we demonstrate how ‘child as method’ serves as a highly productive tool to explore in other memory stories as well the various normative prescriptions and positionalities—‘socialist selves’—produced by the geopolitics of Cold War and ‘transition’ research, as well as the literature that has aimed to re-interpret ‘socialist subjectivities.’ We bring into conversation the narrator’s various positionings with Chatterjee and Petrone’s (2008) examination of the modern self as a historical category in American historiography on the Soviet Union. These authors suggest that Western historians have ‘applied distinct models of selfhood to the various dimensions of Soviet [and socialist] subjectivity and used these to explore its location and its performance in the realms of the private and public’ (pp. 982–983). These models of selfhood draw on various theoretical frameworks that allow for reading and explaining everyday life by emphasizing or de-emphasizing various details. Theoretical frameworks also sensitize the researcher to pay attention to negotiations that the ‘narrator self’ engages in, while disregarding others. We selected one memory story for discussion in which negotiations of the narrator selves are intertwined with ‘child’ to enable the exploration of the geopolitical positioning of the narrator. Chatterjee and Petrone (2008) demonstrate the importance of being reflective upon these frames of selfhood that construct ‘socialist subjectivities’ and shape ‘deeper understanding of that society and culture’ (p. 967) and, we suggest, the geopolitics of the present.

Delinking might necessitate leaving behind a single set of identifiable characteristics of the socialist citizen, but Chatterjee and Petrone (2008) urge approaching this task carefully. They expand the scope instead to look for ‘the complex subject positions that they fashioned, inhabited and exhibited’ in various spaces and situations (p. 985). They suggest a methodology that situates a fluid socialist self ‘along a continuum of the domestic setting, the intimate collective, the larger socially imagined realities of class, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliations, and nationality and explore how it intersects with the discourses and practices of the state’ (p. 986). They maintain that keeping in sight this fluid socialist self helps ‘trace the individual’s range of possible actions within his or her complex and multiple subject positions’ (Chatterjee & Petrone, 2008, p. 986). Thus, instead of aiming to erase the different configurations of the socialist self to decolonize being, here we indicate how delinking might be done by a transversal move by which it becomes possible to pinpoint their existence, intersectionalities, and operations. Finally, we also need to consider our own and the participant researcher selves (as the observers of the socialist self) considering our/their shaping as (post)socialist subjects, including their academic and cultural training located in different theoretical traditions and academic and artistic workplaces.

The memory stories in the memory workshops were first shared in English by participants who mostly came from English as a second language contexts. Then, in response to questions raised by other participants inquiring into the texture of experience, memory stories were collectively re-created, explored, rewritten, and titled during the workshops. While, as already indicated, the goal was to break free of nostalgia and sentimentality that sometimes characterizes memories of socialist past (Silova et al., 2017) at the same time there was an interest in harnessing the anti-hegemonic dimension of post-socialist nostalgia that seeks to resist the official erasure of socialist past (Reifová, 2018). The notion of collective biography and its associated methodological precepts challenge individualist assumptions that usually inscribe accounts of childhood. Instead of anchoring claims to special or unique individual features, or authenticities, as narratives of and about childhood typically warrant, the notion of collective biography instead begins from the assumption of the sociality of the construction of (individual) experience, and the inscription of the political into the personal, extending also—and perhaps especially—into

domains conventionally associated with the intimate, private, familial or domestic domains. For a geopolitically oriented analysis, what we find especially important in the project produced memories are the ways the speaking subject, the enunciator, betrays (or perhaps it would be better to say recapitulates) assumptions or orientations *from the 'now' of the speaking moment, rather than of the moment or time spoken about*. This distinction—or gap—between the speaker, the enunciating subject, and the person/events they are describing (i.e. the subject of the statement) is our analytical concern in the example below. Thus, we are interested in how the memory teller identifies with the self s/he speaks about (including him or herself as a child) and how those selves speak with the prevailing models of childhood, which is under critical scrutiny in this paper. In the example memory story, the author richly narrates her stance with tropes of childhood.

We now move to present and discuss an indicative memory story to illustrate how 'child as method' might inform the broader project of (re)thinking post-socialisms. While the project memory stories could be analysed in many ways, for many purposes, our focus here is confined to consideration of how the narrator mobilizes child and what this discloses about his/her/their geopolitical positioning. We have selected this story, out of the corpus of 250, as one key subgenre of texts generated for the project, in which the explicitly 'political' (in the sense of state and interstate relations) become evident only through and by virtue of familial relations and affections, so indicating both the imbrication of children's lives within the geopolitical but also how this appears often in implicit or indirect ways.

## DISCUSSION OF THE MEMORY STORY

This (lengthy) memory is set in between the urban and rural landscape, different generations, childhood and adulthood, and the different reported ways of belonging to those spaces for the adults described, especially the mother of the narrator, and the child self that is represented. The first three paragraphs set the scene and install dominant childhood tropes concerning the preoccupation with family structure and relations, attunement to parental affectional histories and emotional states, and acute interest in opportunities afforded by physical settings (to 'roam freely') and of course the prototypical—even universal—childhood activity of playing ('hide and seek'). The narrative style performs childhood, opening with direct speech, with relational family terms (Oma and Opa, Granny and Grandad) assumed to be understood by the reader/hearer.

Much is left unsaid, or implied, leaving open the question of whether this ambiguity is arising from child status (drawing on the dominant and longstanding narrative of children as being outside/beyond and relatively unaware of 'politics') or is commonly assumed normalized knowledge of the time. The apparently unspoken, albeit geographically specified, political context is that in 1945, Thuringia was pulled under the Soviet occupation zone and became a part of German Democratic Republic. An Inner German border was created in 1949 which was nearly 1,400 km long and divided East and West Germany. Several villages were located within the border zone, and in two of these lived the child's grandparents. The crossing of this border zone is described as a special occasion. The presentation of the border and the lead-up to passing it aids the narrator in highlighting the geopolitics of the Cold War, manifested in a variety of ways in the story. The emotionality of the preparation for the journey signals the distinctiveness of the event, the anxiety about leaving home, having the necessary papers, the unusual shouting and 'meanness' of the mother, the stress and nervousness of approaching the border, taking a big breath after opening the car window, and the stern look of the guard. These subjective features animate the



## THE STORY—GOING HOME

“We’re going home. Oma and Opa, here we come.” Well, actually, home is this other town, not Oma and Opa’s place. It’s where they moved to when she was five years old, just after her first brother had been born. Her parents always talked about the house they had moved to as their real home, but deep down, she felt that mum and dad’s hearts were elsewhere, in the villages and homes where they grew up. Mum rang Oma regularly and family visits there and back were their main way of socializing, as mum had few – actually NO – real friends in their new home town. In fact, mum had very few friends period, but that was something the little girl did not find strange at the time.

In any case, the little girl loved visiting Oma and Opa. They had a house with a large garden, where she could roam freely with her cousin. Together, they played lots of hide and seek. Or they made up home in the old garden hut.

Going to Oma’s and Opa’s was always a special occasion, something she looked forward to greatly, though she also missed her mum, dad and brothers sorely when she was left there alone. Her parents actually rarely stayed there for more than two or three days, so usually, they would all go together and she would then be left at the grandparents for one or two weeks. Her parents then came back to pick her up or her grandparents did the journey.

Travelling by car was something she always enjoyed, but the journey to Oma and Opa’s was the longest they ever did, nearly an hour, and so it gave her the most time to tuck herself into the corner on the backseat, look out of the window, daydream and disappear into her own imaginary world. Unless mum was upset. Which happened a lot. In that case, her shouting at dad or crying or saying mean things to all of them made the journey intolerable. Mum always got especially tense before long journeys. She would always be the last to get in the car and then spend the next few minutes going through all the things they should have turned off and packed before leaving. One of the most important things to take were the “Passierscheine” – permits to allow people to enter the cordoned off border zone in which her grandparents’ villages were both located. At five or six years old, the little girl did not understand about the border zone, but she quickly learnt that the “Passierscheine” were a great source of stress to her parents and that, without them, you could not go and see Oma and Opa. She also knew that, after a lovely car journey through the Thuringian countryside, which more often than not was interrupted for an ice-cream at the best bakery serving ice-cream in the world, they would get to a roadblock that could only be passed with a “Passierschein”. The roadblock was guarded and a barrier blocked the way. There were armed police officers stationed in a little bungalow. Getting close to the barrier, her parents always got nervous. There was a great commotion as they looked for the papers, examined them closely once more to make sure that they had the right stamp and date on them. They stopped the car in front of the barrier and looked towards the hut. How long would it be this time, before the armed officer took it upon himself to come outside and check the papers? How long would he take after collecting them? He used to take a long hard look into the back of the car too, making a stern face whilst seemingly counting the number of children in the back. The boot also had to be opened – probably to check whether anyone was being hidden in there. The armed officer always seemed to take forever after taking the papers back into the bungalow. When he came out again, the atmosphere in the car was tense. Dad pulled down the car

window again and took a deep breath. Phhhhh. The officer gave them one last stern look, then handed over the papers. This was not always the case. Once the papers were out of date and the new papers had not arrived early enough, so her parents were turned back to only return after they had received the new papers.

Today, however, all was good. They headed off, once the barrier was lifted, not taking the right turn to her dad's village but going straight ahead to mum's village. The final highlight of the journey awaited them: the bumpy tarmacked road, built under Hitler and now serving few motorists but being repurposed into a funfair ride of sorts, as they jumped into the air at the three bumps that they always waited for. "Is it coming up now? No. Maybe after the next turning? No. Must be after the bridge, oooh, ahhh, yes, look, there they are! Come on now, daddy, push the gas pedal, let's jump as high as we can. Bump."

representation of the tense geopolitics of the period. The various objects identified also point to wider geopolitical dynamics, inflected from the point of view of a child. The car window could be read as representing a form of protection, the papers also as they allow them to pass across the border zone, and the 'best bakery ice cream' before and the 'bumpy' road after the border that ease the situation. These objects, as presented by the narrator, perhaps lend some lightness to the story but clearly aid also to confirm the story as generated from the child's perspective.

Several other recognizable childhood tropes also appear. In the rural space, the child is presented as roaming freely and playing imaginatively, invoking the romantic ideal of (modern, Western Euro-US) childhood. Another is the daydreaming child being oblivious of the tense reality. Indeed, in a narrative shift from inside to outside, she is described as a 'little girl', a description Steedman (1995) discusses as replete with affectivity, including nostalgia and vulnerability, that recapitulates the (western) European construction of childhood alongside the emergence of the 'sciences' of biology and psychoanalysis. She is in a child's world while looking through the window. The trope of the innocent child is evident when the 'the little girl did not find [something] strange at the time' or when a 5-year-old is narrated as not understanding about the border zone. The romantic and innocent views of childhood mobilized by the narrator, precisely by accentuating the child's unawareness of the situation, reinforces the hidden but highly politicized context of the travel. The child in this way thus appears as 'protected' from 'knowing about' the realities of Cold War divisions and its political climate, but also perhaps as ironically—via the performance of unknowingness—the success of a reparative re-working of history, since Hitler's road is no longer so straight and smooth (not fascist anymore), but can be experienced as a 'funfair'. Through these tropes, the narrator reproduces the historical geopolitical tensions from the understanding of the adult in the present.

These tropes of childhood also position the narrator as a post-socialist subject. As a child, the narrator presents herself as innocent of political knowledge, which is only possible by revealing the geopolitics of the Cold War from her present knowledge. Her own politics take narrative shape in the form of an adult who knows more now. First, she narrates apparently in retrospect that her mother did not have friends in the city they moved to, perhaps due to fear of excessive surveillance. Then she compares this with the 'little girl' who did not understand what the border regime represented. The narrator is the adult who remembers that there were many cases of border crossings, including those with severe consequences, when they were turned back. The narrator addresses domestic settings—moving and travelling with the family, and thereby connecting

the intimate sphere to the realities of people living in the GDR after WWII and because of Soviet occupation. She demonstrates how the private life of her family intersected with the discourses and practices of the socialist state, drawing on her understanding now. Her political framing also extends to presenting the child's relation to state discourses and practices claiming that children, while experiencing some of these practices, mostly lived in another or less politically shaped realm. With this claim, she directly contributes to the concerns of the *Recollect/Reconnect* project, that seeks to understand everyday childhood experiences without preconceived and imposed ideological interpretations that have characterized knowledge production about the Cold War.

As the narrator's 'I' emerges (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008), it takes the shape of the child and at the same time the position of the gatherer of the experience (of childhood), who is also doing the reflection, analysis, and representation of this memory. In this process, tensions between what is included and what is left out seemingly disappear, so that the created text can operate as a form of truth. In the story, there is a cousin (no gender specified) briefly mentioned, and it is only the little girl who stays with the grandparents. What can these brief mentions point to and what is being left unsaid? If the cousins are left there, it seems the parents may come and go to drop and pick up children. If that was the case, is this border crossing as rigid and demanding as the narrator represents it to be? We are left wondering how this omission concerning a key intersection between political and intergenerational power relations might help to construct the narrator herself—as a child and as a self now. The narrator comes into being in this story as a child, but also becomes different from the child by interpreting the story and, again, as different from the implied 'regular' child who can visit her grandparents without political interference.

In her ontology of emergence and 'becoming-other' (Somerville, 2007), the narrator inevitably incorporates elements of her past self-history during the processes of creating and recreating, interpreting and reinterpreting, and emerges, perhaps, as both a socialist subject who experienced Cold War geopolitics as a child and a post-socialist researcher who has first-hand access to this experience and is able to skilfully interpret it. She emerges as a researcher-subject who can interpret and theorize socialist and post-socialist conditions. The narrator asserts a claim to her own identities as a child in ways different from how socialist childhood has been represented in Cold War literature (see Millei et al., 2018) and as an epistemic subject who has both the legitimacy and capacity to look at the world from her own biographical and narrative positioning, with corresponding (claims to) lived realities, and hence adopts a more decolonial position, albeit one inhabiting and addressing current post-socialist conditions.

Clearly this is a partial analysis, in the double sense of being both incomplete and motivated or driven by our particular analytic focus. As commentators we also inevitably bring our (different) understandings and positionings to this text, as a memory workshop participant growing up and being educated in Hungary, and as a non-participant researcher growing up and being educated in Great Britain. The analysis here has emerged through fruitful discussion between us, with other project team members and various working groups we have brought this (and other project) material to for discussion.<sup>1</sup> We hope the analysis here, partial and particular as it is, offers an exemplar (in the sense proposed by Strathern, 1992), that is indicative of wider possibilities.

## **CHILD AS METHOD: RESEARCHING CHILDHOOD, RESEARCHING COLD WAR**

In this article, we used the analytical strategy of 'child as method' to explore meanings of 'child' and 'childhood' present in a memory story to discuss the adult narrator's geopolitical positioning.

The performance of the authenticity of childhood plays a key part in confirming the production of the narrator's subjectivity and perspectives in the present. Within dominant cultural understandings, childhood authenticity and innocence represent freedom from ideology, constructions which work to contrast with the ideologized adult, so apparently signalling an intention on the part of the narrator to decolonize socialist childhood and knowledge production. Given the scope of the research study, the narrator chose to tell her story thereby disclosing, with varied intentionality of her current self in relation to Cold War geopolitics, her current knowledge of and stance on socialist ideology. The emotional aspects, which were brought to the fore through the collective biography method aided in characterizing the effects of the regime, mobilizing various tropes of child/hood, children, and themselves as children and now as adults. Thus, 'child as method' has helped us in attending to the positioning of the adult narrator and analysing the story created for the listener/reader, highlighting the current geopolitical positionality of the person remembering as well as, perhaps, mobilizing subscription to a modern, now globalized psychologized/psychodynamic model of childhood experience as carrying special significance. In the memory, the presentation of the child's perspective, accentuated with child/hood tropes exposes the regime in an apparently factual manner as part of childhood experiences. The trope of childhood authenticity thus lends (what we regard as a spurious) objectivity to the stories which supports their presentation as true or free from ideology, and which then can be reflected upon by the knowing narrator (and their equally knowing audiences). The analysed story is told from another space to that which the narrator and the narrator's audience now occupies. That these spaces are separated geographically from where the memories took place mobilizes another layer of retrospective perspective, as well as the chronological distance of age as involving a more informed position on history.

Any narrative must, of course, involve a narrator and an (implied, addressed, if not materially present) (range of) audience(s); that is, narratives are situated performances or enactments. So, even in a context like the *Recollect/Reconnect* project where participants had worked together in agreeing topics and practices of generating and recording their childhood memory stories, they still cannot escape the dominant geopolitical conditions that frame current contexts of narrative enunciations, including those normative ideas that shape models of subjectivity, biography and personal 'development' and knowledge production. These, in turn, are the very positionings and knowledge claims that need our attention (as participants and researchers) in the analysis of memory stories to learn about narrators' geopolitical positionings and to aid in decolonizing these knowledge claims and subjectivities. To quote Steedman again:

The child within was always both immanent - ready to be drawn on in various ways - and, at the same time, always representative of a lost realm, lost in the individual past, and in the past of the culture ... The idea of the child was used both to recall and to express the past that each individual life contained: what was turned inside in the course of individual development was that which was also latent: the child was the story waiting to be told'. (Steedman, 1995, pp. 10–11)

While only one possible analytical lense by which memory stories can be analysed, we suggest that the combined and intersecting relation between post-socialist studies (or any other geopolitical axis) and 'child as method' works to strengthen the analysis of the former and demonstrates the value of the latter for empirical research. Rather than treating memory stories as an authentic window onto a past untainted by current neoliberal or capitalist

conditions (albeit framed by different pressures)—which would surely merely enact an alternative version of the typical romanticizations and authorizations associated with narratives of childhood, the interpretative frame of ‘child as method’ prompts reading these memories for the ways the speaking subject, the enunciator, mobilizes (or perhaps it would be better to say recapitulates or navigates) assumptions or orientations from the ‘now’ of the speaking moment, rather than of the moment or time spoken about. That is, we can attend to disjunctions between the enunciator and the enunciated, or what Lacan (2006) called the subject of the enunciation, rather than the subject of the statement. This is something we do all the time in ordinary conversation, but conventions associated with narratives of childhood—especially autobiographical narratives of childhood—make this a more complicated matter. After all, prevailing socio-political conditions of neoliberal selfhood have encouraged us to understand ourselves as continuous and accountable, to ourselves and others, through claims to past experience. Indeed, as a symptom of our psychologized subjectivities, childhood experiences are accorded a particularly privileged position in framing, or even considered to be determining of, who and how we are. And even when working with memory stories (i.e. memories discussed as stories, so detaching them somewhat from experiential truth claims), and narrated in the third, rather than first person to offer further distance from personal ‘ownership’ or identification, that distinction—or gap—between the speaker, the enunciating subject, and the person/events they are describing (i.e. the subject of the statement) inevitably remain. That is, whether and how much I identify with the self I speak about (including myself as a child) itself speaks to prevailing models of childhood that demand critical scrutiny. Analytically, therefore, what can be attended to are the ways twenty and twenty-first century motifs, tropes and associated notions (inevitably) are mobilized to recount or represent, and communicate, the past. In this reading, using ‘child as method’, the structure of the account is opened up for analysis, and also its order, emplotment, cultural aspects of topicalization etc., as well as its content and, most importantly for us here, its geopolitics.

‘Child as method’ also aids in working with a dialogical model of the speaking subject, as continuously addressing and struggling with the ways narrative, and especially the narration (whether oral or written) itself presents obstacles that are socio-culturally and geopolitically as well as personally significant. That is, these obstacles are not, or not only, interpretive problems, but also resources. As already noted, the *Recollect/Reconnect* project participants were elite participants, well acquainted with all manner of narrative genres (romance, tragedy, horror, comedy etc.)—whether deploying these wilfully or inadvertently. They provide a vital resource for interrogation of, as well as commentaries about, narrative conventions of discoursing childhoods, that include reiterations of many kinds of childhood tropes, points of view, evocations (that surely in themselves disclose key cultural assumptions) as well descriptions, evaluations or critical reflections on ‘looking back’. That is, closely reading the narrative form as well as content with ‘child as method’ offers rich resources for the identification of both subjective imbrication within, but also challenges to, current narrative conditions for childhood memory story telling.

The aim of this paper was to present ‘child as method’ as a potent analytical strategy to (re) insert the study of childhood into geopolitical matrices of power and practices, using a memory story from the *Recollect/Reconnect* project to exemplify this. Questions of subjectivity as well as structural positioning and specific geopolitical relations come to the fore in ‘child as method’. Hence, we suggest that ‘child as method’, as a conceptual intervention, enables the posing of more interesting and engaged questions that can better address cultural–political complexities

and fluidities. This is an evolving approach to inspire and connect inquiries across disciplinary debates, rather than a dogmatic or complete model. While readers may consider that such sentiments and questions have long been engaged with by childhood researchers, what is perhaps distinctive about this pairing of ‘child as method’ with the post-socialist childhood project is its analytical framing highlighting the necessary intersections between the political economy of childhood with geopolitical dynamics. Such dynamics, local and global, must figure as part of wider post-colonial, anticapitalist initiatives, wherein children should figure in these as more than ideological, policy or theory tropes.

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## ENDNOTE

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