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Boundaries and Borders in Australian Life Writing

Natalie Edwards, Christopher Hogarth, Shannon Sandford,

Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas

Transnationalism has been the subject of much scholarly reflection in the last two decades. In one of the earliest definitions of the term, historian Aiwah Ong suggested that “*Trans* denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive* aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism”.¹ In the context of Australia, a multicultural society that is necessarily multiethnic, multireligious, multiracial and multilingual, Ong’s emphasis on movement and change across many spheres of activity is particularly apt. Indeed, critical interventions that over-privilege the national or limit analysis to within its borders undermine the multiplicity inherent in Australian society, culture and identity.²

This special volume seeks to understand how transnational Australian identity is represented by authors within their life writing. It asks how they portray the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive* within their self-reflexive writing. The volume is based upon a selection of papers given at the fourth Asia-Pacific Conference of the International Association for Biography and Autobiography (IABA) at the University of Adelaide in November 2021. This conference brought together over eighty academics from

¹ Aiwah Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 4.

² We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Australian Research Council through its Discovery Programme for funding the research that led to this conference and volume: DP190102863, *Transnational Selves: French Narratives of Migration to Australia* (Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth).

across the world, in hybrid format, around the theme “Life Writing: Transnationalism, Translingualism, Transculturalism.” The conference was multilingual and engaged with life writing across languages, cultures and national borders. The articles selected for this volume encompass analyses of refugee writing, travel writing and migrant writing, for example, and underscore the multilingual and multifaceted nature of Australian writing.

In the opening article, based upon a keynote address delivered at the conference, Anne Pender considers the uses of biography in contemporary Australia. In an essay that frames this volume with attention to the *transactional* and the *translational* of life writing, Pender discusses what she views as the democratic underpinnings of the genre of biography: that is, its links between the individual, the body politic and history. This article considers the principles that authorise and underpin the writing of contemporary biography in light of the work of American-Canadian biographer Leon Edel, and in view of new infrastructure that embeds biographical enquiry in Australia. It explores the analysis of cause and effect in relation to writing about the creative work of a range of figures in Australian life, all of whom occupy different subject positions in this multicultural society: Mark McKenna, Jenny Hocking and Alexis Wright. Pender considers the specific challenges of writing about living subjects and reflects on methods of translating, transcribing, synthesising, and presenting their words in written form. In particular, she examines the value of collective biography as a genre of political significance in a changing society. The notion of collective biography and the stakes of writing transactionally with and for others is explored in several of the other articles in this issue, not least the one that follows Pender’s.

The volume then moves to an analysis of one of the most provocative examples of “Australian life writing” published in recent years, which was also the focus of a recent

article in *The Journal of Australian Studies*.³ In this article, Phoebe King maps the Australian reception of Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018). *No Friend* is a hybrid testimonial text that narrates Boochani's experience of Australia's brutal border protection policies at the remote camp on Manus Island. "Thumbed" over thousands of text messages sent from a smuggled smartphone to a transnational network of collaborators and translators, Boochani's text challenges Australian readers to reassess their complicity in these carceral policies that consign asylum seekers to indefinite detention. *No Friend* was reviewed extensively in mainstream and scholarly publications, and it was awarded prestigious national literary prizes that canonised it as an exceptional work of Australian literature. Newer readings of *No Friend* engage with it through decolonising and critical Indigenous methodologies and stress the influence of Kurdish traditions of writing and resistance. King's retrospective view of the text's movements through Australian literary institutions reveals the value of *No Friend*'s canonisation within the fraught space of a national literature as both an act of solidarity and dissent. It highlights a progression from the initial Australian recognition of this as a major literary work to its translation into multiple new editions, languages, and mediums that continue to inspire new decolonial reading practices.

The focus on refugee life narrative is continued in the third article but here the scope is broadened to analyse graphic narrative. Within this context of invisibility and atrocity, Shannon Sandford analyses Safdar Ahmed's Walkerly Award winning documentary webcomic, *Villawood: Notes from an Immigration Detention Centre*. Published online in early 2015, *Villawood* documents the lives, experiences, and drawings of detainees in Sydney's notorious Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. This article productively reads

³ Nicholas Birns and Keyvan Allahyari (2023). "Behrouz Boochani on Manus Island: Contesting Refugee Experience in the Global South", *Journal of Australian Studies*, 47: 3, 531-546, DOI: [10.1080/14443058.2023.2196999](https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2023.2196999).

Villawood as an example of the vital rhetorical and representative work done by webcomics to expose the violences of Australia's border spaces and put the personal stories of detainees in dialogue with vast audiences online. Drawing interdisciplinary connections between comics studies and Life Narrative studies, Sandford explores the radical mobility of webcomics across digital platforms and their popular consumption in the Australian domestic sphere. She argues that webcomics like *Villawood* – that bring into focus the brutality of state power – serve an important socio-political function in transmitting experiences from the sequestered spaces of detention, and for mobilising digitally networked followings for projects of collective witnessing.

Continuing this exploration of visual and textual narratives, the volume turns to Aaron Humphrey and Simon Walsh's examination of a significant autobiographical graphic novel. The cartoonist C. Friedrich penned *The Voyage and Adventures of a Well-Behaved German in Kangarooland* (*Reise-Abenteuer eines braven Deutschen im Lande der Kangaroo*) in 1918–1919, while imprisoned in an Australian internment camp. Humphrey and Walsh's analysis approaches this example of graphic life narrative as a representation of transnational displacement. The borders in this text are multiple, therefore, and include the borders of a Prisoner of War camp in addition to national boundaries. This German migrant's autobiographical comic thus questions the assumption that the genre originated in the US, where it has been popularised by more recent examples of transnational representation, such as *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997), *Palestine* (Sacco, 2001), *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2007). Instead, *Kangarooland* adds another layer of understanding of the experience of displacement in early twentieth century Australia and adds an important dimension to the multicultural and multilingual nature of Australian writing.

In her contribution to this volume, Mary Besemeres considers the links between language and culture in memoirs by three Australian journalists born to non-Anglo migrant parents.

Through a close examination of *Manly Girls* (1989) by Elisabeth Wynhausen, *Whole Wild World* (2016) by Tom Dusevic, and *Paprika Paradise* (2007) and *My Family and Other Animus* (2018) by James Jeffrey, Besemeres charts the ways that language, as a key dimension of migrant experience somewhat underexamined in comparison to ethnicity and nationality, bears upon each authors' interpretations of history, setting, and identity. She employs Paul Friedrich and John Attinasi's term "linguaculture" as a framework for understanding the role and position of language in works that circulate different ethnocultural perspectives. As transcultural life writing, these memoirs to varying extents capture the interrelatedness of language and culture in 'Anglo' Australian contexts from the perspectives of authors growing up in the mid-twentieth century. Adjacent to this argument, Besemeres also reflects on Wynhausen, Dusevic and Jeffrey's shared professional backgrounds as journalists, which inflect the stories they tell of growing up in bilingual families located in predominantly monolingual communities.

Kylie Cardell rounds off this special volume with an article that discusses three essays published online during 2020–2022 by Australian memoirists Amani Haydar (*The Mother Wound*) and Lucia Crowley-Osborne (*I Choose Elena; My Body Keeps Your Secrets*) which reflect on the craft of writing about trauma and explore their author's own motivations, intentions, and ethics for doing so. While writers writing about the craft of writing is nothing new, Cardell argues that these essays notably also focus on publishing and promoting memoir – on what happens after the writing has been done – and that this shift is significant. Cardell draws on Gillian Whitlock's conception of paratext in relation to the ethics of reading memoir and considers Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's recognition of the impact of "afterlives" for

autobiographical representation in order to probe the way in which paratexts represent translational and transactional processes. This article argues that paratext essays productively negotiate further with the formal, cultural, and generic limits of memoir as social justice, for example, by calling for attention to the cultural conditions that shape memoir as a commodity. Through this lens, the article explores how authors negotiate the aftermath of publication, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of memoirs translate trauma as both artistic expressions and instruments of social justice. Cardell calls for a deeper engagement with the “afterlives” of these narratives, recognising the ongoing impact on authors as they navigate the intersection of personal vulnerability, public reception, and the ever-present pressures of their evolving translation of the literary marketplace.

Debates over life writing/autobiography have been present in the pages of this very journal over many years. Back in 2002, Kate Douglas examined life writing and the notion of the “universal autobiographer” in two works by Indigenous women writers which dealt with questions of production, circulation and reception.⁴ The article focused on the notion of life writing as an artistic, representative, translational, yet “profitable” medium. Such questions remain important in 2024, and this volume shows how life writing and transnationality continue to overlap and hinge upon questions of inclusivity. They continue Douglas’s investigations of the ideas of production, circulation and reception, but show that the universe of life writing in Australia has been imagined in a much more expansive manner over the past few decades. To return to Ong’s definition that frames this volume, these essays take a broader approach than a simplistic understanding of the transnational as movement between

⁴ Kate Douglas (2002). “The Universal Autobiographer: The Politics of Normative Readings”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 26:72, 173-179, DOI: [10.1080/14443050209387750](https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050209387750).

nation states; instead, this volume calls attention to the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive* in the elusive term “Australian life writing.”