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Life narrative in troubled times

Abstract:

Life writing such as autobiography, biography and memoir continues to be popular with readers while new genres, for instance, on-line or in other public, performative iterations, also shift and grow. Both historically and in the current moment, life writing emerges to address issues of individual experience in relation to public record. Very often, such works also seek to engage with issues of justice or redress, particularly in relation to expressions of trauma or conflict. What role do life narrative texts play in troubled times? This special issue presents scholarly and creative work that seek sot respond to this question in particular. The writing and research here explores troubling subjects such as political injustice, moral panics, and family and interpersonal relationships. These works 'trouble' prevalent ideas, for instance about minority or marginal cultures to offer new ways of seeing the cultural work that diverse life narrative texts can perform.

Biographical notes:

Dr Kylie Cardell is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Flinders University, South Australia. She is the author of *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary* (University of Wisconsin Press 2014), and editor (with Kate Douglas) of *Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and Youth* (Routledge 2015). Kylie is an executive member for the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) Asia-Pacific and co-directs the Flinders Life Narrative Research Group (Flinders University). She is the essays editor for the scholarly Australian journal *Life Writing.*

Professor Kate Douglas works in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Flinders University. She is the author of *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory* (Rutgers 2010) and the co-author of *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation* (Palgrave 2016, with Anna Poletti). She is the co-editor of *Research Methodologies for Auto/Biography Studies* (Routledge 2018, with Ashley Barnwell), *Teaching Lives: Contemporary Pedagogies of Life Narratives* (Routledge 2017, with Laurie McNeill), *Trauma Tales: Auto/biographies of Childhood and Youth* (Routledge 2015, with Kylie Cardell) and *Trauma Texts* (Routledge 2009, with Gillian Whitlock). Kate is the Head of the Steering committee for the International Auto/Biography Association's Asia-Pacific chapter.

Professor Donna Lee Brien, PhD, is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, Australia. Donna has been writing and researching genres and sub-genres of creative nonfiction for the past two decades, with a focus on memoir. Her most recent book on life writing, *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice in Australasia*, edited with Quinn Eades, was published by UWAPublishing in 2018, following *Recovering History through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives*, edited with Dallas J Baker and Nike Sulway, published in 2017. Donna is the new co-editor of the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, and a member of the Steering committee for the International Auto/Biography Association's Asia-Pacific chapter. Donna is convenor of the 2018 Speculating on Biography Conference.

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In 2013, the Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani fled Iran and ended up incarcerated under Australia's punitive refugee policy. On Manus Island, Boochani has sustained a steady outpouring of testimony, detailing the everyday life of refugees in the detention camp as well as his own physical and psychological trauma. Many of Boochani's writings have been published in the Australian press and he has maintained an active Twitter presence even under great adversity. The recent publication of Boochani's memoir *No Friend But the Mountains* (2018) adds to a significant and shamefully large archive of testimony from the Manus camp. Life writing by, and about, refugees remains a central mode of bearing witness to deeply troubling aspects of life in the Asia-Pacific region. Much of this production pushes against the boundaries of what has traditionally been considered life 'writing'; for example, *The Messenger* podcast, which collects What's App audio and text messages exchanged by Abdul Aziz Muhamat, a Zaghawa man from the Darfur region of Sudan detained on Manus since 2013, and Australian journalist Michael Green, or Boochani's lyrical documentary film, *Chauka, Please Tell us the Time* (2017), which was shot entirely on his mobile phone.

Exigency can make for creative engagement in contexts of trauma and incarnation, and the resulting narratives – such as the above – can be (and in this case, is) avidly consumed and discussed. Such life narrative also raises a range of questions, including of effect and influence. What can this, and other life narrative, *do* in troubled times? Is this production, for instance, having an effect on the Australian government's refugee policy? How does this stylistically diverse body of life narration galvanise and sustain the large communities of activists who collaborate with, and on behalf of, refugees? At the date of writing in August 2018, Boochani remains in the Manus camp and it remains to be seen how powerful his testimony will be in the form of a memoir, as well as what impact this work may have in relation to the diverse modes of witnessing that he and others have produced from this location.

What then, to restate this central question, can life writing, and writers, do in troubled times? In the Asia-Pacific region, as elsewhere, this question has political and moral ramifications. Life writing scholars such as G. Thomas Couser, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and Gillian Whitlock have explored the role that life narratives come to play in times of trauma, and also in times of prejudice and discrimination, inequality, cultural miscommunication, and loss of faith in publishing and other media institutions, for instance. When Whitlock writes, 'life narratives have a distinctive role to play in the struggle to shape dialogues across cultures' (2007: 2), she alerts us to the role that autobiographies and memoirs play in providing an entrée to understanding the experiences of culturally marginalised groups, for instance. Life narratives can 'trigger conversations and interactions across cultures in conflict' (Whitlock 2007: 3), and these narratives are often thought of politically active texts that open dialogues and attempt to address the social and cultural disharmonies that stem from troubled times, whether within families, cultures or global communities.

This means that life narrative texts often carry a burden of responsibility. G. Thomas Couser reminds us that, 'Genres of life writing are sometimes *defined* by what they do – the *work* of memoir (2012: 14). Life narratives, in troubled times, can hence often be thought of as culturally restorative texts. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that

life narrative scholars have considered the representation of, and effects of, trauma. They discuss, for example, Marianne Hirsch's term 'postmemory' that accounts for aftereffects of trauma on succeeding generations (2010: 220). In these instances, the troubled times are often dealing with family legacies, and the healing that both producing and consuming life narrative might bring.

A notable feature of contributions for this special issue is a willingness to present and engage in creative approaches to life narration and storytelling. In recent years, the Asia-Pacific has become a locus for practice-led research in relation to creative methodologies and life writing has a particular place in this. For example, in their introduction to *Offshooot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodology and Practice*, Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades observe that 'both *doing* and *thinking about*' is a distinctive quality of life writing; a mode where practice and scholarship often intersect and overlap (2018: 3). Many of the contributors to this issue are also creative practioners – that is, writers – and are thus able to present a perspective that focuses on the nature of process and challenges of assembly in relation to life narration. The scope of this special issue, which encompasses a spectrum of scholarly and creative works, demonstrates what we see as formative hybridity in practice and theory that often characterises life writing in this region.

This special issue brings together a diverse collection of studies that show the different ways that contemporary life narrative practices and texts seek to trouble the genres of life narrative – expanding the genres' boundaries and unveiling new possibilities for the form, or showing the ranges of ways that life narrative texts and practices trouble socio-political or cultural contexts, representations and conditions. The articles cover various life narrative forms and formats including plays, poetry, prose writing, reportage and social media. Two core issues emerge from this collection and the dialogue that arises from considering them together. Firstly, the subject is troubling and/or the discussion represents and explores a particular life narrative of troubled times. Secondly, the texts or practices discussed 'trouble' life narrative genres and the limits – and potentialities of life narrative.

Together, the works in this collection provide an insight into what researchers, scholars and writers are thinking, and doing, in terms of life writing/narrative in the Asia-Pacific region. Many of the works also reflect on forms of life writing. Whitlock reminds us that, 'New technologies have altered the fabric of autobiographical expression' (2007: 4) and so, the definition of life narrative texts and practices has broadened significantly over the past decade. In particular, social media raises fascinating new questions for life narrative, for example, with regard to young people's creative practice. In her paper on social media as a new mode of diary for young people, Kate Douglas explore the ways that Instagram might be a contemporary version of the diary, used in similar (but inevitably different) ways to traditional pen and paper. Through analysis of data gained in a pilot study, together with theoretical work on social media, and childhood and youth, Douglas argues that we need to 'trouble' mainstream moral panics about children's social media use. At a time when there is much negativity around young people's use of social media, we need to think about how Instagram – as autobiographical practice – is used as a mode of cultural participation. The resulting case study aims to promote a more nuanced

understanding of young people's everyday life storying and communication practices, and their relationships to certain publics or anticipated readers.

Life narratives play 'a vital role in the public sphere as it deals in and through private lives. It renegotiates and redefines how we imagine and rehearse cross-cultural encounters' (Whitlock 2007: 10). Life narratives are often testimonial and represent a call to action for those responding to the text. Jo Loth and Ginna Brock discuss an Australian play currently in development: *The Centre*. The play reimagines Ancient Greek tragic characters as contemporary asylum seekers in off-shore detention sites. The play works at the interstices of fiction and non-fiction to imaginatively show the tragedy inherent within the contemporary asylum seeker context. At the same time, it aims to challenge some of the prevalent ideas about asylum seekers through mobilising theoretical ideas on tragedy in the narrative, for instance, the tendency to place responsibility for tragic events upon on individuals rather than political events and contexts. In doing so, the play aims to address the dehumanisation of asylum seekers by exploring their human rights and need to belong. In 'Life Narratives and *The Centre*: a call for action', Loth and Brock present their methodology for producing the play, including ethical concerns about the tensions inherent in both respecting the non-fictional subjects involved and a desire to enable their voices within the text.

The troubled times of life narrative also extends to the personal subject: how too authors negotiate the very tricky practicalities of representing the self, and crafting art from the self. Experimental poet Anne Carson's work troubles the self and subject, even though autobiographical questions are at the core of her writing. Carson advocates a poetics of 'decreation' in 'The Glass Essay', which is committed to getting 'Me out of the way' (2005: 172). In her paper on Carson, Christine Wiesenthal notes that Carson has invented a hybrid of life narrative style and form that aims to resist, and even subvert, ideas about self and the subject. In this, Wiesenthal argues that life narrative is an 'inherently troubled mode' (2). As we have long seen, the genres of life narrative themselves invite experimentation, and consistent questioning regarding what is possible at the limits of the genres. And rather than destabilise life narrative genres, this questioning has come to strengthen and expand these genres in fascinating and important ways.

In 'Troubling the life narrative: The case of Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a childhood, 1939–1948'* Sue Bond presents a discussion of perhaps one of the most well-known 'troubling' memoirs, certainly a text that has been an object of much critical and popular curiosity. Bond's approach to this material deviates from what as often seen as the foundational issue: a question of verifiable autobiographical truth that Wilkomisrki's text is usually understood to fail. Instead, Bond argues that *Fragments* can be approached more obliquely, through the frame of Wilkimorkski as a literary character that prioritizes the *subjective* in relation to this account as an authentic representation of the author's interior psychological self-perception and lived experience. Working with theory in relation to adoptive experience and to childhood trauma in identity formation, Bond argues that Wilkimorski's 'troubling' account cannot be understood simply in relation to a dialectic of 'true' or 'false' and so must be approached within a more nuanced and creative contextualizing that pays

direct attention to the conflicted, contradictory and, ultimately, authentic subject at the center of the story.

In 'Troubling narratives of true crime: Helen Garner's *This House of Grief* and Megan Norris's *On Father's Day*', Law academic and creative writer Rachel Spencer explores both troubling content – in terms of two non-fiction accounts of the same horrific crime – and troubling structure, in her exploration of the different ways each author approaches the material and context for their narrative. Arguing that grief is a central concern in both narrative accounts, Spencer explores the different narrative approaches that also become part of, and inform, the literary affect of the story in each case. Garner's account is located very much within literal (but also symbolic) space of the courtroom, while Norris takes an even less ambiguous narrative point of view, very directly working with the trial outcome, and its guilty verdict, in formulating a strongly rhetorical account focused mostly on blame and reparation. Spencer's analysis draws on her training as a lawyer to negotiate the difficult legal and moral ethics of trial reporting and, as such, provides an invaluable discussion for the creative writer who is drawn to tell stories that trouble both in content and form, whether these involve biographical content, or not.

Grief is also a theme in Alison L. Black's creative piece, 'Time to remember: A portrait of my mother', an emotional creative homage to Black's deceased mother. Written eleven years since her mother's passing, Black immerses the reader in intimate memory, nostalgia and longing as she attempts to negotiate and work though the enormity of loss. In reconstructing her mother's biographical story, Black also engages with the genre of the eulogy, both remembering her mother's life and achievements, but also creatively drawing into play a connection between mother and daughter memorialised and embodied in the activity of a shared passion for writing. In this work, the mother's autobiographical text becomes part of the daughter's autobiographical exploration of the mother's biography, productively troubling the boundaries between these literary forms.

Amy Benn's arresting and moving graphic memoir, 'The final letter', brings poetic form together with comic art to explore the author's experience of her brother's suicide. Here grief is again a theme, with the author seeking to find a way to give voice to the pain of her personal. This visually dense graphic memoir both articulates highly personal thoughts and feelings while making reference to the lasting and reverberating significance of such a death on family and friends (Kaslow and Aronson 2004). Here, the rawness of lived experience is represented using both textual and visual elements.

While these creative works by Black and Benn can be read as a reflection of how real life inspires and stimulates creative practitioners, the life writer's relationship with their sources can be another troubling element of the process of producing life narratives. This is the territory of historian and writer Kiera Lindsey's contribution to this collection, 'Deliberate freedom': using speculation and imagination in historical biography' – which seeks to tease out this aspect of producing life narrative. Lindsey explores the challenges and opportunities associated with using what she terms 'informed imagination' to write a speculative biography of an historical figure, the

colonial artist Adelaide Ironside. In the process, Lindsey raises the problematic notion of biographers citing the concept of gaps in the archive as a justification for creative license, as all archives are inherently incomplete. Making a case for what she terms 'the archival overlap', Lindsey instead argues that all biographers use both speculation and imagination in making sense of their sources as a key stage of the biographical process.

In 'Yone Noguchi: curating an international self by "Being a poet"', Ayako Hoshino also reflects on the sources involved in bringing to attention an overlooked figure in the transnational, Japanese-American poetic canon. Yone Noguchi (1875-1947) was the first Japanese writer to publish an book of poetry (in English) in the United States. His *Seen and Unseen: or, Monologues of a Homeless Snail* was published by a San Francisco based publisher in 1896 and secured for Noguchi a reputation at home and abroad that impelled him to seek a career and an identity 'as a poet' in America and Japan. Hoshino's careful tracing of Noguchi's career in terms of this identity construction offers a discussion of texts not well known to Western readers. The result is the presentation of a compelling portrait of the poet himself as he negotiated the politics of his time and the places in which he lived, and as he constructed an identity that he hoped would transcend the subjective realities of race, culture and nation.

Academic and poet Gail Pittaway's poem 'In the country' provides a different kind of auto/biographical narrative. Based on a sequence of events that occurred when the author's family relocated from the city to live in the country, the poem is also an example of New Zealand Gothic, using an everyday, but fearful, situation to reveal New Zealand as a location of 'isolation, loss, and despair, of a rugged, wild, and treacherous land that can assail and entrap' (Conrich 2012). Ironically referencing conventional tropes of country living as idyllic and pastoral, this poem instead suggests the violence and death that are a daily part of rural life. At its centre, however, this is a love poem, with a happy ending.

As both a writer and a researcher, Gay Lynch also found the sources she discusses troubling, but this time for a quite different reason. In her case, the recent death of her aunt, criminal charges against her cousin and the family management of that crisis and attendant shame drove Lynch to writing as a form of research. Lynch wrote first to understand her cousin's plight and secondly to avoid conflict with her father. Seeking to, at all times, respect the vulnerable subjects she was writing about, Lynch found Anna Denejkina's model of 'exo-autoethnography' (2016) useful. Denejkina offered Lynch a model of writing trauma vicariously suffered through family or personal connections, in her purpose of using fictional and reflective life narrative to represent and clarify complex problems, short-circuit authorial paralysis attempt to and enhance readers' empathy.

In their discussion of the ways writers and readers narrate and navigate troubling times, Pamela Greet and Michelle Vlatkovic explore the responsibilities that might be attributed to writers of 'troubling' life narratives. As the authors propose, memoirs are omnipresent at difficult times in history. What ethical questions arise when a writer represents the lives of others according to their own curated memories and life narratives? What are the risks in representation, particularly the possibilities of

misremembering? And what are the roles and responsibilities of critics in raising ethical questions about memoir? Through a structured conversation between the authors, this article considers two recent memoirs completed as part of creative writing doctoral programmes in Australia: Kerrie Davies's *A Wife's Heart* (2017) and Brentley Frazer's *Scoundrel Days* (2017). Greet and Vlatkovic explore the socio-cultural value of reading and discussing memoirs openly and publicly, particularly as it might enable us to explore and understand the experiences of others, and raise vital questions about the interconnectedness of lives within and across different social and cultural contexts.

Antonia Pont's prose work 'Yellow-tailed black cockatoos' closes the special issue by seeking to unsettle its own relation, in practice, to a convention within life writing; the use of first-person singular point of view. Using the scene depicted – an encounter with a flock of yellow-tailed black cockatoos on an evening walk – Pont's work raises questions about ways of evading heavy anthropomorphism in life narrative, while still speculating – as human visitor – on the non-human involved. The non-human inhabitants of this environment clearly exude elements of personality and, as such, this work attempts to de-centre the human while also including them, as companions rather than masters of the scene, thus providing another way of troubling life narrative itself in the age of the Anthropocene.

These studies – articles and creative works – reveal that contemporary life narrative scholarship and creative practice is varied and animated. Sales of life writing, and especially memoir, continue to show enduring reader interest in life writing (Miller 2017), while audiences for life narrative across various other platforms – textual, audio, visual and hybrid continue to grow. A number of organisations support this work in the Asia-Pacific region. Alongside the work of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (founded in 1986) and *TEXT* (first published in 1987) (Brien et al. 2011), the dedicated disciplinary association for auto/biography scholars is the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA). Founded in 1999, the IABA is a multi-disciplinary network that aims to deepen the cross-cultural understanding of self, identity and experience, and to facilitate global dialogues about life writing and life narrative (IABA 2018). Established in 2016, the IABA Asia-Pacific seeks to foster new region-specific conversations and develop scholarly networks between life narrative scholars and practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region to support the circulation and publication of high-quality life narrative theory, practice and pedagogy. After the inaugural 2015 conference at Flinders University in Adelaide, the 2017 IABA Asia-Pacific conference was held at the Noosa campus of Central Queensland University, with the theme of 'Life Narratives in Troubled Times'. During this conference, presenters and other delegates investigated the ways in which the authors of life narrative and their resulting texts explore, mediate and respond to personally, culturally and politically difficult events and contexts. The roles life writers and life narrative can play at these moments, as well as how such research and storytelling can, and does, represent troubled times was a central issue of interest. The role of writer, genre, media, publisher and marketing in how 'troubled' life narratives are created, distributed and received was another topic of discussion, as was the 'trouble' this might create for writers, readers and others. A selection of presentations

from this conference are included in this special issue, supported by other contributions.

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