Edited by Maureen Perkins

LOCATING LIFE STORIES

Beyond East-West Binaries in (Auto)Biographical Studies

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Locating Life Stories: Beyond East-West Binaries in (Auto)Biographical Studies

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NEVER THE TWAIN: LIFE WRITING'S GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS

MAUREEN PERKINS

East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet . . .

—Rudyard Kipling

In today's globalized, hyper-international, post-migration times, it may seem obvious that Kipling's claim about East and West no longer holds true. Nevertheless, the East/West split is still widely held to have relevance, not only in popular stereotypes and vague generalizations, but even in academic scholarship across a range of fields, including psychology, literature, and some areas of politics. Witness Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations theory, which posits a West under increasing threat from the "civilization" of Islam. The field of life writing has also at times been prone to make generalizations about whole swathes of humanity, suggesting that "Western" life writing is in some important senses different from that of "non-Western" societies—differences that align all too closely with modernity. In early 2010, several scholars working with different aspects of biography and autobiography were invited to meet at the Australian National University in Canberra to discuss the role of location in their work. One thing they had in common was the focus of their work on one or another aspect of "non-Western" life narrative. This collection explores what they had to say about the role of place in the way that personal life narrative has been told, and will show that the complex intersection of nation, identity, culture, and race challenges categorization by geography alone, so that East and West are shown not only to meet but also to be profoundly involved with each other.

In 1956, leading autobiography scholar Georges Gusdorf wrote that autobiography is a uniquely Western genre of life narrative, only possible in a culture with a historical notion of time and a concept of the individual:

It is necessary to point out that the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and in space: it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere. . . . It would

seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe. . . . The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal. (28–29)

The historically specific nature of Gusdorf's claim is evident in his use of gendered language that would be out of place at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but his influence is still current in the study and critique of life writing literature. In 2008, in a review of a book by Marcus Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone*, Benjamin Nathans explained in some detail Moseley's debt to Gusdorf, from whom he takes the belief that "genuine autobiography" is possible only under certain cognitive preconditions. And Gusdorf's work continues to be set as basic reading for those studying life writing (see Christoph).

Gusdorf's core assumption that autobiography is not a universal phenomenon has been expressed even more recently. At the 2008 conference of the International Auto/Biography Association, held in Honolulu, Philippe Lejeune ventured to say that autobiography did not exist outside the West, as far as he knew.¹ Conference attendees were quick to contradict and to offer him more information about non-Western life writing, as Philip Holden's chapter in this volume relates. But Lejeune's intervention raises interesting questions.

To identify certain aspects of culture or society as "Western" is not unreasonable, since divisions and categories have to fall somewhere. It is a common practice to place the word in inverted commas to signal the writer's awareness of the complexity of definition. The West may be taken to include the United States, Canada, Europe, South America, Australia and New Zealand; while differing opinions about which countries are "in" and which are "out" can be counted on to generate heated discussion (for example, does South Africa belong in the West?). Undergraduate units in Western culture generally teach a heritage going back to Classical Greece and leading through the European Enlightenment to a modern worldview based on reason and democratic processes. Most would agree that there is also some assumption of modernity and individualism involved. In fact, discussion about what the term means is not hard to come by. In *The Idea of the West* (2004), Alastair Bonnett claims the term is "in constant use" (1) to refer to an economic system dominated by the United States and free-market ideologies, and a political system based on democracy, the rule of law, and certain fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression. However, Bonnett stresses the fluidity of the term, giving several ways in which its meaning has changed over time, and suggests that unlike racial labels, "the West" is a "highly expandable category," capable, for example, of subsuming Japan: "The notion that the entire world can become Westernised results from this elasticity" (5).

It is in the definition of "the East" that a simple binary most clearly fails. The very fact that Europe has divided the East into the Near, Far, and Middle East, as well as their nominally close relative the West Indies, indicates the limitations of the terminology. Subdivisions of Asia into South, East, and Southeast further suggest the shortcomings of a blanket use of the term. Nevertheless, "Asia" is still widely used, and in a Kiplingesque sense is still often used to demarcate a difference from some aspect of the West. A substantial body of recent research in psychology, for example, explores reasons for demonstrated differences between the visual perception of "East Asians" and "Caucasians" (Hedden et al.). Researchers have claimed that when asked to evaluate the length of a simple line, East Asian subjects have responded to the wider context of the frame in which the line was drawn, which Western subjects in the experiments have ignored. It has been commonly argued that this indicates a difference between collectivism-dominated cultures (which integrate the *background* context of what they see) and individualism-dominated cultures (which concentrate on *focal* objects). In revisiting this debate in 2010, a group of researchers at the Australian National University and Oxford University discussed the possibilities that the physical environment of East Asian cities influences the perceptual priorities of natives of those cities, and that there are cultural differences in the way in which parents direct babies' attention during infancy. The researchers also suggested a "situational social variable," in which "an interaction between the race of the participant and the race of the experimenter (defining race as 'continent/s of ancestral origin') could prime participants to adopt a more global or more local focus" (McKone et al. 1547–48).

This combination of biology (ancestral origin) and culture (parental nurture) creates a terrain so complicated that it seems hardly worth drawing conclusions in regional terms at all, yet the binary of East and West retains a major role in much current psychological research. In 2005, the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* published an article exploring differences between how a person is described "in the East and the West," containing the claim that over the past two decades "research has shown that Western person descriptions are more *trait based* and less *contextualized* than Asian person descriptions" (Kashima et al. 388). *Psychological Science* similarly published findings on differences shown by brain research between the ways in which Western brains and Eastern brains function (Hedden et al.)—research summarized in the *New York Times* as echoing "more than a decade of previous experimental research into East-West differences" (Goldberg). A useful corrective to this body of research can be found in Ed Yong's brief survey in the *New Scientist*.

The collection of life writing research published here also helps to destabilize East/West stereotypes. This is not to say that every author reflects on the theme of East and West. Several authors discuss the significance of location

while making no assumptions about geographical or cultural exclusivity, although many are concerned with the way in which life writing creates or subverts the nation. In fact, one ready frame for organizing the chapters would have been according to the national identity of the subject matter: Australian, Indian, US, Indonesian, South African, etc. Grouping the chapters according to other focal points, however, makes clear how much their concerns run across national boundaries. First we have several chapters that approach life writing through works of art or artistic performance. Each finds that the work examined has an importance for national identity, in some cases underpinning but more often making the concept more complex and challenging.

In a chapter that looks closely at the body of work of the Malaysian filmmaker Amir Muhammad, Philip Holden responds to the claim that autobiography is an exclusively Western narrative form. Holden is less interested in the production of new "national" studies that might correct this misunderstanding than in an exploration of the relational aspects of the cultural work that life writing does, both within a specific context and cross-culturally. He notes that life writing produced by ethnic minority writers outside a specific cultural and national context may lead an audience unfamiliar with the complexities of that context to expect the work to represent a certain "national authenticity": "packaging national identity or ethnicity as a commodity in a global marketplace." Holden problematizes an understanding of life narrative as re/producing national identity by exploring in detail the techniques of, and responses to, the films of Amir Muhammad, whose recent movies *The Big Durian* (2003), *The Last Communist* (2006), *Village People Radio Show* (2007), and *Malaysian Gods* (2009) reconstruct historical events through interviews with a number of different people. Amir Muhammad's interviewers encourage these participants to wander off into personal reminiscence, rather than shepherding them back onto the highways of historical narrative. Refusing the use of historical footage and historical depth, the films make use of the fragmentary and fragile surfaces of memory in the present, and so oppose the desire for cultural or national autobiography presupposed by both an international audience and the apparatuses of the Malaysian state. They offer an "alternative history . . . opposed to received national history." Underscoring this destabilizing role, Holden introduces the term "anti-region" to convey the challenges posed by "maritime Southeast Asia" to cultural discussions centering on "region." In comparison with the larger, recognizable units of India and China, it seems clear to him that Singapore and Malaysia are instead marked by "ubiquitous hybridity," and Muhammad's films demonstrate that national identity is constantly undergoing complex negotiations within the several cultural communities gathered under a regional banner. In terms of geography, the comparison that Holden is examining here is between different cultures within Asia,

within the East, with specific and detailed discussion demonstrating the impossibility of generalizing about the whole region.

In "Lifewriting and the Making of Companionable Objects," Kenneth George examines the work of Indonesian artist Sunaryo. In telling the story of how Sunaryo resorted to a literal cover-up of his paintings and sculptures in a politically inflected installation entitled *Titik Nadir*, "The Low Point," George is concerned with the ethical aspects of how we "dwell with and understand the things we call art." He places Sunaryo's art works in a category of "companionable objects," a term George coins in response to recent discussion about the agency of objects themselves, and a term that reflects what he refers to as the "material turn" in anthropology. Contributing to this turn is Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things*, and as George observes in describing how one of the Indonesian painters he has worked with takes comfort in—and refuses to sell—paintings that he regards as "my friends," that comfort "is by no means peculiar to the West." Like Holden, then, George is responding to the symposium's call to correct an overly simplistic understanding of East and West, indicating that he regards the theoretical framework of object theory as equally applicable to the context of Indonesian life narrative. George pushes further than a claim for recognition of auto/biography's equal role, however, arguing that an examination of the relational work of art reveals "a far-reaching and pragmatic social salience that goes beyond the cocoons of self-discovery and self-reflexivity." What goes beyond is the way in which art auto/biographical discourse helps to create communities, "identifying those things that will be recognized, made companionable, and recruited for cultural and sociopolitical ends, and those that will be destroyed or expelled." In examining what happens to Sunaryo's companionable objects, some of which are destroyed and expelled and some shaped "principally in response to a summons from the nation and a national public," Kenneth George offers us a complex insight into the work of a specific Indonesian artist, as well as the role of life story in Indonesian culture and art, and the way in which this speaks to the broader role of all life narrative.

In "These people are my people, these places are my places," Mathilda Slabbert considers the work of David Kramer, "entertainer and cultural commentator," and popular musician in South Africa. As in the previous two chapters, the interaction of national identity and artistic production plays a central part. David Kramer is a singer, songwriter, performer, producer, and director. His lyrical narratives depend on sociopolitical commentary, ranging from biting satirical reflections on the ills and injustices of apartheid and white Afrikaner nationalism to pioneering research into indigenous musical traditions and the transformation of musical elements which developed as a result of cultural interaction between the Khoi, San, European settlers,

Malayan slaves, and indigenous African tribes in the Western Cape. Slabbert traces Kramer's recuperative role in representing cultural hybridity and identity in a diverse South African context. Stressing the same multiplicity and complexity as the previous chapters, Slabbert points out that public regard of Kramer and his work is as diverse as the heterogeneous society of the country itself. This regard is influenced by a range of contributing factors, including his use of language (his lyrics are in Afrikaans and English), his social commentary concerning the complex and controversial notions of "coloured" and creolized identity (in his earlier work, he jokingly refers to his own "racial impurity" as an English-speaking Jew who writes and sings in Afrikaans), and his changing style of dress and appearance. Although South Africa's cultural location within either East or West may be much more complicated than Malaysia or Indonesia, Slabbert argues that the heterogeneity of Kramer's self-fashioning and performance serves to undermine stereotypical notions of race, culture, and nation.

Moving away from painting and performance and focusing more on the role of literature, while still remaining within South Africa, Tony Simoes da Silva's chapter, "Under New Management: Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South African Life Writing," investigates the role of auto/biography by white South Africans. Recent life narratives by white South Africans, Simoes da Silva argues, have come to rely on a rhetoric of nostalgic attachment to Africa to rehabilitate what they articulate as a whiteness under duress, in which the writers bear their pigmentation as *stigmata*, an ambivalently powerful and poignant reminder of what they themselves perceive as the cost of being white in Africa. Concentrating especially on two highly popular books by Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (1998) and *A Change of Tongue* (2003), as typical of such texts, Simoes da Silva considers the notion of an African whiteness and its management in postindependence, postcolonial Africa, reading the texts against the backdrop of rapidly changing political conditions now largely outside the control of white Africans. Simoes da Silva's nuanced study of whiteness, place, language, and nation within a specifically South African context is an example of the kind of life writing study that refuses a simple national agenda for unraveling the complex cultural work done by auto/biography in a specific location.

Another literary study is the chapter by Craig Howes, "The Fictobiographical Pact," in which Howes considers a Western author, Martin Amis, who takes explicit pride in his position as non-Eastern, and thus, Howes argues, perpetuates an Orientalist perspective. Howes quotes Amis on Islam as the Eastern other: "The conflicts we now face or fear involve opposed geographical arenas, but also opposed centuries or even millennia. It is a landscape of ferocious anachronisms: nuclear jihad on the Indian subcontinent; the medieval

agonism of Islam; the Bronze Age blunderings of the Middle East." This ideological position is couched within a fictobiographical study that appears to present the reader with the inner thoughts of a character called Mohammed Atta, who, while fictional, explicitly references the real participant in the 9/11 hijackings. The locational context of Howes's analysis has several levels. It can be read as the motel where Howes stayed in Portland, Maine, from where he discovers Atta had begun his journey on 9/11; there is the authorial positioning of Amis firmly in a superior Western world under threat from a barbaric Eastern other; and finally there is the positioning of Howes's analysis itself within an established Euro/American tradition of biographical analysis.

Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada transports us back to nineteenth-century literature, to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of Hawaiian biographies. In "Hidden in Plain Sight," Kuwada shows how the cultural context of these Hawaiian-language biographies was formed by interplay between indigenous language and culture and foreign ideas and technologies. The biographies appropriated foreign life writing conventions "in a manner consistent with Hawaiian literary traditions." This appropriation and forging of a distinct genre was important in the shaping of a sense of Hawaiian nationhood. It is also a reminder that Hawaiians were "wrestling with and navigating their way through these foreign structures of meaning and . . . actually deploying certain foreign traditions of life writing as a means of cultural resistance and a nationalistic rallying cry." Kuwada is clearly speaking back to a historiographical tradition that has read Hawaiian literature as possessing a mere "patina" of the local added to a fundamentally foreign literary style. This, he says, would be an insufficient understanding, and in a rich, detailed study he claims these life narratives as an important demonstration of indigenous agency, examples of the ability to "enfold" influences from the outside world, a quality he clearly believes is highly relevant to the contemporary Hawaiian nation.

The significance of sensitive translation to cross-cultural understanding is an important feature of Kuwada's treatment of Hawaiian-language texts and their English-language translations. In "Ethics, Oral History, and Interpreters in the Iraq War," Maria Faini similarly highlights the relationship between translation and life narrative. Faini conducted a series of oral history interviews, speaking through cell and land phones with Iraqi men employed by the US as military interpreters in Baghdad. She was acutely aware of the ethical dimensions of her work, feeling that she was taking part in an investigative tradition that has a long history of misrepresenting cross-cultural "others." By theorizing this process, however, she came to the conclusion that oral history techniques have the potential to safeguard against some of the dangers of exploitation and ethical failure. The transcripts survive as their own insurance against misrepresentation, although she is keenly aware of ways in which

their specific context is more complex than it is possible to capture: "That we spoke in English instead of Arabic and through phones instead of face to face was a burden morally and practically. But these circumstances were still productive, and helped to form an original and invaluable archive." Following recent debates among oral historians about the ethics of oral history as an academic paradigm, Faini suggests that the dynamic between interviewer and interviewee and the methodology of life writing across cultures and languages are practical examples of the necessities of specific context that make regional generalizations irrelevant.

In "Don't Write This," Gerry van Klinken continues the theme of ethics and life writing. The similarities and differences between van Klinken's and Faini's approaches are interesting in themselves. Faini discusses the guidelines that determine how oral historians should approach interviewees. Coming from an anthropological background, van Klinken refers to his Indonesian "informants," implying a quite different process and purpose. Both, however, address themselves to a burden of responsibility. In van Klinken's case, he has been given information that he is then told not to write: "Although my informants knew the outline of my project, there was no explicit agreement about how their information would be used. They may be surprised by what they finally read." Van Klinken writes that he sees his primary responsibility as being to a broad readership rather than to the individual interviewee. However, his decision to disclose what he has been told in confidence is much more complicated than a betrayal performed in order to provide more biographies for the global marketplace. He outlines four ethical principles that underpin his decision, principles formulated to ensure the safety of his informants; and it is clear that a driving force is a sense of responsibility that he does not actually make explicit: to reawaken memory and to reconstruct the complex past of a history that has been oversimplified. These goals are manifestly the moral dimension of his "guerrilla campaign" to reconstruct the lives of four provincial elite actors. The process of living in 1950s and 60s Indonesia

deposited numerous skeletons in the cupboards of the survivors, and unending pain in the hearts of those losers who got away with their lives—to say nothing of the dead. This history also explains why establishment accounts of the past are so pragmatic and shallow, so full of taboos. It explains the gap that yawns between the schematized, historicist public accounts of lives as they *are* written, on the one hand, and the dramatic contingency of the private accounts that the biographer "must not write," on the other. . . . Since there are almost no written documents about what I considered to be the dark heart of Kupang's political history, and since so few leftists or even their relatives survive who are able to tell their side of the story, I was forced to amplify the whispered stories of those who were on the right of the political spectrum. These are people who have something to lose by telling them openly.

Van Klinken's search for historical traces and the ethical implications of that search provide a riveting ethnohistorical detective story that combines rigorous scholarship, travel memoir, and methodological critique.

Peter Read's study of a lengthy Australian court action provides yet a different sense of how to capture the testimony or words of a subject/interviewee/informant, in this case someone who had asked him to write her biography. In "Biography in the Court Room? Far from a Final Judgment," Read examines the case brought by Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams, an Aboriginal woman removed from her mother's care at birth in 1942 in New South Wales, Australia. Williams claimed that the state should be held liable for her mental deterioration and the hardship she had experienced through being one of the Stolen Generations. While she did not win her case, Read compares the nature of evidence as required by the state Supreme Court to what he, as Joy's biographer, might count as evidence. In doing so, he reflects on "discontinuities between Western and non-Western modes of thought," and expresses sadness at the "judicial system's cultural ignorance of Aboriginal life." Read chose to try to capture Joy's life largely in direct speech, like scenes in a play, rather than through conventional biographical narrative. When asked to justify this unusual style, he gave several reasons, not least that it was appropriate for the primarily oral culture in which Joy moved, and a style that "would be most readily accessible to her family and friends." The legal systems of Western countries are essential bulwarks of the democratic state, so a Westminster-style court may be justifiably termed "Western." In failing to validate Joy Williams's evidence and testimony, the Supreme Court of New South Wales demonstrated that a "never the twain" experience can still be encountered within the national boundaries of a first-world (Western) country.

The themes of secrecy and national identity return in "Writing Lives in Exile," David T. Hill's discussion of the autobiographical writings of Indonesian political exiles after 1965. With the rise following 1 October 1965 of the New Order regime of Major-General Suharto, hundreds of Indonesians working and studying in communist states abroad were effectively cut off from their homeland. Faced with detention or execution, Indonesian leftists abroad were unable to return. Scattered across some dozen states spanning the Sino-Soviet divide, isolated communities of Indonesian political exiles struggled to survive the vicissitudes of the Cold War, and to communicate, organize, and maintain an effective voice of opposition to the New Order. While residing in communist states, the exiles communicated with their host governments largely through intermediaries from the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). With the close of the Cold War, host states became less supportive, and Party authority over the exiles weakened. Increasingly they

sought refuge beyond the communist bloc, with substantial numbers moving to the Netherlands and France from the mid-1970s onwards. The fall of Suharto in 1998 triggered a surge in the publication of their autobiographies in Indonesia. Among the authors whose accounts have appeared in their homeland are three relatives of the PKI Chairperson, D. N. Aidit (who was shot by the military in November 1965): his younger brothers, Sobron and Asahan, and his daughter, Ibarruri. To what extent do these autobiographies, composed in the Indonesian language, by multilingual authors who had spent their formative decades isolated from their homeland, relate and contribute to the practice of Indonesian autobiographical writing? Hill notes the continuing reluctance of once-exiled Indonesians to go on record with their memoirs, with Asahan and Ibarruri both carefully crafting their work "to navigate the shoals of personal bonds and comradely loyalties. The writers know the community about which they write, they know its conventions of secrecy." Despite the secrets (bringing to mind, of course, van Klinken's chapter), Hill records and comments on the valuable testimonies and the "insights they add to the incomplete jigsaw that is Indonesian history."

In "Local Boons: The Many Lives of Family Stories," Kirin Narayan brings us back to the relational aspects of life writing that Philip Holden signaled in this volume's first study. In fact, Narayan's chapter, although the next to last in this collection, actually opened the symposium, and set the themes that would be explored in so many different contexts over the next few days. Her chapter follows the story of a journey in 2009 to her grandmother's village in Gujarat, Western India. Narayan had recently published *My Family and Other Saints*, a memoir—which she playfully terms a "we-moir"—describing a childhood at the cultural crossroads of spiritual questing, as her father was Indian and her mother American. Her grandmother's stories about supernatural intervention and meetings with gods and legendary figures contributed one thread of the family stories, but upon undertaking the journey with her aunts to the ancestral village, Narayan was "stunned" by a story hidden from the family for almost nine decades. She was forced to consider "how the social life of transmitted stories masks silences: both the culturally inflected silences around what's not story-worthy and the intentional personal silences of keeping family secrets." As both a literary practitioner and scholar of life writing, Narayan adopts various angles to reflect on the methodological, theoretical, and literary potential of family stories, and how they further complicate the insider/outsider dimensions of ethnography. The final paragraphs of her chapter show her experimenting with new ways to tell the story, and signal her understanding of how life writing might be embodied in "different sorts of texts," including those "hidden away as partially revealed secrets." In such generous, open, and textured

writing, Narayan demonstrates ways to interrogate the strengths and limits of available cultural forms for representing and understanding lives.

One scholar missing from our Canberra gathering was Professor Pei-yi Wu from Columbia University, whose death in 2009 meant that we were deprived of the privilege of hearing from the author of the major English-language work on Chinese life writing, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (1990). The paper he would have presented was titled "The Jiwen, a Unique Hybrid in Chinese Life Writing." He had planned to help us see Chinese life writing in unexpected places, in a multitude of genres. Specifically, he hoped to demonstrate that jiwen, or libation addresses, include several of the "best specimens" of autobiography ever written in China. In the abstract and brief summary he had sent before the symposium, he noted that the jiwen originated in China probably before the emergence of written language. After the dead were buried, offerings of food and wine were often accompanied by a short speech, expressing grief and admiration. The translated jiwen that was to be the core of Pei-yi Wu's address is contained in this volume's last chapter, together with his introductory notes. "The jiwen of Shen Cheng for his Daughter Azhen" is a moving reminder of the universality of human emotion, as we read a grieving father's address to the spirit of his precious three-year-old daughter, reflecting on her mischievous and bright nature.

We were sorry not to have Professor Wu with us, to discuss Chinese autobiography and to share with him our own often cross-cultural work, but when we heard the universal quality of a parent's grief and love as retold in his translation of Shen Cheng's words, we knew immediately the benefits of looking for similarities in each other's work. The "East" is still sometimes presented in English-language studies as encapsulating differences that require the Western speaker/writer to be wary of generalization. Authors of several of the major reference works in the field of life writing make it clear that they lack the expertise to discuss non-Western traditions and practices. This disclaimer is obviously intended to avoid misleading assumptions, but does it really mean more than saying that any two life stories are likely to differ in ways that are related to social and cultural context? It is all very well to be alert to difference, but this should not blind us to similarities. The ways in which people have reflected on their lives vary across time and place, but always and everywhere, people have in one way or another reflected, discussed, and recorded. Gusdorf was simply wrong when he claimed that "The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal" (28–29). The importance of the symposium lay in hearing about "other" lives, and recognizing commonalities that form the basis for a shared understanding.