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REVIEWS

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REVIEWS

Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World. Desley Deacon, Angela Woollacott and Penny Russell, eds, 2009. Canberra: ANU E Press.

Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present. Desley Deacon, Angela Woollacott and Penny Russell, eds, 2010. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Two of the most lively areas of historical scholarship in recent years—biography and transnational history—seem at first glance to be pulling in opposite directions, the former towards the detailed close study of the individual and the latter towards macro-history, the study of large-scale social movements and patterns. Yet, in fact, these two trends can dovetail very nicely with one another, as these two collections of essays amply demonstrate. The life story of the individual on the move because of displacement, migration, travel, or professional advancement becomes an ideal means for exploring connections, networks, and influences. If national histories have had trouble containing biography, since the individual and the national story will align only some of the time, transnational modes of history, as these two volumes demonstrate, can happily follow individuals wherever they go.

Both volumes emanate from the 'Transnational Lives: Biography across Boundaries' international conference, organised by the editors at the Australian National University in July 2006. The first focuses on people who have a significant Australian connection as part of a broader pattern of mobility, while the second brings together the biographies of a very wide range of people, only some of whom had Australian connections. Both volumes have plenty of riches for the reader, and yet both, I think, raise some troubling issues for the transnational biographical project itself. It is to the editors' credit that they have included a wide range of essays in both collections, including some that are critical of either transnational history or biography. It all makes for a stimulating read.

In their introduction to *Transnational Ties*, the first of the two volumes, the editors explain that they are using the term 'transnational' to emphasise the ways in which Australian lives are 'intricately enmeshed with the world, bound by ties of allegiance and affinity, intellect and imagination'. They want to emphasise, against old-fashioned searches for Australian identity or Australian character, stories of 'diaspora, imperialism, exile and conflict' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2009, xvii). They seek to explore not simply the movement of people from one place to another but also the movement of the mind; that is, the transnationalism of the intellect and the imagination.

Transnational and national histories, of course, are not entirely separate kinds of history. For the people discussed in *Transnational Ties*, Australia was either home or came to matter in some way, like Jim Hammerton's English migrants, Nancy Paxton's New Zealander Jean Devanny, Maggie Mackellar's Western district settlers, Mark Hearn's cosmopolitan Alfred Deakin, and Cassandra Pybus's African American convict, Billy Blue. Perhaps Australia mattered less to Edward Eyre, though his visit to the Australian colonies helped to shape his thinking and later life in Jamaica and England. It may have mattered even less to Prince Alfred, who after an assassination attempt in Sydney in 1868 probably

returned home just pleased to be alive. Still, the idea of Australia does serve as an anchor for the volume, proving yet again that the transnational is always in tension with the claims of the national. The editors approvingly quote Jill Matthews, who wrote of the value of transnational approaches for prising our subjects 'out of the death grip of the national' (xv). Perhaps the kind of national that survives here is less a death grip than a firm handshake but its presence is unmistakable.

The editors have, then, a clear project—the development of transnational biography as a distinct and productive form—and they have brought together an excellent collection of essays in the process. Their contributors in *Transnational Ties* are, however, an unruly lot. A few are somewhat dubious as to whether transnational really applies to the kind of work they do, and some are not quite certain about biography either. In her chapter, Julie Evans ponders some historiographical issues arising from her study of Edward Eyre (see her excellent book *Edward Eyre: Race and Colonial Governance*), especially the relationship between biography and global history. Evans is wary of biography, wishing to de-centre the figure of Eyre the individual 'in order to bring the more commonplace violence of colonialism more fully to the fore' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2009, 30). She also highlights perceptively some of the issues that historians face as they grapple with imperial, national, comparative, and transnational histories, and prefers to describe her approach as comparative rather than transnational. Nicholas Brown does not really describe himself as transnational, either. Rather, he traces the growth of the idea of the international in the post-First World War period, as many thoughtful people sought to leave aside national ties and embrace the idea of themselves as international citizens, citizens of the world. His focus is Raymond Watt, an advocate of international causes from the 1920s to the 1940s, and a leading force in the NSW branch of the League of Nations Union, which campaigned on a range of issues, including disarmament, the arbitration of international conflict, the collective enforcement of peace, and setting standards for labour, health and migration. For his part, Mark Hearn uses the idea of the transnational to emphasise the breadth of Alfred Deakin's intellectual and political interests—his wide reading, and the diverse sources of his ideas. Although proudly an Australian Briton, his imagination was, Hearn suggests, truly eclectic, diverse, and 'transnational'.

For some authors in this volume, transnational becomes less an analytical term than a description of particular kinds of ideas, experiences, activities, and types of people. Maggie Mackellar writes of a transnational conception of home (112), Prince Alfred in Cindy McCreery's essay has 'transnational experience' (67), and Henry Alexander Wickham, a planter who operated in many locations and about whom Ann Lane writes, conducts 'transnational activities'. For Nancy Paxton, Jean Devanny is a 'transnational' subject' (215), while Susan Carson explores how Christina Stead and Eleanor Dark 'conceptualised transnational experience in their fiction' and describes Stead as a 'transnational novelist' (229). In many of these essays, transnationalism has become something good, something to be desired, emulated, and celebrated. To my mind, transnational is a morally neutral term, simply denoting connectedness, and this might have dramatically varying results. It might lead to broader sympathies, but it might also result in the strengthening of racial ideas and allegiances. The connections people make across national borders might be of any moral character at all. I wonder if the idea of transnational in some of these essays, especially those on literary figures, is doing the work that might be better done by the notion of cosmopolitan, or cosmopolitanism—an ideal of being in the world, of world citizenship, and being open to a range of diverse local influences and traditions.

Cosmopolitanism is the more complex normative concept, whereas 'transnational' denotes simply a particular method of analysis and interpretation.

The second volume, *Transnational Lives*, is conceptually tighter, employing the notion of a transnational method consistently across its 21 chapters. It is also held together through each chapter referring to other chapters, giving it coherence that such collections often lack. This is strong editing indeed. This volume also has a stronger feminist concern; in the Introduction the editors insist on 'the centrality of cultural history and feminist analysis to any understanding of global circulation and interconnectedness' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 5). The feminist point here is taken to be the intertwining of cultural with political and economic history, and of studies of the intimate and the personal with broader structural patterns and processes. Individual life stories, the editors suggest, can illuminate social inequalities and racial hierarchies.

The editors disagree with the concerns expressed by Marilyn Lake and me in our own edited collection, *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (2005), that transnational histories, though of great interest to professional historians, are potentially somewhat disconnected from national polities and reading publics. Their reply is that globalisation shapes the experiences of disempowered people as much as the powerful and that political movements are transnational. True, but our concern was not with the analytical potential of transnational approaches but rather with the question of to whom they really speak. The problem of *audience* is, I still feel, an important one. These two volumes, for example, hold a wealth of scholarship and some real treasures, but they address a specialist audience. There is nothing wrong with that; specialists need to address their peers in the process of developing new ideas and approaches in any discipline. I learnt a lot, for example, from Martha Hodes' reflections here on biographical method. Writers of transnational lives, she suggests, 'must employ a narrative interplay between what historical actors knew and did not know in the past and what historians know and cannot know about the past' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 19). We must, she says, construct a narrative that conveys how our historical actors were 'aware or unaware of the widening scales of context' around them. This can be done either explicitly or implicitly, by shifting the narrative voice when evoking contexts outside the actor's awareness (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 19). This is valuable advice for biographers and historians. My concern, though, is that we need to find ways to address broader audiences as well. Transnational history has, in my view, the *potential* to interest the non-specialist reader; I am just not sure that we have quite worked out yet how to realise it.

Many of the essays in *Transnational Lives* are part of wider research projects. In many cases, the authors have published a book on their biographical subject(s), such as Kirsten McKenzie's *A Swindler's Progress*, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds' *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, Martha Hodes' *The Sea Captain's Wife*, Pamela Scully's co-authored (with Clifton Crais) *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, and Penny van Toorn's *Writing Never Arrives Naked*. In others, for example for the three editors, a major book on their chosen biographical subject is soon to appear. This means there is a massive amount of research behind each essay. In some cases, the essay becomes a reflection on method, in others a condensed summary of a life. In both cases, the results make for a stimulating read.

The doubts expressed by Julie Evans in *Transnational Ties* about the entire project of biography are echoed in this second volume, perhaps even more strongly. Pamela Scully's reflections on writing the transnational life of Sara Baartman are especially acute. As she

puts it, 'I find myself increasingly struggling with the biographical mode' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 30), and she quotes K. Mullen Sands, who urges potential biographers to be fully aware of the 'difficulty and ethical ambiguity of undertaking to represent the life of another human being' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 30). I only wish they were so aware more often; too many biographies seem to claim so much more knowledge of their subject than could ever be justified. In her chapter, Penny van Toorn shows just how fraught biographical projects can be in her sensitive and subtle discussion of writing about Indigenous Australians. Her critique of biography is most telling when she discusses how Aboriginal systems of naming, which were relational so that a person's name varied according to who is addressing him or her, were replaced by Western names so that each person was 'individually tagged and therefore traceable' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 49). People who for thousands of years had identified themselves in relation to kin and country had now to transform themselves into individually named actors (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 49). The biography of the named Aboriginal individual, then, in some senses relies on and mimics these colonising processes of tagging and fixing individual identities, independently of social context. Van Toorn is also revealing in her application of the idea of the transnational to Indigenous societies within the nation-state. She shows the importance and malleability of borders, which are shaped by political projects of settlement and displacement. 'Australia', she writes, 'is a palimpsest in which new and old borders and boundaries intersect and shift underfoot over time' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 41). In such contexts, displaced Indigenous peoples have become 'a multitude of diasporas, as communities have been expelled from all or part of their land and children have been systematically removed from their kin' (Deacon, Woollacott, and Russell 2010, 45).

There are, then, plenty of riches here, both methodologically and substantively. These lives are all fascinating, all revealing, and all important. It is interesting to note that although over 70 per cent of the authors are women, the number of individual men and women studied is approximately equal, reflecting the increasing interest of feminist scholars in masculinity. While the feminist sympathies of the editors and many of the authors are unmistakable, I am not sure that the collection is, however, as distinctively feminist as the editors hope. In her lively account of the life of Mary Berenson, a feminist philanthropist and activist who lived in North America, England, and Italy, Ros Pesman poses the following question: 'are women, less embedded in the national, more able to live in the transnational?' An interesting question, but Pesman does not really answer it. In many other essays, gendered questions do not really arise at all. Perhaps the contribution of these two collections to feminist studies is rather their practical and detailed emphasis on the nexus between, as the editors rightly claim, the intimate and the public, the personal and the political.

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The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity and Globalization. Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong and

Tani E. Barlow (The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group), eds, 2008. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

This marvellous collection focuses on the emergence of the Modern Girl in the first decades of the twentieth century. Through studying the global flows of commodity culture, changing ideas about modern femininity and their intersections with 'race', and the intersections of gender, nationalisms and colonialism in various geopolitical locations around the world, this collection argues for a fresh approach to the study of globalising commodity culture and the transnational circulation of modernist ideologies. Seeking to move beyond centre vs periphery or trajectories of influence, this volume looks instead to debates about femininity and modernity via the iconography and performance of the Modern Girl. She is posited as a prime location from which to illustrate the complex and 'multifaceted linkages' (7) between the seemingly simultaneous emergences of cultural phenomena within a globalising culture.

An excellent introductory chapter maps the journey undertaken by participants involved in a seven-year project (based at the University of Washington) bringing together scholars working on India, South Africa, Germany, China, Japan, France, the Soviet Union, and Australia. Aiming to articulate an innovative yet practical research methodology, their work will be of interest to readers beyond the history of the girl, consumerism or modernity. With the help of an erudite opening discussion about the outcomes of this collaborative research, we are invited to share in the framework developed by the group. Casting the Modern Girl as a 'multidirectional citation' (4) that literally comes into being through the process of research, the members investigate her visibility as both historical agent and in iconic representation (the two are variously intertwined), using her appearances as a heuristic device through which to illuminate the local taking shape via complex interconnecting global dynamics. These include corporate capitalism and the cosmetics industry (here rightly deserving its own chapter), film culture, racial nationalisms, and empire. What we find in the pages of this collection is that the Modern Girl could stand for both the 'dangers and possibilities of modern life' (8), whether in fascist Italy, Germany and Japan, Stalinist Russia, the settler colonial nationalisms of the United States, Australia and South Africa, or a variety of anti-colonial nationalist movements.

Supported by global capital and circulating globally, the proliferation of popular forms of consumer culture—particularly the illustrated women's magazine—in this era necessarily placed an emphasis on the visual, on corporeality and self-representation in deportment, dress, cosmetics, and so on. But while the conditions in which such visibility might be performed by Modern Girls in different locales varied dramatically, she was always read within a racial as well as gender hierarchy. A central issue for this engaging collection is what the strategies that (usually) young women employed in variously adopting the Modern Girl look can tell us about the complexities of historical agency within those hierarchies. In some cases, becoming modern entailed co-opting 'whiteness' towards asserting respectability: such a strategy (if counter-intuitively) might equally celebrate black beauty, as described in an excellent chapter by Davarian L. Baldwin on the New Negro era and Madame C.J. Walker's beauty business among African American women in Chicago, or in Lynn M. Thomas's equally fascinating chapter on African women, beauty contests and white face powder in South Africa's *Bantu World*. In other cases, such as among middle-class white women in the United States, Modern Girls sampling 'other' cultures represented not the cosmopolitan transcendence of 'race' but the powers

accruing to whiteness over other peoples and cultures. In a consummate discussion of womanliness, masquerade and white racial privilege, Alys Eve Weinbaum shows how control over this racial masquerade represented a form of racial suprematism expressed in terms of consumption. And in the Australian context, in a compelling study of racist cartoons, Liz Conor considers the 'limits' of Aboriginal femininity in the context of a White Australia profoundly shaped by racial discourses structured upon notions of extinction and primitivism.

Rather than attempt any universal reading of the Modern Girl phenomenon, this comprehensive study seeks to delineate the multiple influences and circuits of exchange, producing a remarkable global effect. With her rejection of traditional femininity and her play with the feminine in new forms, the Modern Girl appears in its pages as consummate at combining global elements with local forms to produce a look immediately identifiable to her peers as implacably 'modern'. But while surface changes might signal the presence of the Modern Girl, a range of behaviours were attributed to her public appearances by contemporary commentators. In some cases her femininity was cast at odds with the national ideal, while in others celebrated as an exemplar of the virtues of modernisation. Several chapters in this volume concern the diverse reception and representation of the Modern Girl in Japan, China, Germany and Russia. All are wonderfully illustrated, as befits their subject. With the addition of commentaries by influential scholars in the field and an invaluable bibliography, this collection represents a highly recommended addition to new scholarship on histories of gender and modernity in global context.

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Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond. Paula Bannerjee, 2009. New Delhi: Sage.

Paula Bannerjee's work on borders and bordered existences is written as a critical feminist history and encourages a rethinking of issues around the security and insecurity of vulnerable communities living around borders. She portrays how states construct borders and make them invincibly rigid, and how the bordered existences of women migrant workers destabilise these apparently rigid constructs. As borders are problematic at different historical junctures, sometimes representing extreme control and violence, not only is the wider political context relevant but also women's lived experiences which are located at, but also constantly change, the borders. In South Asia, in particular, borders are policed by hostile neighbours, who at one time comprised a single family. There, as Bannerjee says, 'Borders do not stop at the borders. They percolate further into the interior, affecting lives of millions of people on either side, often even of those miles away from these lines on the map' (xx). Yet, as South Asian experts point out, borders in the region have been fluid and porous, allowing mobility across them. They evoked little or no interest from Indians themselves as merchants, traders and religious pilgrims crossed them and exchanged goods and ideas on their way. When the East India Company began to expand up to the Himalayas, the need to draw lines and to create frontiers under 'European pressure and by the intervention of European agents' was felt (xxxiii).

Bannerjee analyses borders not from the perspective of the state or security, but from the perspective of the people who inhabit these borders; those who cross them, make them insignificant and try to appropriate or reconfigure the borders by creating different meanings for them. She also adds a gender angle to border studies by privileging women's experiences of, and at, the borders. She argues that what are given to us as the narratives of borders are male narratives privileging male modes of discourse and power compulsions. The three sections of her book make these points strongly. The first two sections offer case studies from the borderlands of the South Asian region. The first is titled 'Borders and their Pasts' and explores how borders create the notions of difference, foreignness and 'others', and the way that legislation acts to deter the movement of itinerant groups and migrants. Bannerjee shows how governments—both colonial and postcolonial—have seized on the notion of difference to include some and exclude others from the process of state formation. The attitudes of postcolonial states to refugees and women reflect an inheritance of this shibboleth of power as the basis of governance. Two borders are put under the microscope for detailed study in this section: the yet 'unsettled marker' of the Sino-Indian border, and the ideologically sacrosanct but politically contested 'Line of Control' in Kashmir. Here, Bannerjee demonstrates how control is not only exercised but also challenged on an everyday basis, through 'low-intensity conflict' that has had the effect of destabilising the whole region.

The second section is titled 'Life on the Border' and looks at how lives are actually lived at the present time on these borders. It explores the population flows in the east and north-east of India from the South Asian subregions of Bangladesh, Myanmar and parts of Nepal that border India, and analyses how these flows impact on metadiscourses of security. It is in this section that she speaks about border communities more authoritatively and brings out the gender aspects of vulnerability caused by such illegitimate flows. In the chapter titled 'Circles of Insecurity' Bannerjee moves between the past and the present to show that although men dominate in numbers amongst the illegal immigrants, women bear the brunt of cross-border migration. Some communities in the Indian north-east that traditionally ascribed greater status to women have changed their customs under the weight of male immigration. Farming systems, such as *jhum* or shifting cultivation, became sedentary as a result of increased pressures on land, and the new plough cultivation, with its focus on individual ownership of land, changed women's lives. Bannerjee shows how borders under such rapid and fundamental transformation become places of endemic poverty, substantial illiteracy among women and children, and enormous violence against women. Such poverty has a feminine face: 'Women living in these borders live a life of extreme hardship. They are the quickest targets for both the security personnel and the criminals ...' (121). And then:

Trafficking of women and children is on the increase in northeast India. This region is being torn apart by multiple levels of conflict ... The traffickers in this region are said to be working through local networks, yet governmental agencies seems not to be much concerned about the situation. (122)

Continuing conflicts—between the state and the communities as well as between the communities—create a violent world that forces women to confront and negotiate new roles. One interesting chapter in this section is about how 'mobile diseases' like HIV/AIDS cross borders and boundaries, and act as instruments to further marginalise people at the

borders. As media hype over such travelling diseases escalates frantic efforts to locate and fix the 'target population', certain categories of women—such as sex-workers—are forced into vulnerable and disadvantaged situations.

Section three, 'Laws and the Border', deals with the 'dark side of democracy'; that is, how liberal democratic states like India embark on ethnic and political cleansing as a means of hegemonic control, by marking certain people as errant and/or deviant. The 'deficit of democracy', Bannerjee argues, is that the democratic space is not a homogeneous space, and as it converts itself into secure and insecure spaces it 'securitises' democracy. This means more control in the hands of the state, and more demarcated and controlled or 'secured' borders. Thus the hill tribes in the north-east of India are constructed not only as different but also as violent, and the state then institutionalises that difference through laws.

Bannerjee's book is a critical indictment of border studies, bringing to the fore the real stories of marginal people at the centre, and showing how superfluous the hallowed doctrine of security can be. The pundits of security studies have often ignored the oppositional challenges presented by people in relation to territory, movements—in relation to borders, fluidity vs rigidity, and coexistence vs control. In transcending these disciplinary and intellectual borders, the book offers not only a corrective but a critical contribution to feminist political understanding. The book is a must-read not only for South Asianists but also for those looking for a grounded feminist critique of contemporary border politics.

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Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism and the First World War. Ana Carden-Coyne, 2009. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reconstructing the Body documents what Ana Carden-Coyne identifies as the 'cultures of resilience and the institutions of reconstruction in Britain, Australia, and the United States' (1) in the period following the First World War. During this time, Carden-Coyne suggests, classical imagery was revived in the service of rehabilitating not only those whose bodies had been broken in the line of fire but also the body politic: the nation(s) that had likewise borne the brunt of battles lost and won. This was less an attempt to return to the past, says Carden-Coyne, than a deployment of the classical principles of order, unity, universality, and so on, in order to rethink the future of the modern. Framing her exploration in these terms, Carden-Coyne turns her attention to what she describes as the cultural, medical, and commercial networks involved in the enterprise of physical and social reconstruction.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus primarily on the sensorial aspects of rehabilitation and, in particular, the role of the visual in the representation of the war-wrecked body (in film, literature, art) and its healing (in memorial architecture). Chapters 4, 5 and 6—which to me are by far the most interesting—map the emergence and popularisation of 'body culture' and its role in the materialisation of heteronormative idea(l)s of gender and sexuality. In

the first of these the reader is presented with an account of the ways in which military rehabilitation came to inform commercial practices of 'therapeutic consumption', 'entwining sexualized selfhood with the state, medicine, and civilian reintegration' (164). Medical rehabilitation, Carden-Coyne argues, drew on and reiterated the notion of the warrior hero whose mental and physical fortitude enabled self-transformation and the overcoming of the devastation and suffering associated with war. Appropriating this idea(l), commercial industries (gymnasiums, fitness and body-building magazines, the 'health food' industry and so on) 'introduced a compelling ideology of physical liberation through the sexual body' (170). 'Virility', then, became the aim of the game, and this was seen as embodied in both the statuesque figures of Ancient Greece and in the heroes of physical culture, men like Walter Balmus and Clarence Weber (in Australia).

What went hand in hand with the reconstruction of male bodies, and thus of masculinity, was, of course, the 'refeminising' of women. Whilst the literal and symbolic putting of women back in their place (that is, the home) operated on a range of levels and in relation to a wide variety of institutions, discourses and discursive practices, Carden-Coyne focuses on the refeminisation of 'women through beauty and body consciousness' (222). The disciplinary practices that Carden-Coyne discusses differ from those we associate with the contemporary West in interesting ways, at the same time that such practices, like our own, held out the promise of independence, self-fashioning and liberation. As Carden-Coyne tells it, physical fitness was associated with feminine well-being, and women (at least those of a certain class) were encouraged to participate in activities such as archery, gymnastics, and classical revival dance, all of which were represented as inextricably bound to the goddess figures of the 'Modern Diana', and the 'New Venus'. At the same time, physical culture was regarded by many as a way to sublimate unwanted (and 'unfeminine') autoerotic impulses, and classical figures such as the 'New Venus' laid the foundations for the exacting idea(l)s of physical perfection that inform current cosmetic practices, in particular those associated with the face.

Reconstructing the Body is a rich source of information, much of which is extremely interesting. The book, however, is disappointing in its lack of critical analysis. Carden-Coyle's failure to develop a theoretical frame for her exploration of (bodily) reconstruction ultimately means that the book is often repetitive and leaves one feeling as if one is on the brink of something that, in the end, fails to materialise.

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