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Life Writing and the Southern Hemisphere: Texts, Spaces, Resonances



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# The South as subject

As the decolonial turn in the Humanities continues – both within former colonised and colonising territories – academia has been engaging with the troubling notion of how our epistemological positions are skewed in favour of the standards of the Global North. Life writing seems an ideal discourse from which to begin such interrogations, because of its historical position as being a literary avenue for marginalised voices to find expression. The volume *Life Writing and the Southern Hemisphere: Texts, Spaces, Resonances* (2024) sees multiple scholars considering the way that lives in the South are written and understood. Edited by Elleke Boehmer and Katherine Collins and forming part of the *New Directions in Life Narrative* series from Bloomsbury, this book sees a multitude of perspectives being considered and interrogated.

The book is divided into five sections, thematically arranged around conceptualisations of interpretations, spatiality, nature, sound and embodiment. The contributing authors focus on life writing within a number of southern countries: South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, Nigeria, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, India, New Zealand, Australia and Antarctica. The presence of Antarctica in this book adds a critically interesting angle, as this is a territory that is often forgotten in our discussions of issues of the Global South, as if its ‘southness’ is double – it becomes both geographically and intellectually the south of the south. That this edited volume clearly situates Antarctica into the discourse of life writing is an undoubted intellectual strength.

The introductory chapter of the volume takes as its starting point the perception that ‘the South’ is understood by people in the North as a place of natural beauty, distance and remove. The authors continue by making plain the issue at hand in how we conceptualise, construct and ultimately narrate lives, writing “southern geographies, histories and lives tend to be defined from a northern perspective” (p.1) and “with the legacies of colonialism including language loss and archiving practices that prioritize some lives over others, the ‘authoritative life’ still tends to be the northern life, as are the dominant historical narratives” (p.3).

In Chapter 1, Elleke Boehmer expands on the themes of vastness and distance, and argues that life writing serves as a potential mechanism for bridging the perceived distance between North and South. Emma Parker’s chapter considers how tactile objects hold life narrative meaning, and are used to inform the life writing of Janet Frame and Doris Lessing. Such an argument aligns in interesting ways with the position of archives within life writing narratives, and how the physical objects that a person leaves behind become sites of meaning and expression. This position is also taken by Katherine Collins in her chapter in which she discusses two artefacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and reads the lack of information on the objects’ origins or creators through Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s theory of abyssal thinking.

A number of chapters engage with the life writing of Southern writers, and how these contribute new ways of conceptualising auto/biographical praxis within the Global South. Elizabeth Chant considers the writing about Antarctica by Chilean author and intellectual Francisco Coloane, and how his *criollismo* writing focused on realistic depictions of rural regional settings, rather than the romanticised images expressed in rural idealism. Priyanka Shivadas interrogates two life-as-told narratives, namely *Mayilamma*, which documents the life of activist Mayilamma from India, and *The Town Grew Up Dancing*, a text from Australia which narrates the life of Wenten Rubuntja in the Arrernte language. Shivadas considers how both texts utilise oral storytelling to create the life story of two prominent activists from the South.

The chapters by both Obari Gomba and Cristóbal Pérez Barra speak to the complexities of African identities, and how emigration further distorts these understandings. Gomba considers the memoir of Ken Wiwa, a Nigerian author who grew up in London, and how these two locales find tension in his understanding of himself in relation to his activist father who was murdered. Barra focuses on South African author J.M. Coetzee, who considered the importance of writing from the South. Barra writes that “Coetzee’s appeal is for the literary practitioners of the south to operate with little regard to the mandates of the northern metropolises” (p.115).

Spatiality is explored in the chapters by Archie Davies and Pablo Wainschenker. Both chapters consider space within South American life writing, with Davies interrogating how the spatiality of the Brazilian Northeast is present in the lives of Josue de Castro, Milton Santos and Beatriz Nascimento. Wainschenker’s chapter focuses on how Argentinian non-fiction creates a spatial imaginary of Antarctica.

Part III of this book considers the presence of water within Southern life stories. Charne Lavery’s chapter considers the presence of natural disasters in selected non-fiction by Amitav Ghosh, and particularly the links to the Indian Ocean. The chapters of Confidence Joseph and Tinashe Mushakavanhu relocate this area of interrogation to Africa. Joseph argues for understanding other ways of knowing through centring water within the writing of Meg vandermerwe, Lynton Burger and Pepetela, while Mushakavanhu unpacks the centrality of the Isis River in Oxford, the Rutsape River in Zimbabwe within the fiction of Dambudzo Marechera.

In Part IV, Antarctica is considered as a space of sonic and imagery expression. Joanna Price considers the concept of ‘intimate immensity’, and how the study of plankton evokes this concept in the works of poet Chris Orsman, photographer Jane Ussher and installation artist Judit Hersko. Sound and Antarctica are considered in the chapters by Carolyn Philpott and Elizabeth Leane, through the importance of music for the members of the Australian Antarctic Expedition of 1911, and the life of Sidney Jeffryes, who was the wireless operator on that expedition. Lewis Williams speaks to their own desire to explore the Antarctic, and utilises their poetry and diary entries of their experience of eventually visiting the area.

The final section of the book considers the body in life writing, as well as autoethnographic approaches to narrating the self. Sarah Comyn and Porsche Fermanis consider the body enslaved and in a fugitive space, through the life

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of Xhosa activist David Stuurman. Comyn and Fermanis further consider Stuurman's life as one recorded from Northern perspectives, and how he was unable to speak directly to the historical record of his life. Isaac Ndlovu considers the intersection of fact and fiction in Melina Rorke's narrative of her own life as a white settler in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe.

The final two chapters of the book utilise self-reflexive mechanisms to consider life writing in their authors' own works. Louis Rogers considers the play *Two-Body Problem* as a form of inadvertent autobiographical

exploration, and Khutso Mabokela is able to tackle her own experiences of hope and trauma in post-apartheid South Africa through her autofictional short story 'Mogau Grace'.

This edited volume therefore provides interesting and thoughtful additions to the growing discourse on Southern epistemologies and ways of being. I would argue that the project from which this book emerged is a vital one, and one with which scholars of life writing need to continuously engage, and re-examine their positions therein.

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