From the margins to the mainstream: towards a history of published Indigenous Australian autobiographies and biographies

Oliver Haag

Published Indigenous Australian autobiographies have undergone considerable change over the last five decades.¹ From tentative beginnings between the 1950s and the 1970s, they saw tremendous growth during the 1980s and 1990s. Now, 50 years later, autobiographies have secured their place in overseas markets. This article reconstructs some aspects of this development.² More precisely, I first present an extended bibliography and then make a statistical profile to contextualise the statistical findings within a broader historical frame. ‘Extended bibliography’ is understood to incorporate several variables relevant to the statistical survey, including year of first publication, genre, gender, publisher, and production-authorship.³

Compiling a bibliography

Any bibliography must rely on a consistent definition of its sources. In this instance, two ideas require a definition: ‘what makes an autobiography an autobiography?’ and ‘what makes it Indigenous?’ The latter idea in particular should be comparable to self-perceptions: ‘how do Indigenous authors define their own work?’ Anita Heiss elaborates on this question in her seminal analysis Dhuuluu-Yala.⁴ Following her findings, my principle is that a work must at least be co-authored by an Indigenous person to be identified as Indigenous.⁵ Other indicators, such as subject-matter and perspective, are too imprecise to use in constructing a definition and they tend to homogenise what is, more often than not, highly diverse. This definition thus excludes all biographies about Indigenous persons, as well as authors such as Mudrooroo, whose indigeneity is contested.⁶

This definition, however, is complicated by early autobiographies that do not meet the criterion of shared authorships, such as, for example, Hetherington’s Aboriginal queen of sacred song, Thonemann’s Tell the white man, or Lockwood’s I, the Aboriginal.⁷ Including them as Indigenous autobiographies is a matter of perspective because the issue of actual authorship was relatively unimportant in these earlier works. I have excluded them from this analysis because their
contexts of production and reception are too different from those that I wish to study.

Compared to authorship, genre is a more complex topic. Scholarly literature has applied more than 10 different genres to Indigenous autobiography: autobiography, autobiographical narrative, life history, life story, life writing, testimony, history, Indigenous history, oral history, auto-ethnography, and novel. Most of these genres closely relate to each other because they revolve around life experiences. Their differences, however, can be both subtle and substantial. While some stress the oral background of Indigenous autobiography, others heed the differences in the historical depth of a narrated life, stretching from aspects of a life to an entire life cycle. Further genres gauge a clear distinction between self-productions and ‘as-told-to’ stories. Yet, it is striking that, while (or exactly because) the autobiography is ranked as one of the most widely used genres, it is also one of the most fiercely criticised. While Rowse, Brewster, and Watson deploy the term autobiography, a considerable number of other researchers use other terms such as life history. Interestingly, this is not the case with the term biography. Moreton-Robinson, for example, prefers life writing and life ‘herstories’ to autobiography, considering that the Indigenous autobiographical self was not in any sense individualistic but relational, communal, and connected to others through spirituality and/or place. Westphalen holds that the term autobiography has tended to conceal the actual origin of Indigenous life histories, namely, the discourses of the Dreamings. In turn, Mudrooroo decried the autobiography as an individualistic and apolitical ‘battler genre’.

Conventional literary definitions of autobiography play a major role in this critique, referring in particular to the understanding that the autobiography presupposes a completely individualised self. From such a perspective, Indigenous autobiographies are indeed fundamentally different. They rest upon a distinctively oral background as well as a wealth of inter-generational story-telling networks. Their presentation is often dialogic rather than purely retrospective, taking the form of direct speech. They are often communal instead of entirely individual. All of this, however, does not mean that the term autobiography as such is unhelpful. For example, (Indigenous) feminist theorists have criticised and expanded the narrow focus on individualism. To me, then, the term autobiography is not necessarily a misnomer for Indigenous life narratives because it finally depends on how the genre itself is defined. Bearing this in mind, I adopt the following working definition: both autobiography and biography can at least be identified as distinct genres of Indigenous literature. While the autobiography is a life-narrative principally narrated by the protagonist(s), the biography is a life-narrative principally narrated about the protagonist(s).
In my bibliography, I do not distinguish between individualised and relational selves, dialogic and descriptive styles, or collaborative and independent works. Nor is it important whether a publication covers an entire life circle or focuses upon select aspects of a life. Furthermore, this bibliography includes published books and excludes manuscripts, journal articles, reports, and ethnographic field studies. I do not consider such forms to be equivalent to books, at least as far as public reception and marketing are concerned. The ‘Bulman Oral History Series’ are a special case. Although they are added to a separate rubric in the bibliography, they are not part of the sample underlying the statistics. All items included are authored or co-authored by an Indigenous person; authorship follows gender so that men’s autobiographies have to be authored by men. Indigenous autobiographies are sometimes a composition of different life stories of different protagonists. In this respect, they bear some similarities to related genres like family or community history. Nevertheless, such genres are different from autobiographies and thus excluded from the bibliography. This bibliography also does not include semi-autobiographies or autobiographical novels. In many cases, this bibliography draws upon the National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. It also takes into account similar bibliographies, such as those compiled by Heiss, Watson, and Schürmann-Zeggel. Lastly, no bibliography of Indigenous autobiographies should ever be considered definitive.

Retracing the history of Indigenous autobiographies

My goal, then, is to provide an overview. For this purpose, I explored approximately 400 books across different genres, published between 1950 and 2004, before selecting 177 which qualified as published autobiographies for analysis.

I make three general observations relating to authorship, genre, and increase:

(1) Authorship: The overall ratio between female and male authors is 3 to 2, meaning that women have authored around 60 per cent of the 177 books issued between 1950 and 2004. There are signs that this numerical imbalance corresponds to a broader pattern of Indigenous literature: in the survey To tell my story, around 66 per cent of Indigenous writers are female. Most of the autobiographies (98 per cent) were published in the period of self-determination (from the late 1960s onwards). Males prevailed by 55 per cent during the first phase, prior to 1988, while women dominated by 64 per cent during the second period. The Indigenous autobiography, it seems, has become a female-dominated genre. David Unaipon (1951) is the first male Indigenous autobiographer, and Theresa Clements (c 1954) is the first female.

(2) Genre: The bulk of Indigenous life writing is autobiographical (81 per cent). A more recent phenomenon, biographies did not gain a foothold until the
mid-1980s. In all, 38 per cent of Indigenous autobiographies are co-authored (‘as-told-to’ stories). Statistically, both these genres do not show any gender-based differentials. This means that, in contrast to the autobiography, the biography is neither a more male nor female genre and that co-authoring is not specifically gendered. Only anthologies (collections of several distinct contributors) are dominated by female authors (71 per cent).

(3) Increase: Measuring by decade-specific data, the number of publications has continuously increased since the 1960s. That is, the 1970s saw, in nominal terms, more publications than the 1960s, the 1980s saw more than the 1970s, and the 1990s saw more than the 1980s. The number in the 2000s will likely surpass the 1990s. While 6.8 books were published a year on average during the 1990s, 15.2 books were published a year during the period of 2000 to 2004. This steady increase also applies to co-productions and biographies.

In the case of co-authoring and production processes, these changes have been not only quantitative but also qualitative. As scholars such as Jones and McDonell have explored, there are now substantial discourses on how to collaborate, edit, and publish Indigenous autobiographies. This, along with the establishment of Indigenous publishers, has led many publishing houses to maintain Indigenous English and idiomatic styles of expression. Also, while many autobiographies were exclusively transcribed and edited by non-Indigenous persons, they are now increasingly co-produced by Indigenous persons, including My place, When the pelican laughed, or Auntie Rita. Together, these factors suggest a consistent progression of the Indigenous autobiography, due to the consistent increase in publishing in general and the numbers for co-productions and biographies in particular. The history of Indigenous autobiography has indeed followed a linear path of progression.

This history has, however, also been distinguished by uneven developments. I have ascertained two different phases in the evolvement of Indigenous autobiography: from 1951 to 1987 (20 per cent of all items) and from 1988 to 2004. This corresponds with the findings of other scholars such as Brewster and Olijnyk Longley, who also consider the late 1980s as a turning point. There may be at least three reasons for this: publications have increased enormously, the ‘publishing landscape’ has changed, and Indigenous autobiographies have started to acquire an international reputation.

(1) The Increase in Publications

In spite of the fact that published Indigenous autobiographies date from 1951, rapid expansion did not begin until the late 1980s, after when their growth was dramatic. But, unlike the decade-specific pattern, year-to-year data reveal an uneven growth rate characterised by four major peaks in publications (see Figure 1.1). The first of these occurred in 1977 and 1978, after the first Whitlam reforms,
such as the implementation of the (new) Australia Council, had taken effect. The second major peak occurred in the two years following the Bicentenary in 1988. The third occurred in 1995 between the Mabo judgment and the tabling of the Bringing them home Report. The final peak was in the year of the Sydney Olympic Games, 2000.

Figure 1.1: Diagram representing both graphically and numerically the number of male and female Indigenous autobiographies published per year. The lower two rows of the figure display the numerical data and form a ratio.

This evidence points to a likely correlation between periods of heightened socio-political activity and the rise in publications. Shoemaker has also identified such a nexus, and, indeed, the first wave of published Indigenous autobiographies appeared just at the threshold of what is now often perceived as creative period of change – the late 1960s. Political minorities, including Indigenous Australians, became (not least because of the then nation-wide political activism) increasingly vocal and, therefore, a subject of intense interest. Some 10 years later, the (anti-)celebrations of 200 years of settlement or invasion in 1988 generated a similar demand for Indigenous stories which publishers were eager to meet. Market demands, in other words, were not steady. Indigenous Australians had become increasingly visible. Audiences and writers followed the trend.
(2) Changes within the national market

The proliferation of Indigenous autobiographies has been closely intertwined with the nature of the publishers. In general, most items have been issued by either local presses or through self-publication, both of which have affected their reception. Significantly, none of the autobiographies that are part of the canon in inter/national scholarship has been published in either of these categories of press. Setting this aside, the publishing infrastructure surrounding Indigenous autobiography can be subdivided into Indigenous and mainstream publishers.

The most prolific publishers of Indigenous autobiographies are the two Indigenous presses, Magabala Books and Aboriginal Studies Press (ASP). The former was inaugurated in 1987, the latter in the 1960s. Though not Indigenous, the University of Queensland Press (UQP) – within the scope of its 1990-launched Black Writers Series – ranks third.

As for the mainstream field, four eminent publishing companies, including imprints, stand out: Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP), Allen & Unwin, Angus & Robertson, and Penguin. Together, they make up 20 per cent of the 177 published Indigenous autobiographies (see Figure 1.2).

![Figure 1.2: Pie chart displaying the relative proportions of the 177 published Indigenous autobiographies each publisher produced.](image)
Interestingly, Australian feminist presses have not played a significant role. Except for Spinifex Press, none of the major feminist presses, such as Sybylla Press, Women’s Redress Press, or Artemis Publishing, has issued Indigenous autobiographies. Other presses evidently also supported women’s autobiographies, but a possible correlation between the different gender ratios and a corresponding publishing policy demonstrated by these presses reveals a rather hazy picture: the different ratios in the publications of Magabala Books, ASP, and Penguin are too minuscule to draw any serious conclusion. In contrast, while FACP, Allen & Unwin, and UQP published significantly more female than male authors, Angus & Robertson in turn published twice as many male authors.

Mainstream and Indigenous publishers have both produced Indigenous autobiographies. This has not always been true, as the publishing landscape has changed drastically since the late 1980s. Firstly, Magabala Books and, shortly thereafter, the UQP Black Writers Series were established. This new infrastructure led to a proliferation of Indigenous autobiographies and culturally sensitive publishing. Secondly, by the late 1980s, Indigenous autobiographies increasingly attracted the attention of the mainstream publishing industry, presumably triggered by the success of *My place*. Whatever the different causes, two significant events occurred in the late 1980s: Magabala Books was founded, and Indigenous autobiographies entered a mainstream market and, thus, a new phase.

(3) The entry into an international market

When the 1980s, especially the Bicentenary, drew to a close, publications of Indigenous autobiographies became increasingly prolific. Since then they have flourished not only within Australia but overseas. Little, however, is known about this international reception and distribution.

International distribution can be analysed from two perspectives: reception, including both readership and scholarship, and the publication, including the translation. Both have seen an enormous expansion within the last two decades. In particular, increasing interest can be observed within the academic field. Indigenous autobiographies have become an intense subject of academic study, demonstrated by an increasing number of university theses. At Austrian universities alone, at least six have been written since 1998. Moreover, Rühl, Schürmann-Zeggel, Zierott, and Duthil have published their studies on Indigenous autobiographies. These monographs, however, have received only minor attention within Australia.

Indigenous autobiographies have also been taken on by overseas presses. The UK edition of *My place* was published by Virago Press, a leading publisher of women’s literature. The German translation, entitled *Ich hörte den Vogel rufen*, was published by the feminist press Orlanda Frauenverlag. The German version of Morgan’s *Wanamurraganya* was released by the mainstream Swiss company
Unionsverlag. The Finnish edition of Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t take your love to town, Bonalbon Musta Ruby*, was published by Kääntöpiiri, a Christian press. Long walk home, the German translation of *Follow the rabbit-proof fence*, was issued by mainstream publisher Rowohlt. It appears that, in overseas contexts, it is primarily mainstream and feminist presses that have published Indigenous autobiographies. The existence of such a strong commitment on the side of feminist publishing is in stark contrast to the situation in the Australian market. This contrast in part suggests why predominantly, if not exclusively, women authors have been published overseas.

Lastly, I would like to present a note on the complexity of translating Indigenous autobiographies. Translations are an unmistakable sign of success, but also pose a string of critical questions: How is it possible to properly consult with Indigenous authors once a text is rendered into an unfamiliar language? How can a distinctive speech pattern – like dialogic utterance – be maintained in a foreign language? For instance, *My place* was rendered into a very rough version of Northern German, which sounds extremely artificial to most German speakers. To mention yet another difficulty, the German equivalent of race, *Rasse*, denotes a purely biological conception of race. Meanwhile, *Rasse* has become an indubitably racist word that is either substituted for ethnicity (*Ethnizität*) or avoided completely. Ethnicity, however, does not correspond with current discourses on race and racisms in Australia. How, then, does one translate this word?

**Conclusion**

Published Indigenous autobiographies span five decades, during which they have undergone some drastic changes. They have changed from ‘male’ to ‘female’, from ‘local’ to ‘global’, and from the ‘margins’ to the ‘mainstream’. Particularly since the Bicentenary, they have seen several decisive increases in publication. As I have argued, the late 1980s indeed marks a watershed in the history of published Indigenous autobiography, separating two different phases from one another, and it is in the second phase that they have became an internationally recognised phenomenon.
Table 1: Extended Bibliography (1951-2004)

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<td>Sykes/F</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Muir/F</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalarimeri/M</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Ngarta et al./ F</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decker* F</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Schilling/F</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havnen/M &amp; F</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Tovey/M</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holt/M</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Wilson* M</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latham/M</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Wyllie/F/ B</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Annotation to coding:** F(emale) and M(ale) refer to the gender of main author. If not indicated as B (= biography), all items are autobiographies. Asterisk* after name means ‘as-told-to’ story or editor/transcriber/assistant is named as additional author. All borderline cases (history/semi-autobiography) are italicised. Joint productions (anthologies) are underlined. Roberta Sykes is included. Mudrooroo has been omitted.
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ENDNOTES

1 I thank Peter Read for his feedback on the earlier version of this article. I am also grateful to Frances Peters-Little, Jackie Huggins, and Maria Preethi Srinivasan for expanding my thinking on Indigenous autobiography.

2 This paper is based on a fuller empirical documentation, see Haag 2006. In stark contrast to articles and theses, little monographic literature addresses Indigenous (Australian) autobiography. Brewster 1996 is hitherto the only Australian-originated book entirely devoted to the topic. Other books, such as McCooey 1996, Attwood and Magowan 2001, and Grossman 2003 deal only partially with published Indigenous autobiographies. See Rowse 2004 for an assessment of this literature.

3 Production-Authorship refers to the relation between single- and co-authored items.

4 This study uses a plenitude of interviews conducted with Indigenous writers. See Heiss 2003: 26.

5 The current definition of an Indigenous person is threefold: descent, self-identification, and community acceptance. See Langton 1993: 29.

6 This includes Koolmatri/Carmen and Mudrooroo, but not Sykes. Koolmatri 1994 is a forged Indigenous woman’s autobiography. Heiss 2003: 8–9 does not include Sykes’ and Mudrooroo’s books in her bibliography. I include Sykes’ with a special annotation because the debates surrounding Sykes are not clear-cut.

7 Hetherington 1929; Thonemann 1949; Lockwood 1962.

8 Due to length restrictions, I cannot reference all these cases. For a fuller survey, see Haag 2006: 14-15. A few examples should suffice. For fiction, see Ferrier 1992; for lifestory, see Phillips 1997: 40.

9 There is no consistent definition and usage of these genres in international scholarship. Often, life story and oral history are understood as an account of select life experiences. See Brettel 1997: 224, 227.
Hamilton 1990, however, regards oral history as a form of autobiography. Life history in turn is often seen as an ‘as told to story’. See Angrosino 1989: 3; Geiger 1986: 336. For a discussion of these terms in the Australian context, see Shaw 1982-1983.

11 See Moreton-Robinson 2002: 1, 16.
13 See Mudrooroo 1990: 14-15, 149, 158-161, 163.
15 See Anderson 2001: 86; Blackburn 1980: 133-134.
16 These are 13 booklets (between seven and 19 pages in length), all published in 1995 by Barunga Press. They are transcribed and co-authored by Cowlishaw. Including them would falsify the statistics due to their arithmetic extremes (that is, their shortness and the circumstance of their having been published by the same press within a group project).
18 Unless otherwise indicated, the findings are taken from the extended bibliography.
19 This survey is based upon the responses of 215 Indigenous writers. It shows women dominating most genres, including family history and academic writings. See Cooper et al. 2000: 3, 12, 42.
20 For this policy, see Anderson 2000: 431-432. Rowse 2004 discusses the usefulness of a periodisation of Indigenous autobiographies along the policies towards Indigenous peoples.
21 See Jones 2003; McDonell 2004.
25 This is the case not only with Indigenous autobiography but also with Australian non-fictional writing in general that has amassed throughout the last decades. Consequently, Indigenous autobiography should not be treated as an isolated phenomenon. See McCooey 2006: 26; Korporaal 1990: 12-13.
26 Statistically, the third of the three major Indigenous presses, IAD Press, including its imprint Jukurppa Books, has not been decisive as regards the autobiographical genre. For a good overview of publishers, see Heiss 2003: 51-65.
30 See Morgan 2002.
31 See Langford 2000.