From this point the themes already taken up by the Indigenous writers grow even more complex. Each scholar is seeking answers to questions about appropriate protocols in biographical writing that seem so straightforward in theory but sometimes so murky in practice. First, quoting Frances Peters-Little, Michael Jacklin notes the difficulty of deciding who or what is the community one is supposed to consult, and what the benefits may be to that community when the biographical project deals with only one individual. Ethical Clearance Committees, without whose approval no fieldwork is supposed to proceed from within a university, should be able to tell us. From my observations such Guidelines that seem so absolute and demanding on paper leave unexplored important ethical issues that researchers face in their practice. For instance, no Guidelines require a researcher, having presumably built a warm relationship with a biographical subject, to maintain that warm relationship after the biography is complete. How could they? Yet an ongoing relationship may well be desirable from the point of view of the subject. Again, a biographer writing about an indigenous person of the early nineteenth century, probably would not consider submitting a research plan for ethics clearance. Yet for a conscientious biographer, to carry out such work without informing that individual’s living descendants of the work in hand, would be unthinkable. So to literary studies. Michael Jacklin tells us that literary critics of indigenous texts are not required to consult with anyone. Until recently they have deliberately avoided speaking to an autobiographical author, not out of discourtesy, but because ‘at least since the poststructuralist overthrow of authorial intention, seeking elucidation of a text through interlocution through its author has had little credit’. He argues persuasively that critics should join oral historians and anthropologists and get out into the community.

But having consulted appropriately, Jacklin found himself with information that he did not need, and indeed, did not want to know. This happens frequently amongst biographers who consult widely, and the complex ethical issues that emerge are often difficult to disentangle. Nowhere is this dilemma expressed more acutely than in the anguished discussion of Kristina Everett. Her title encapsulates the problem neatly: ‘Too much information: when the burden of trust paralyses representation’. In one sense her problem is a new version of a familiar (but nonetheless difficult) conflict, that is, when the individual’s wishes
are at odds with those of many other community members. More seriously, as an anthropologist, Everett foresees that the act of editing and publishing the autobiography of her friend will create the potential for damage to a future claim by the author’s community and beyond for reparation for past injustices by the Australian state. Where does Everett believe her responsibilities lie? It is only in the final sentence of the last paragraph that we learn her decision.

Simon Luckhurst’s intriguing project carries the discussion in a different direction. From 3500 pages of personal documents ranging from diaries to bills, he seeks to create a biography or is it an autobiography of the Stolen Generations victim and children’s storyteller Pauline McLeod. Though his interventions are arguably much less intrusive than those of other biographers in this monograph, Luckhurst still feels the need to justify his editorial practices. At the outset, though, the documents were in the possession of Pauline’s brother Michael. Luckhurst needed Michael’s permission to begin, and presumably he will ask for comments, and perhaps permission to publish, at the end of the project.

In her biographical account of her husband Jimmy Pike, Pat Lowe follows the opposite tack. In describing her decision-making processes in preparing her biography of Pike as a young man, Lowe consulted no one, except, significantly, her own memories of what Pike had said or her feelings of what he would have wanted. Each possible inclusion required individual consideration. Some of Pike’s surprisingly frank accounts she or he had already published. Others she suspected might be at variance with the wishes or memories of his relatives. Quite possibly they might disagree amongst themselves. Reasoning that asking permission to publish certain accounts would imply a willingness to comply with the response, Lowe elected to consult nobody living. She took responsibility for her decisions about which stories to include and how to present them: ‘Despite my occasional misgivings about one story or another, I deliberately didn’t conceal anything, or dilute it to make it more acceptable, or try to explain it away’. The most controversial of Pike’s autobiographical stories, perhaps, is the brief account of how as a young man he pretended to ravish a younger cousin. He reportedly retold the story with humour rather than shame, so Lowe included the story. Lowe’s critics may insist on more contextual information about such stories and the circumstances of their retelling. They may reject altogether Lowe’s decision to include them. Nevertheless Lowe’s interesting defence of her editorial practice provides a further instance of the wide variety of ethical principles that guide biographers, in this case one who writes from the level of the personal knowledge and
intimacy that exists between husband and wife. She reveals the resolution of her dilemmas in ways that many biographers shirk or avoid discussing publicly for fear of critical censure.

The ethical, moral and practical issues of entering, not another life, but another-life-in-community are endless. In these last four papers we catch a glimpse of where ethically aware biographers have been travelling and what challenges they may face in the future.

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