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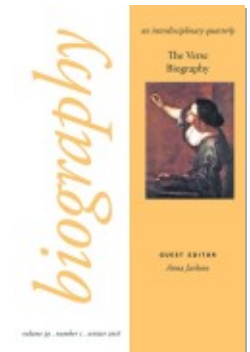
## The Verse Biography: Introduction

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## THE VERSE BIOGRAPHY: INTRODUCTION

ANNA JACKSON

Biographers themselves have described their art as the search for the subject's "inner life and the scenes that depict it" (Geoffrey Scott, 1925), "the pure essentials—a vivid image . . . without explanations, transitions, commentaries or padding" (Lytton Strachey, 1931), "a happy precision, a pithy brevity, a condensed argumentativeness" with "no fretting away of the portrait in over-multiplicity of lines and strokes" (John Morley, 1877) (qtd. in Nadel 62, 65, 41). Victorian biographers referred to Plutarch's observation, in his introduction to his life of Alexander, that "a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall" (qtd. in Nadel 18). As Ira Nadel argues in his 1984 study *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (from which these quotes come), any biography can only be "an ironic fiction, since no life can ever be known completely, nor would we want to know every fact about an individual. Similarly, no life is ever lived according to aesthetic proportions" (100). Aesthetic proportions, precision, brevity, a simplicity of lines, gaps, leaps, and the revelation of character through the telling detail: the art of biography is already sounding indistinguishable from poetry.

Biographies can be written in many forms—the theatre has been producing biographical dramas since before Shakespeare's *Richard III*, cinema offers the biopic, the literary graphic novel quickly gave rise to graphic biography. Many of the concerns of biography, and their changing aspects over time, can be usefully examined across formal boundaries. At the same time, the forms in which biographies are written have their own "affordances," to follow the lead of Caroline Levine in borrowing this design term, describing "the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs," to look at the impact of form on literary works. While Levine herself largely focuses on the operations of social and cultural forms, the examples she uses to illustrate "the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford" include the rhymed couplet, the sonnet, and the triple-decker novel:

What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet *capable* of doing? Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities. Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation and memorization. . . . The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, “a moment’s monument,” while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. (6)

Likewise, a verse drama is going to have a different range of emphases, a different cast of characters, and a different narrative trajectory than a graphic or a prose biography. The set of essays in this Special Issue looks at how biographical concerns are shaped by the form of what might be called verse biography, by analogy with the term verse novel. Just as the verse novel is more usually written today in free verse, without meter or rhyme, so too the verse biography is typically written in various forms of free verse, but the term can usefully describe a sequence of poems concerned with the representation of a biographical subject. Like all biographers, verse biographers must make selections, portray character, and construct a narrative; must balance aesthetic considerations with considerations of accuracy and completeness; must decide on how much interpretation to offer, what sort of transitions are necessary, what structure best organizes the material. Like all biographers, too, the verse biographer is inevitably involved, more or less deliberately and consciously, with the representation of self. These essays look at the effect that writing the biography in the form of poetry has on these considerations.

The last two decades have seen a significant number of major verse biographies published. Ruth Padel’s 2009 *Darwin: A Life in Poems* has received considerable critical attention, not only as a collection of poetry but, as Richard Holmes puts it in a *Guardian* review, “a complete miniature biography of the great man.” With its “unique sense of drama, speed and poetic intensity,” Holmes suggests, this collection might represent “a new species of biography.” If it is a new species, however, it is a new species with a sizeable population, including Jane Holland’s *Boudicca* (2006), Craig Raine’s *History: The Home Movie* (1994), Robert Sullivan’s *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002), Chris Orsman’s *South* (1996), Marilyn Nelson’s *Carver* (1997), Jordie Albiston’s *The Hanging of Jean Lee* (1998) and *The Book of Ethel* (2013), Ed Sanders’s *Chekhov* (1995) and *The Poetry and Life of Allen Ginsberg* (2000), Chris Tse’s *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (2014), and Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade* (2015). Anne Carson’s 1995 “The Glass Essay” can be read as a verse biography of Emily Brontë. Even the species made up of verse biographies of Charles Darwin has several members of the population, with Emily Ballou’s *The Darwin Poems* and Kelley Swain’s *Darwin’s Microscope* both published, like Padel’s *Darwin*, in 2009, and Claire Orchard’s 2016 collection

*Cold Water Cure* similarly—and quite independently—constructed around a series of poems taking Darwin’s life and writings as a starting point.

Yet Richard Holmes, who is himself, of course, an acclaimed, and inventive, biographer, is unusual in reading verse biography in terms of biography, even if he doesn’t recognize it as belonging to an emerging genre of verse biography. So Robert Winder, reviewing *History: The Home Movie* in 1994, discusses it in terms of its pretensions as a novel (“in these novel-gazing times, anything goes,” Winder worries), the collection having been entered for the Booker Prize (though it failed to make the shortlist). Anne Carson’s “The Glass Essay” has been written about in terms of the long poem, the verse novel, the narrative poem, and the essay (see D’Agata and Tall; Rae; Joshua Wilkinson), while Dorothy Porter’s *Akhenaten* is typically discussed alongside her other verse novels as a verse novel (see Pollnitz, Addison).

This issue of *Biography* seeks to open up the study of the verse biography as a critical field. As such, it is wide-ranging in approach, looking not only at full length verse biographies but at a range of forms including the dramatic monologue, the portrait, the sequence within a collection, and the mythography, or auto-mythography of Tusiata Avia’s *Bloodclot*. Anne Carson’s *Nox* is at once a biography of her brother, a translation of the Catullus elegy for his brother, an autobiography, and a dictionary, an act of lexicography. Helen Rickerby writes as a practitioner about her own poetic sequence, “Artemisia Gentileschi, 1593–1642,” which is included in her 2008 collection *My Iron Spine* along with another extended sequence, “Empress Elisabeth,” about Elisabeth Wittelsbach, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary, and many dramatic monologues, portraits, and other forms of biographical poetry. Jessica Wilkinson looks at how important the verse biography has been as a form of feminist revisioning of history, as it has been of course for Helen Rickerby along with Stephanie Hemphill, Jordie Albiston, and Susan Howe; we might also think of Margaret Atwood’s *Journals of Susannah Moodie*, Stephanie Bolster’s *White Stone: The Alice Poems*, Pascale Petit’s *What the Water Gave Me: Poems After Frida Kahlo*, or Margarita Engle’s *The Firefly Letters: A Suffragette’s Journey to Cuba*.

Biography is a form of history, and as such, carries political weight, as Robert Sullivan acknowledges and examines in his essay for this issue on the political context of biographical writing by Māori and Pasifika poets. For women Pasifika poets the political charge their poetry carries can be particularly fraught, as well as empowering, and the distinctions between history, biography, and autobiography impossible to maintain. Karlo Mila’s *Dream Fish Floating*, Leilani Tamu’s *The Art of Excavation*, and Teresia Teaiwa’s *Searching for Nei Nim’anoa* combine lyricism, political opinion, personal stories, and an investigation into the stories of others and a refusal to maintain silence. This

is a combination that can at times be challenging in a Pacific context where, as Leilani Tamu has said, culture, oral history, and story-telling exist in unison and play an instrumental role in shaping the power dynamics that govern what is considered to be “appropriate” discourse for women in both public and private spaces.<sup>1</sup>

Leilani Tamu talked about these issues in a Talanoa on Pasifika Women Poets and Biography, organized by Tulia Thompson, as part of a conference on verse biography, *Truth or Beauty: Poetry and Biography*, at Victoria University of Wellington in November 2014. All the papers in this issue have been developed from presentations originally given at this three-day conference, organized by Helen Rickerby, Angelina Sbroma, and myself.<sup>2</sup> As well as the papers presented in this journal, the conference gave rise to an anthology of biographical poems, and two special issues of the Melbourne-based literary journal of nonfiction poetry, *Rabbit*, one on biographical poetry and one on poetic autobiography. Later in this year, a book, *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, co-edited by Helen Rickerby, Angelina Sbroma, and myself, will be published by Victoria University Press. This book focuses on collections of poetry that can more strictly be defined as verse biography, as the genre begins to take shape not only in terms of a defined form but in terms of an emerging cultural practice. The genre of verse biography in these countries can be read in relation to the tradition of the long poem in Canada and the prominence of the verse novel in Australia, the influence of Canadian and Australian practices on New Zealand writing, and the effects of creative writing higher degrees and their requirements in all three countries.

This collection is concerned primarily with questions of form, and the ways in which poetry necessarily approaches biography differently from the conventional biography in prose. While biographers, as we have seen, may describe their approach to life writing in terms more commonly associated with poetry, and while a collection of poetry like Ruth Padel’s *Darwin* may be described as “a complete miniature biography,” there are, nevertheless, interesting points of tension between the demands of biography as a genre and poetry as a form. While Hermione Lee, in her *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, notes that there are many exceptions to all the “rules” of biography, nevertheless most contemporary biographies *do* aim to cover, if not the “whole life,” the life of the subject from birth to death, with the most significant events treated in some detail; the biography need not be written in prose, as we have seen, yet the “authorized” or “standard” biography of a public figure is unlikely to be the graphic novel or verse biography version. Biography may be concerned with a subject’s “inner life” or with portraying “character,” yet the method depends on recounting facts, events, and anecdotes,

with interpretative narrative and analysis (6–18). If not a “rule” of biography, biographers *do* usually work with archival material and have a responsibility to note sources and verify facts, a responsibility that is very much the focus of biographers’ own accounts of their work: James Clifford gives a wonderful account in *From Puzzles to Portraits: Problems of a Literary Biography* of the lengths he went to when tracking down manuscripts mentioned in a footnote, while Hermione Lee’s *Virginia Woolf’s Nose: Essays on Biography* is concerned, amongst other things (such as the nose), with evaluating the various sources regarding Jane Austen’s health, looking in detail at the evidence for one fainting episode that “no biographer of Jane Austen leaves out” yet which every biographer has treated differently and for which there is little reliable evidence at all (83, more generally 77ff). While there is no rule for a biography’s length, the typical biography remains a substantial volume: Hermione Lee’s *Edith Wharton* is 851 pages long; Jonathan Bates’s *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* may be unauthorised but is similarly magisterial, at 672 pages; Lyndall Gordon’s *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* is 752 pages; Claire Tomalin’s *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* is 316 pages long and her *Charles Dickens: A Life* 536 pages. All contain photographic plates, notes, and an index.

To begin with the most immediate difference between prose biographies and verse biography, we don’t even need to lift the books off the shelves. Even book-length verse biographies are short: Tusiata Avia’s *Bloodclot* is 80 pages long, Jordie Albiston’s *The Book of Ethel* 68 pages, Dorothy Porter’s *Akhenaten* 176 pages. The line breaks, stanza breaks, and spaces on the pages make the works shorter still, at once moving the narrative more rapidly on, and demanding a different sort of attention from the reader that may slow the reading down. Alice Oswald suggests space is as important to poetry as the words themselves: “One of the differences between poetry and prose is that poetry is beyond words. Poetry is only there to frame the silence. There is silence between each verse and silence at the end.” Biographers have become more open about acknowledging the necessary silences in their own accounts of their subjects’ lives. As Hermione Lee puts it, “Biographies . . . are full of things that aren’t there: absences, gaps, missing evidence” (*Virginia Woolf’s Nose* 5). But even when the absences are observed, the very observation of them becomes part of the interpretation and analysis that fills the silence with prose. In contrast, much of the work of the verse biography is in the unfilled silence, the absence of interpretation.

Jessica Wilkinson observes the work that visible gaps on the page perform, as part of the layout of Jordie Albiston’s poetry in her verse biography *The Book of Ethel*, and connects these formal gaps with the gaps of interpretation and detail she finds highlighted in feminist verse biographies generally.

Even Stephanie Hemphill's inclusion of biographical notes in her verse biography of Sylvia Plath, Wilkinson suggests, "do not really fill in the 'blanks' that bloom in the wake of the poems" but rather offer further juxtapositions pointing to gaps between different facts, details, accounts, and voices (7). Joan Fleming similarly sees Anne Carson's *Nox* as constructed around absence, not only the absence of her brother but absences of interpretation and narrative coherence. Summarizing Anne Carson's own account of the writing process, Fleming describes her early attempts to write her brother's life as having "collapsed him down into a stingy darkness," and the possibility of light only coming "when she resists this collapsing motion by mobilizing her elegy to ask questions about the very nature of history and biography itself" (68). Verse biography, like psychoanalysis, not only begins with questions rather than answers, but always turns back towards questions, away from answers. In a Māori context, Robert Sullivan observes, the open space of poetry might be read in terms of "the courtyard fronting the meeting house complex, which is the ritual domain of encounter between host and visitor groups" (93). Sullivan explains that since "The Open or the Ātea in this marae context belongs to the domain of the deity of humanity, Tūmataurangi, who is also the war deity," this space offers us either "the possibility of enhancing or undermining human relations." This open space is, therefore, a political space, in its very openness, since "the ātea is where one brings one's story" (93–94).

Whether the openness of this encounter is brought to the poetry by the reader, or is an aspect of the poetry's own construction, is a contested question. Margarete Rubik's provocative essay "In Deep Waters. Or: What's the Difference between Drowning in Poetry and in Prose?" presents a range of textual extracts and invites the reader to determine which are poetry, which are fiction. As she has set them all out with line breaks, and without stanza breaks, it proves difficult to tell, and the indeterminacy is unsettling. All can be read with the attention the reader might bring to poetry, even if most might ordinarily be read as part of an extended fictional narrative. Yet what invites the reader to read the fiction extracts as poetry is, in fact, an aspect of form. Even if not written as poetry, the extracts have been set out as poetry, with the concision, the line breaks, and the absence of closure or narrative context, all of which characterize the contemporary lyric. Lyric is the term Rubik uses, and the term that most usefully describes contemporary poetry, even though it may seem an odd term to use to theorize verse *biography*, given that biography itself is a narrative genre and the essays in this collection look at dramatic monologues, portraits, and most typical of the verse biography, narrative *sequences*. The lyric has become the dominant mode of contemporary poetry precisely as narrative has moved on to prose (and now television



and cinema). Nevertheless, the essentially anti-narrative features that characterize the lyric—described by Ian Rae as “short, concise and characterised by radical associative leaps and abrupt shifts in perception” (*From Cohen to Carson* 10)—are what, in turn, account for the particular ways narrative is constructed in verse biography and the poetic sequence more generally.

Airini Beatrais looks in detail at this question of how narrative can be constructed in poetic sequences in her essay for this collection, “Automythography” in *Poetry: Tusiata Avia’s Bloodclot*. She finds useful the term “segmentitivity,” proposed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and developed by Brian McHale. While segmentitivity can be found in other forms of writing—the chapters of a biography, the scenes and episodes of a television series—poetry is characterized by particular forms of segmentitivity, the line break defining each line as a “segment” of writing, the stanza break making further discrete units, and the sequence of poems itself making a “segment” of each individual poem. This is another way of calling attention to the gaps, the juxtapositions, and “the associative leaps and abrupt shifts in perception” that can be found not only in individual lyric poems but can be seen to structure the verse biography as a sequence. McHale deliberately moves beyond the concept of the lyric, using segmentitivity as a way of thinking beyond the lyric moment, looking at the ways in which *all* poetry, whether lyric or not, might be read, to quote Du Plessis, as defined by its “bounded units . . . operating in relation to . . . pause or silence” (qtd. in McHale 14). Other aspects of the lyric, however, can also be seen in play in the verse biography, and structure the particular relation we find in these works between part and whole, self and other, poet and biographical subject.

The importance and the strangeness of the lyric address—often, as Jonathan Culler observes, to birds, clouds, urns, or otherwise unresponsive figures—takes on a particular resonance in verse biography. Many biographers, of course, are aware of the impossibility of the relation between biographer and biographical subject; indeed, Janet Malcolm characterizes Anne Stevenson’s biography of Sylvia Plath, *Bitter Fame*, as “being as much about the problems of biographical writing as about Sylvia Plath” (17). But the closeness—and distance—between the writer and the subject often affects the verse biography at a more structural level, while giving rise, too, to sometimes startling flourishes. If writing about the biographical subject is often a way of exploring aspects of the self, in the verse biography this identification can structure a whole collection, as when Tusiata Avia writes of Nafanua in the third person, as a way of telling refracted versions of stories from her own life. The mirroring relationship between Nafanua and the poet herself is set up in an early pair of poems, “Nafanua is the goddess of war” and “Nafanua



is a girl from Aranui.” Likewise, when Francis Webb writes about St Francis, he writes from a position not only of identification with St Francis but also with the Leper whom St Francis embraced; the Leper representing, Webb explained, “‘my kind of guilt’ as he transforms from the bitter, ulcerous outcast to being ‘Forgiven, forgiven. / Forgiven by the road’” (qtd. in Davidson 53). The story Webb tells of St Francis and the Leper borrows, as Toby Davidson recounts, from “Webb’s own personal experience of sores, flies, and accepting a lift from a stranger while hiking to the New Norcia Monastery in Western Australia around this time” (53).

The bringing together of different timescapes in both Francis Webb’s and Tusiata Avia’s poetry fits with Jonathan Culler’s recognition of the relation between the complexity of the lyric address—and the identity of the lyric speaker—with the way lyric poetry works with a particular kind of lyric time. It is this, he suggests, that distinguishes the lyric from dramatic monologue. The lyric poem brings events into a performative present that transcends the evocation of a particular situation, just as lyric subjectivity transcends the “fictional representation of a possible real-world speech act” (112). Thus, a poet like Hone Tuwhare, whose most well-known poem, in true lyric fashion, addresses rain, when he writes in the first person as master carver Hone Taiapa might also be writing about the carving of poetry. As Robert Sullivan points out, carving itself carries complex resonances of homage and identity: “The chips Tuwhare refers to are partly the shavings from wood-carvings, partly the excess wordage from the process of composition. In the traditional wood-carving context, the chips represent a mirror-image of the figure being carved—often a significant ancestor or a deity” (105). The turn, at the end of the poem, when the carver addresses the poet himself—“Bite on this hard, poet: and walk careful”—might recall the moment in a poem as early as Sappho’s “Ode to Aphrodite” when the goddess speaks back to Sappho herself.

It is this relation between the writer and subject, or autobiography and biography, as well as between the historical time of the biographical narrative and the present time of the lyric moment that distinguishes the verse biography from bio-fiction. Given the frequency with which the verse biographer writes in the first person from the point of view of the biographical subject, the growing field of bio-fiction studies is certainly likely to prove useful for theorists of verse biography, and would be a promising direction for further work on verse biography to take. Yet the use of the first person must also be understood in lyric terms, and as an effect of taking a poetic approach to biography. Where bio-fiction is grounded in the realization of *setting*, both in terms of place and time, the setting of verse biography tends to be more complicated, with Nafanua, for instance, existing both on a mythological plane

and in the present day Aranui, Christchurch. As Anne Carson has said, “Lyric attempts to enter so deeply into history at a particular point that time stops” (“Poetry” 57). Even in the lyric sequence—or the verse biography—we might understand the focus on the detail, and the bringing together of autobiography and biography, present and past, in these terms. In a study of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Sharon Cameron expands on this idea of lyric time, explicitly to *distinguish* lyric poetry from the operation of sequence in narrative: “If a poem denies the centrality of beginnings and ends, if it fails to concern itself with the accumulated sequence of a history, it must push its way into the dimensions of the moment, pry apart its walls and reveal the discovered space there to be as complex as the long corridors of historical and narrative time. For the moment is to the lyric what sequence is to the story” (qtd. in Rae, *From Cohen to Carson* 12–13).

In Anne Carson’s *Nox*, the capacity of language to open up the moment is foregrounded with the inclusion of dictionary entries for every word of Catullus’s elegy for his brother, the dictionary entries offering resonant commentaries on the interwoven story of Carson’s own brother, opening up the moment of reading the Catullus poem to the whole weight of linguistic possibilities that themselves offer glimpses down the corridors of linguistic history. Even a biographical sequence as focused on story as Helen Rickerby’s *Artemisia Gentileschi*, a sequence that brilliantly answers Geoffrey Scott’s search for a biography of “the inner life and the scenes that depict it” (qtd. in Nadel 62), or Lytton Strachey’s ideal biography of “the pure essentials—a vivid image . . . without explanations, transitions, commentaries or padding” (qtd. in Nadel 65), nevertheless works through the expanded reflection on moments of time. Each poem looks at a scene from one of Gentileschi’s paintings, to expand on the meaning of that moment depicted through its relation to the moment of composition in the context of earlier and later moments from Gentileschi’s life. Although we do not see, here, that movement between biographical subject and the poet as autobiographer, the sequence itself explores exactly these kinds of links between Gentileschi’s artworks and her own life, so that we are invited to recognize her identification with Judith when she paints her “with calm / precision” slicing off the head of Holofernes, who “bears a striking resemblance / to Tassi” (“Judith Slaying Holofernes, 1612–1613,” lines 7–8, 17–19). The implication that we might equally imagine Helen Rickerby identifying with Gentileschi’s relish of Judith’s act of violence is supported by the place of this sequence amongst a collection of poems imagining other women’s lives, autobiographical poems with a similar precision and focus on telling moments, and poems which bring together the figure of the poet with historical subjects imagined entering the poet’s own life: “Retail therapy with

Artemisia Gentileschi,” for instance, contrasts the poet’s search for something black to wear with Gentileschi’s rush to color.

One of the arguments Jonathan Culler makes against reading the lyric as dramatic monologue, or as the fictional speech-act of an imaginary character, is the role of allusion in lyric poetry. It is interesting in this context to read Rickerby’s account of her use of biography as *intertext*:

I was using lives as intertexts, in the same way I have used myths and fairy tales, characters from novels, and phrases from other poems. Intertexts, being intersections and conversations between one text and another, can bring the resonance and richness of the text alluded to. They can add layers of meaning, and like hypertext, they act as little doors into other, generally larger, spaces. (24)

Even when we do, in verse biography, have historical figures speaking in words that they never actually spoke (so that we do, in fact, have fictional speech-acts of biographical subjects imagined as characters), not only do the poems themselves often work with allusion to suggest their relation with other works in the lyric tradition, but as we see here, biography as the subject of the poem can *itself* be understood simply as another form of intertext. Its importance is in the lyric play of the layers of meaning it allows, the possibilities biography opens up for identification and expansion of subjectivity, the bringing into the present tense historical moments of time to reveal their discovered spaces.

A more radical attention to language and the poem as artifice can be seen in the works examined by Jessica Wilkinson and Erin Scudder. Susan Howe’s poems are so radical in their employment of language as material that, as Wilkinson explains, “The reader is ‘torn’ between appreciating the text as an object to be admired and attempting to reweave these threads into comprehensible sentences with a recognizable syntax” (13). These are poems less about the biographical subject, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, herself, than about biographical unknowability, absence, and the interpretation of biographical traces. Erin Scudder looks at biographical poetry in relation to the idea of the portrait, which, she suggests, is unlike biography—but like the lyric—in being concerned with “a single, suspended moment in time” (35). The most conventional literary “portrait” of Mae West she looks at in fact fails to inhabit such a lyric moment, whereas the more language-oriented portrait offers what she also finds in Salvador Dalí’s radically experimental “Mae West’s Face Which May Be Used as a Surrealist Apartment” (1934–35). Paisley Rekdal’s “Self-portrait as a Mae West One-Liner,” which plays anagrammatically with the title of West’s best-known film, *I’m No Angel*, becomes, like the Dalí “portrait,” a work of art to be inhabited by the reader, a work without chronology or narrative, which dissolves into detail the closer the focus. In its deconstruction of

a speaking voice, and resistance to being read as the expression either of the poet or subject, it might be read as anti-lyric as readily as in lyric terms. From the point of view of verse biography, it is interesting to explore the furthest, experimental reaches of the direction poetry moves biography—away from narrative into the opening up of time, inviting the reader to step in, and drawing attention to the work as an artistic construction, a work of language, at the same time as the portrait of the other becomes a “self-portrait” of the writer.

Representing the first sustained study of verse biography as a genre, this collection examines the verse biography in relation to issues of representation, narrativity, and identity, in relation to related literary forms, in relation to politics, and in consideration of the purposes the genre might serve. Jessica Wilkinson’s survey of three feminist approaches to verse biography, from the relatively conventional verse biography of Sylvia Plath by Stephanie Hemphill to the more experimental approach of Susan Howe, serves as an introduction to Helen Rickerby’s discussion, as a practitioner, of the feminist poetics of her own verse biography sequence. Erin Scudder’s examination of more radical approaches to the possibilities of portraiture, in both the visual arts and biographical poetry, follows nicely on from Rickerby’s examination in her essay of the continuities between more classical portraiture and biographical poetry, and the ways in which the lyric sequence extends and alters the possibilities of portraiture. Where Scudder looks at the relation between verse biography and the portrait, Toby Davidson looks at Francis Webb’s long engagement with the dramatic monologue. Joan Fleming examines the biographical and autobiographical elements of Anne Carson’s *Nox*, a work which—like all her works—crosses multiple genre boundaries and opens up possibilities for thinking about the relations between poetry, biography, the resources of language, translation, empathy, and identity. Airini Beauvais’s analysis of Tusiata Avia’s *Bloodclot* in terms of narrative theory offers useful terms for thinking about the sequential aspects of verse biography—beyond the portrait—and how narrative itself might be figured differently in poetry. Finally, Robert Sullivan’s essay on Polynesian poetics and the concept of *collective* biography returns us to questions of politics, while also opening up further ways of thinking about subjectivity, empathy, poetry as open space, and poetic—and biographical—*purpose*.

Each of these approaches offers an introduction to ways of reading verse biographies that could be developed by other scholars working in the field. In addition, there are other avenues of study yet to be undertaken, or yet to be collected in volume form, some of which we saw introduced at the *Truth or Beauty* conference. Our own study, *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, will look at nine particularly important verse

biography collections that can be understood as representing the beginning of verse biography becoming established as a genre in these countries, and the emergence of a canon of verse biography with a significant relation to the national canons. Obviously further work could be done on the verse biography in other countries, where it will take different forms, respond to different influences, and have various political and literary meanings, while sharing some of the constraints and possibilities of genre and form. There is work that might be done too on the relation between verse biography and history, and the role of verse biography in revisioning history, recovering facts, changing the record, shifting emphases, and reclaiming forgotten voices. While lyric theory is important in considering the particular form biography takes in *poetry*, there is theory to be developed about verse biography as narrative, considering aspects of world-building, the construction of setting, the management of incidental detail, and the different approaches that might be taken to historical and geographical accuracy. The forms of research undertaken by the verse biographer would reward further study, examining the use of archives and the use of secondary sources. The question of perspective and voice requires further thought, along with the relation between verse biography in the first person and bio-fiction, and the different effects and implications of first- and third-person narration in verse biography. How do these issues relate, in turn, to third-person *autobiography* in poetry, as we see in, for instance, Anne Kennedy's *Sing-Song*, or Paula Green's *Slip Stream*? The repeated metaphors of masks, palimpsests, and ghosts in verse biography also open up possibilities for research. Australian poet Libby Hart, who takes on the voices of a wide range of personae in "This Floating World," describes one of the characters in this work as "a ghost who sees its future" (68). What makes biography spectral? We hope this issue of *Biography* gives a sense of how wide-ranging and exciting verse biography is as a genre, and will open up the area of verse biography for further study. The work represented here is just the beginning.

## NOTES

1. Leilani Tamu, initially speaking at the Talanoa on Pasifika Women's poetry, Victoria University November 2014. The wording here is Leilani's, after an email exchange, February 2016.
2. The full program, which can still be accessed at *Truth or Beauty: Poetry and Biography*, includes readings and discussion panels, as well as papers on the use of archives and images in verse biography, biographical poetry in programmable media, dramatized poetry, and collaborative verse biography projects. Issues that were explored included the role of research in verse biography, the relation between biography and autobiography, the representation of living people, relations, and friends, and the ethics of biography and literary art.

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