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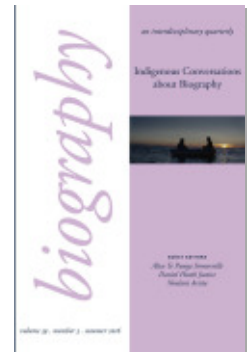
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INTRODUCTION: INDIGENOUS CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BIOGRAPHY

ALICE TE PUNGA SOMERVILLE AND DANIEL HEATH JUSTICE

This is a conversation about Indigenous lives, the ways we understand them, the ways we represent them, and the responsibilities that come from doing this work in a good way. And this is just a beginning. We are honored to welcome you to this special issue of *Biography*, and to the Indigenous scholars, artists, and visionaries who come together in community on the topic of Indigenous biography. Some of this diverse group of Indigenous thinkers came together in person in Mānoa Valley on the Hawaiian island of O‘ahu, traveling from the Indigenous territories claimed by New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States to take up the challenges, questions, concerns, and possibilities of representing Indigenous lives. Others have contributed commentaries on the ideas, questions, and concerns that emerged from those initial conversations. Together, this volume brings a trans-Indigenous, multidiscipline, multivocal community into expansive dialogue about what it means to think about Indigenous lives and what it means to *do* Indigenous biography.

INDIGENOUS?

Gone are the days when it was interesting to engage in long taxonomical discussions about what we are talking about when we talk about “Indigenous.” While the production and articulation of ethnic, racial, and Indigenous categories (subject positions, identities, etc.) are always deserving of further historicization and critical reflection, it is also important that Indigenous projects do not simply revert to definitional work, which still too often centers non-Indigenous and/or colonial concerns, critiques, and contexts. Questions such as “Isn’t everyone Indigenous?” and “Are these people really Indigenous?” are far less engaging than questions we get to ask once people who identify and are recognized by others as Indigenous get in a room and say, “Okay, what

shall we talk about?” This project is decidedly not an attempt to trace the scope, centers, or limits of Indigeneity. Rather, this journal issue is about what happens beyond those questions, particularly in relation to the theme of this issue: what interests *us* about Indigenous lives?

At the same time, it is always important to pay attention to matters of representation when it comes to Indigenous things. Diversity is a given in the lived realities of Indigenous experience, but those realities are often overshadowed by powerful non-Indigenous stereotypes about monolithic and singular Indigenous “culture.” To privilege a range of Indigenous voices and perspectives is to explicitly insist upon our contexts as the central structural ethos of this project. We are pleased that this volume reflects much of the range, strengths, and complexity of both historical and contemporary Indigeneity. While the conversation here is not held up as representative or exceptional (in the sense of including the only, or best, or elite participants, or in terms of including people from the only, or best, or elite Indigenous communities), and while it is certainly possible to point to other Indigenous sites and communities not represented on these pages, the diversity of Indigenous participants is an important element to the makeup of the people here: Indigenous affiliations, countries, and contexts in which they live, disciplinary training and positions, relationships to (and positions/experience in) the academy, and focus of scholarly work.

CONVERSATIONS?

The original impulse for this project came from an invitation issued by the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, which has generously provided intellectual, financial, editorial, and collegial support for the production of this special issue. In 2014 they asked us to consider editing a special issue of the journal *Biography* in 2016 after convening a workshop and public events in August 2015. (Historian Noelani Arista joined us as coeditor at that time, bringing an important disciplinary perspective to conversations too often limited to the literary. She has been a vital contributor to the scope, vision, and realization of this project.) All three coeditors were aware of other existing publications and ongoing projects about Indigenous biography, and this volume is intended to speak alongside and in dialogue with these. Our first response, however, was to think about a single project that focused on Indigenous people as the biographers rather than biographees: to focus on the things Indigenous people want to talk about when it comes to biography, rather than focusing on the

biographies of Indigenous people, which are too often studied for how they engage colonial subjects rather than for the ways they center their own contexts and concerns both within and beyond settler colonialism. We believed then—and, after working with these creative and compelling contributors for the past year, believe even more so now—that questions about biography posed by Indigenous people in conversation with one another offer something different and perhaps even transformative to the larger field of biographical studies.

This is particularly important given that the long history of Indigenous biography in the academy has been decidedly monologic. Indigenous lives have been the focus of Eurowestern interest since the rise of Eurowestern ethnography in the nineteenth century, but primarily as they either contested or, more often, seemingly confirmed the colonial presumption of vanishing cultures. In these accounts, White writers and scholars interviewed individual “native informants”—generally men, generally associated with forms of diplomacy or military prowess that seemed similar to those of European patriarchy, often converts to Christianity and/or assimilation programs—for insights into their fierce and/or noble cultures that were ostensibly fading away before the inevitable power of Anglo-European civilization. As such, the lives were instrumentalized for deeply ideological purposes—and purposes too often at odds with the living struggles and resistances of the peoples supposedly being represented. And for all that these were real lives lived and that the Indigenous people who participated in these projects did so for complicated and often very strategic reasons, the legacy of these works is quite mixed. When singular lives are taken out of communal contexts and then presented as though they exemplify the whole, we learn far more about the motivations and biases of the interviewers than the actual people under consideration. Such monologic approaches flatten out Indigenous subjectivities and reduce complex lives to one-dimensional types, and this never works to the benefit of living, dynamic Indigenous peoples and communities.

The idea of an actual conversation feels inclusive and generative, and is reflective of *actual* Indigenous experiences and lived realities. We hope this volume will be read as an invitation to converse rather than a description of a discussion to which readers can merely listen. This is not an exhaustive grouping or a narrow clique of Indigenous people talking in an echo chamber about biography. Other Indigenous people would surely add other things—perspectives, questions, starting points, and emphases—to the conversation started here. This is just one set of voices in conversation on

a topic of shared interest—a starting space of possibility, not an end point of asserted certainty. The prompt for this conversation was a series of questions that foregrounded the opening invitation and expansive scope for the conversations we wished to incite:

What conversations are Indigenous biographers interested in having about their work? What use do Indigenous scholars in a range of disciplines have for life writing? What does a biographical dimension add to broader research projects? What compels, underpins, and enables the production of biographies by Indigenous people who do not work as scholars in universities? How do Indigenous biographers engage the relationship between individual and collective lives? How do Indigenous conversations about life writing—writing about individual and collective lives—take place in a context in which the terms “Native” and “Indigenous,” and the conditions of many native language archives, have dictated that those “lives” are considered in often narrowly circumscribed frames, and especially as inherently collective? How do non-human and ancestral lives figure in Indigenous biographical work? What are the ethical considerations for Indigenous biographers, whether the subject is from their own community or another? What do conversations about collaborative community-focused biographical projects look like when “scholar” and “subject” are both Indigenous? What kinds of subjects, methods, accountabilities, and archives do Indigenous people who work with biography make visible? What are the priorities for Indigenous communities with regard to biographical work? How is the biographical conceived through different genres of chant, dance, and performance in and out of Indigenous language? How do Indigenous experiences and practices of translation challenge or extend the boundaries of “biography”? How might Indigenous scholars problematize the concept of “biography,” or “life writing,” across multiple oral and literary genres, and contexts?

The results of this conversation, as demonstrated in this special issue, are provocative, powerful, playful, and sometimes deeply personal, and they reflect on a wide range of concerns regarding the chronicling of Indigenous lives, especially the ethics and transformative possibilities of representation. Inevitably, the individual articles in this volume do engage specific lives and produce biographical work about specific individuals and communities. However, shifting the frame to a conversation *about* biography—rather than a small collection of discrete biographical pieces, or indeed, a series of abstracted discussions of biographical method—means there are substantive links between the articles. In this special issue we foreground conversation as a method of (collaborative) research. We encouraged further connection by pairing each participant with a colleague in the project whose work was different but demonstrated compelling affinities, and asked that they work with one another throughout the revision process. We followed this with requests for short responses from other Indigenous thinkers to keep the conversation going, and

its ripples expanding far beyond the focused set of voices at the center of this issue.

BIOGRAPHY?

Interestingly, the term “biography” has, in some “biographical” circles, fallen out of vogue in favor of “life writing”; biography can feel rather more prescriptively or clinically like a particular (literary/historical) form than a kind of project or approach. It is possible that the full lives of individual people, and a full range of forms and styles, can have room in a frame like “life writing”—(even if the term does, by its focus on *writing*, seem to exclude work such as that of Elle-Máijá’s celebrated film work and the storytelling on which Warren’s essay focuses). And the somewhat conventional—and sometimes problematic—aspects of some biographical work can also be pushed (or held) to the side when the term itself is not used. In this case, however, we decided to retain the term biography. Partly this was because that term is well known in Indigenous circles and one way to start a conversation is to use terminology that feels familiar. We can unpack, repack, and throw out terms once we’re at the table, but there is still life in this old term “biography” yet.

One of the things that came up over and over at the workshop was the idea that people hadn’t necessarily thought about their work in relation to biography (or as biographical work) until they were asked to participate in the project. We were insistent in planning the initial discussion that we go beyond the literary or historical to include thinkers and doers from other disciplines and approaches to Indigenous lives and representations. An interdisciplinary conversation offered a far more expansive conversation than was possible by focusing solely on the work of scholars in disciplines used to being at the center of biographical work. As a result, we found that biography supplied an additional perspective—or better, an additional series of questions—to work that was already being undertaken across a range of disciplines, contexts, and places.

Further, as noted above, participants gave significant attention to the issue of ethics. Given the vexed and vexing history in which Indigenous lives have been represented—most often by non-Indigenous editors, and very often to the detriment of the individuals and communities most intimately associated with the enterprise—contributors were deeply reflective about the consequences of their work and how they could do it with rigor and respect. Some contributors were explicit about these questions and put them at the center of the discussion, while others wove those conversations and concerns

into their comments, but all took seriously the potential impacts, both positive and negative, of representing Indigenous lives. And for some, what this means is questioning the entire enterprise of biography itself.

Of course, this is just a starting point: there are so many other questions we could ask about Indigenous lives. How, for example, might we think about biography in relation to various “fictional” Indigenous characters such as Tonto, the Lone Ranger’s stalwart Potawatomi (or Comanche or generic Indian) companion, other-than-human animals and the natural world, and divine/spiritual/ancestral figures? The stakes of these questions are high: as the issue goes to print, a robust and many-stranded Indigenous conversation is picking up in the Pacific in response to the depiction of the Polynesian ancestor/demigod Maui in Disney’s film *Moana*. Also at the same time, Australia has had to grapple with specific instances of mistreatment of Indigenous children in custody and detention, and Canada has asked questions about missing and murdered Indigenous women that are now under scrutiny in a national inquiry. The urgency of these issues—and there are so many more to which we could point—challenges those of us thinking about Indigenous lives to consider how our work contributes to an underpinning question: what is the value of an Indigenous life in a time of continuing settler-colonial policy and practice?

INDIGENOUS CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BIOGRAPHY

The eight substantive essays and sixteen response pieces in this special issue have been produced as a result of, enact, and seek to kick off conversations. Coeditors Alice Te Punga Somerville, Noelani Arista, and Daniel Heath Justice joined Tsianina Lomawaima, Warren Cariou, Ngarino Ellis, Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, Arini Loader, Shino Konishi, Jordan Wilson, and Deborah Miranda (on Skype) in the initial discussion at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. This was followed by months of conversations between paired contributors and the editors. As with all conversations, these unfolded over time and took unexpected twists and turns. Once the eight essays had emerged from several stages of face-to-face and online conversation, with Elle-Máijá’s becoming a multivocal conversation in its own right, it became possible to trace a number of experiences and ideas which resonated through several of them. Some of these were anticipated: the centrality of family relationships, dynamics of gender and class, the importance of place, intersections of specific lives with schools and research. Others became visible as the essays were read side by side: the specific significance of sibling relationships, the experience and work of silences, an insistence on thinking about our whole lives—including the mundane—rather than redacted snippets. We noted

that some of the essays directly position themselves in conversation with the author's own prior work (Tsianina and Elle-Máijá) and within ongoing local Indigenous scholarly conversations (Shino and Ngarino).

Toward the end of the process, a diverse community of Indigenous scholars and artists were invited to contribute responses to the eight core essays. These shorter pieces are by writers whose Indigenous and disciplinary roots are different from the author of the essay to which they respond, and respondents were invited to write in any form or style they chose. We believe these sixteen authors both provide a range of critical pieces that can be engaged on their own terms, and demonstrate what is possible when Indigenous scholars engage each other's work. Again the conversation kept folding back on itself, and it has been a thrill to see the resonances between scholars from vastly different contexts. In a text message sent the day after receiving the essay to which she responds, Natalie Harkin enthused: "This is no accident that Tsianina's paper is with me. So much synergy here I'm tingling all over." Nepia Mauika was invited to respond to Warren's essay on storytelling because of his interests in oral histories. Who could guess that he happened to have heard Dovie, the storyteller on whose work Warren focuses, tell the very story Warren engages? In an email, Nepia wrote: "I've met her on more than one occasion. So I knew everything Warren was writing about, including . . . her ability to connect with the audience (because I was one of those connections). I'd heard it myself." Summing up something we have felt throughout the project, he wrote: "This must have [been] meant to be. There are no coincidences!"

One of the delights of the issue is the playful approach that so many of the contributors brought to the topic, and to see how and what people write when they're not bound to the "essay" form in their responses. So many of these pieces push against genre expectations, and approach biography and one another's work through different forms and voices. Some are traditional essays; some are poems; some are conversations; some are letters; some combine elements of all of these and others. In every case, writers chose the form that seemed best to communicate their understandings and questions. Something happens when we approach an issue as a conversation where everyone is part of a relationship, rather than an argument with losers and winners. There's a lowering of defenses, an exploration of connections, an unfolding of possibilities. There's a willingness to try something different, to risk vulnerability, to be inspired to laugh together sometimes. Beyond book and film reviews or teaching, we so rarely have opportunities to just experience and engage with a colleague's work. When we allow ourselves that opportunity—and are encouraged to engage in that generous, generative way—we create something really special.

And here, too, we are our own readers. As Tina picks up in her response to Deborah's essay, Indigenous people often end up having to be explainers; but here, with eleven readers of eight essays and then sixteen more readers of each essay, we clearly demonstrate the potential of Indigenous scholarly conversations. Taking for granted that there are Indigenous readers of essays by Indigenous authors quietly sidesteps the dominant dynamic of scholarly conversations, in which non-Indigenous readers are the norm, and gently nudges claims that continue to be made in some Indigenous research contexts that certain kinds of publishing are not a priority because our research and thinking needs to be accessible to our communities—as if our communities are not present inside as well as beyond universities. Internationally, scholars have worked hard to create and nurture multiple connections between Indigenous sites: academic associations, conferences, symposia, research collaborations, institutes, publications, and so on. This ongoing and wide-ranging work, to which this volume seeks to contribute, enables the kind of intellectual engagement we believe is visible across these twenty-four pieces. But it also places pressure on the nation state as the base (or rational or only) unit for analysis of anything Indigenous. We are our own readers, but we also, through our reading across vast distances and multiple disciplines, produce the context in which we read.

We—all of us—are readers, but we are also writers and filmmakers and storytellers and artists and students and teachers and curators. The conversation in this volume is among Indigenous people, and we share this work with the hope that you focus not so much on what hasn't been said or who hasn't been speaking, but on the directions the conversation has already taken because of who *has* been speaking. We invite you now to join this conversation: to continue the conversation inside your head as you read; to write notes down the sides of the page; to talk about these essays with friends or colleagues or classmates or students or with readers of your own writing.

We ask you to consider, too, what the reading of these words and the sharing of these thoughts does in support of Indigenous continuity into the far future. This conversation is not just a theoretical engagement for us; it is a relationship with one another, with you the reader, and with those Indigenous people who came before and those who come after, all of whose lives are worthy of empathy and understanding. If any one thread weaves through the work of our many contributors, it's this: an insistence on Indigenous biographies as more than past-tense histories of study, but rather, as meaningful and ongoing living relationships in the world. It is our shared hope that those relationships are enhanced and empowered by the work we do here, now and in the future.

We hope this conversation inspires your imagination and challenges your expectations. We hope it makes possible new and better ways of thinking, being, understanding.

Many voices await you here. They've already started sharing stories, tears, laughs, and questions. Now it's time for us all to continue together.

Welcome to the conversation.