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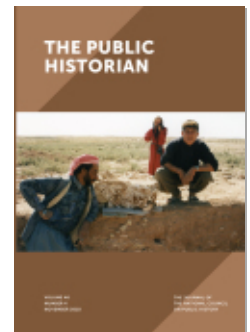
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*Australian Lives: An Intimate History* by Anisa Puri and  
Alistair Thomson (review)

Tanya Evans

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(Review)

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mention of policies of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), reference to his very overt strategies (in his role as Governor of Michoacán) to generate a tourist attraction and to develop an economic infrastructure in the Lake Pátzcuaro area through the construction of the 132-foot high statue of Morelos in the center of the tiny Island of Janitzio, would have placed the specifics of San Miguel into relationship with other key developments from the 1920s onward.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps more seriously disconcerting is the seeming conflation of “head-shaving” with the state-sanctioned massacres and disappearances of the 1960 and 70s. Pinley Covert opens chapter 4 by describing an incident in 1969 in which a group of eighteen “long-haired Americans” were taken to jail and had their heads shaved (113). The author suggests that the “head-shaving raid was emblematic of efforts the ruling elite was making across Mexico to contain deviant bodies in an attempt to preserve the future of the nation,” making some connections to the Cold War (113–4). Yet, this was precisely the era in which governmental actors of the highest level were engaged in a dirty war involving killings and disappearances, not least the 1968 Tlatelolco massacres of protesting students. Although Pinley Covert briefly mentions the 1968 massacre later in the monograph (145), she seems to offer a more benign description that was connected only to the representation of the Olympics, and not to a wholesale challenge to the rule of the long-standing political party (the PRI).

Overall, then, for public historians and even *sanmiguelenses* (residents of San Miguel) this book opens up some little known details of this unique town. For readers unfamiliar with political and cultural histories of Mexico more broadly, this book should be read in conjunction with other historical, ethnographic and socio-cultural studies in order to understand the complex and transforming contexts within which the location-specific examples of San Miguel de Allende were taking place.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Ruth Hellier-Tinoco, *Embodying Mexico: Tourism, Nationalism and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95.

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*Australian Lives: An Intimate History* by Anisa Puri and Alistair Thomson. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2017. 14 + 873 pp.; illustrations, notes, index; paperbound, \$39.95; eBook, \$18.00.

I had the pleasure of reading and listening to this book as I moved between the hardcopy and the electronic version. I was keen to compare the experience of engaging with both, wanting to learn more about the experience of eBook reading and writing for authors, readers, and publishers. It is rare for me to read what I consider to be scholarly books in electronic format but public historians, more than most perhaps, need to think carefully about producing and publishing their work in different media to reach as wide an audience as possible. Many academic

historians are also painfully aware that their students rarely engage with hard copies of books, preferring to read electronic copies of these and journal articles. EBooks, of course, also have a far greater potential, when available globally via Amazon and Kindle, to reach audiences far in excess of most scholarly books.

Decades of groundbreaking, innovative oral and public history projects have made us well aware that the spoken word can be much more powerful than the written word. This marvelously rich showcase which draws on three hundred oral history interviews with a range of Australians born between the 1930s and 1980s (roughly fifty from each decade and a handful from the 1920s) is best enjoyed in both the hard copy and electronic versions. The Australian Research Council funded the project, a collaboration between historians at Monash and La Trobe University, with the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the National Library of Australia (NLA) as partners. It was led by the internationally renowned oral historian Alistair Thompson and Anisa Puri. Their work has resulted in innovative outputs. The research and interviews were undertaken by a large team of researchers who helped gather over 1200 hours of audio that have been used to provide the snippets of the fifty fascinating life stories detailed in this book, and also used in academic journal articles, in ABC radio documentaries on fatherhood, motherhood, and play, among a range of other subjects, as well as an online exhibition curated by Puri on glory boxes (hope chests). The book is powerful in its written form but it really comes alive when readers follow links to the National Library of Australia's collection of the Australian Generations project. Links from the book have been edited, but when reading the eBook the reader is able to jump straight to the relevant section in the interview on the NLA's website and have the opportunity to learn more from the wider contextual discussion between interviewer and interviewee. All of us who work in and with oral history know how time consuming it can be to listen to interviews in their entirety—this will certainly benefit readers and future researchers.

How wonderful it is to hear all these different voices expressing a range of emotions including laughter, love, and heartache when articulating their life stories. It was touching to listen to Suzy Quartermain's interview by Katie Holmes describing growing up in her adoptive family and discovering details about her biological mother, hearing the tears in her voice describing the intense love she has for her grandparents. She had never cried when talking about her grandparents before the interview but she told Holmes that she felt enormous gratitude for the way "they just loved me unconditionally." She volunteered for the oral history project because "she thinks she is an ordinary person with an interesting and different story." This is, of course, why many oral historians practice their craft—to provide a platform for the voices of ordinary people like Quartermain.

This project and all of its valuable and varied outputs should become a treasure trove for social, public, and oral historians for decades to come. It reveals intimate aspects of everyday lives and many varied details about ancestry, childhood, faith, youth, migration, midlife, activism, and people's autumn years, how those lives

have changed over time and how the ways in which people narrate their life stories are reshaped in different historical contexts.

The book's value for scholars and public historians is unquestionable and will help feed an enormous global appetite for social history and the details of everyday lives being sought by ordinary people thinking historically. Many of the people who contributed their life stories to this project are also family, local, and community historians wanting to learn more about how Australian, and other, lives have changed over time. The book begins with a discussion of the increasing "quest for ancestral knowledge" among the people in this book. Valuable projects like these are feeding a growing thirst for historical understanding among ordinary people around the world (33). Public historians need to be at the forefront of the production and consumption of history in these forms.

Engaging, emotional but also academically rigorous in its production, *Australian Lives* deserves to reach a wide general audience, in Australia and far beyond. Let's hope it encourages similar projects in different national contexts so that scholars and others might compare and use this enormously rich data over time.

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