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## Translating a Genre

### A Comparative Analysis of the Popularity of Indigenous Australian Autobiographies in Australia and Germany

The autobiography is one of the genres in which Indigenous Australian writers seem to have published most frequently between the 1980s and mid 2000s. According to the statistical survey *To Tell My Story* (Cooper et al.), the genre of family history, which includes autobiography, ranks among the most frequently published genres of Indigenous literature<sup>1</sup>, followed by poetry, short story, and report writing (11). The autobiography has indeed experienced a tremendous increase in publication over the last three decades; with well over 170 books produced until 2007 (Haag 2008), it appears that the autobiography has become almost synonymous with Indigenous Australian literature of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

However, the autobiographic genre does not always have this popularity. In German translations of Indigenous Australian literature, the autobiography is far less popular and less frequently published than in Australia itself (Haag 2009). Thus, in terms of genre, the German translations do not mirror the trend in Australia. Does this pattern suggest that the frequency of publication and the popularity of particular genres reflect national and/or local, rather than global, phenomena?

This study focuses on the reasons for the proliferation of the autobiographic genre in Indigenous Australian literature and its relative unpopularity in German translations of Indigenous Australian books. Drawing on the theoretical premise of translations being in

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with Indigenous self-designations, by 'Indigenous autobiographies' here, I mean books that are either co-authored or authored by Indigenous persons. See Heiss' *Dhuuluu-Yala* (26) for self-definitions of Indigenous literature. In accordance with the usage in Australia, the term 'Indigenous' is capitalised throughout this article. By 'Indigenous' here, I mean both 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' Australians.

need do be domesticated to a target culture (Venuti 468), it investigates the causes behind these differences.

### **The Reasons for the Proliferation – the Genre**

Much of the popularity of the Indigenous Australian autobiography, I argue, has to do with the genre itself. Autobiography is a genre that is closely tied to history. It is close to what is often considered history, loosely defined, a non-fictional account of past happenings. Imparting history seems to be a vital motivation for many Indigenous authors to opt for the (non-fictional) genre of autobiography. This motivation becomes evident in two ways: first, through outright declarations in the texts themselves, and second, through the motivations of the authors. As for the textual declarations, to highlight but a few examples, Rita and Jackie Huggins emphasize that “[t]he writing of this book was an attempt to reclaim the history of our people” (4). Alice Nannup elucidates at the end of her story that “[y]ou won't find anything about the hell we went through in history books, but it happened, every little bit of it is true” (1996: 218). *My Bundjalung People* (1994) is not defined as “an academic work. It is not a remote observation of a people. This is an Aboriginal history as experienced by many, many Aboriginal people” (Langford Ginibi, xii-xiii). Iris Lovett-Gardiner outlines that “[t]hese stories are about places that I've been to and about my own experiences ... These stories are only in my time. I knew about these places in the past. All histories are a personal history” (4).

As these representative examples elucidate, authors stress the historical value of their stories as well as the distinct truthfulness inherent in their histories. Autobiographies are seen as different from academic versions of history in that they are based on personally experienced knowledge (witnessing). Autobiographies are, furthermore, supposed to raise feelings and emotions in the reader, as opposed to the detached intellectualism of academic texts.

As for the authors' motivations, the significance of history in Indigenous autobiography is also evident in the authors' desire to communicate specific historical and political themes to the audience. I conducted 22 qualitative in-depth interviews with writers and editors engaged in the production of Indigenous Australian autobiographies.<sup>2</sup> The interview question "What should readers get out of your book?" helps elucidate some of the motivations of Indigenous authors in writing autobiographies.

In response to this question, Melissa Lucashenko, author of a semi-fictional autobiographic work, reveals her expectation that her non-Indigenous readers will acknowledge the survival of Indigenous cultures as well as ponder their own (lack of) knowledge of Indigenous peoples:

I suppose for white readers two things mainly. One is that Aboriginal culture is alive, not dead. And the second thing is that they know very little about Aboriginal culture. I want to illuminate people's ignorance. I want them to reach an understanding that there is a culture or set of cultures in Australia that they don't know about and that they aren't expert about.

Frances Peters-Little wishes to raise emotions and, indirectly, influence the ways of knowing about Indigenous Australians:

I don't want people to read anything that I write just for the purposes of exercising their knowledge about Aborigines, but when they read what I write, that they feel something and are moved by the story and say, 'yes, now I understand; not about Aborigines but, yes, I understand more about what I think about Aborigines'.

Gillian Cowlshaw, co-author of an Indigenous autobiography, wishes to accentuate Indigenous agency and, thus, influence the present discourse on interracial history:

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<sup>2</sup> In 2004, I conducted 22 interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and scholars concerning Indigenous Australian autobiography. The quoted interviews are excerpts of those 22 interviews. For a selection of the full transcripts, see Haag 2004.

The fact that [the main protagonist] stood up to these officials and battled with them, that's one thing I'd like people to take from the story. Because I think a lot of the way historians have been writing, or at least the way their histories are coming into the public domain, is just this awful oppressive stuff, with no sense of how people fought back and engaged with their conditions.

Jackie Huggins seeks to preserve her mother's biography within the wider historical framework of cultural survival:

[My Mother] had the story of a twentieth century Indigenous woman from Australia who had lived through these horrible times, who had come through it as a great survivor. And the resilience of spirit that every other Aboriginal woman in this country shared needed to be emulated through her story.

Despite the differences in the answers provided, a common thread is the desire not only to communicate an individual life story, but also to rewrite the images and narratives in the discourse of Indigenous Australians. There is a desire to present a revised account of history from an Indigenous viewpoint and to 'confront' readers with history. This 'confrontation' is not merely about presenting different facts (as seen from Indigenous perspectives) but also, or perhaps even more so, about leading the reader to reconsider her- or himself as a subject of history. This goal is evident in the authors' references to the reader's acknowledgment of survival (in contrast to racial oppression) and the power dynamic in his or her own knowledge of Indigenous Australians. The re-narration of the past is thereby seen as a central mechanism of imparting historical agency and Indigenous sovereignty. The autobiographic genre is apparently an appropriate form to convey such history and is indeed considered the most widespread form of Indigenous historical writing (e.g., Brock 211; McGrath 373).

Lyndall Ryan has described some of the characteristics of (published) Indigenous Australian history, including the motivation

to testify to Indigenous survival, the distinctive forms of Indigenous style and humour, the absence of bitterness, the centrality of the author, and the belief that the historian is a part of the history (56-57). This form of history is based on the memories of personal experiences over many generations, and thus relates to wider historical and cultural contexts encompassing the family and community. As Isabel McBryde remarks, “[t]o Aboriginal people, a history that is grounded in personal and family histories or accounts of familiar territory (country) has primacy” (12). Indigenous history is derived from both an autobiographical and a local background, with personal experiences forming the basis of historical accounts. The very nature of the autobiographic genre enables the expression of personal histories in which the author is the central protagonist of the story.

The Indigenous autobiography is defined by a discourse that identifies it not only as a form of life writing, but also as history and a means of re-writing Australian history. The autobiography is a genre that is seen as ideal for imparting such histories. The similarities between the genres of autobiography and history create the possibility of re-connecting with the past, re-telling history, and especially conveying the family history (e.g., Sareen 283; McGrath 374). Moreover, the primarily self-referential nature of the autobiography maintains Indigenous truths and ethical obligations not to narrate ‘foreign’—that is, not personally experienced—knowledge (Watson; Muecke 95). The sense of veracity inherent in non-fiction genres is read as adequate to support the truth of the story (McDonell 60). Although truth is not part of the literary definition of autobiography, which is usually defined as a text in which the names of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are identical (Lejeune 26; Klüger 407-408), some scholars have indeed suggested that Indigenous authors favour the autobiography because the assumption of truth enables the communication of historical experiences (e.g., Westphalen 2002, 96; Watson 125-126, 193-194). In a similar fashion, Sonja Kurtzer surmises that white Australian audiences perceive the Indigenous autobiography as being much more threatening to ‘their’ history than fiction or poetry

(187). These very characteristics, typical of non-fiction, render the autobiography an appropriate genre for Indigenous (counter) history.

Another reason for the proliferation of the Indigenous autobiography lies in the collaborative production processes of Indigenous life writings, which applies in particular to the earlier publications of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Rowse; Shaw). These collaborations between Indigenous story-tellers and usually non-Indigenous editors and transcribers constitute 38% of the body of published Indigenous autobiography (Haag 2008: 8). The autobiography is an appropriate genre for publishing such 'as-told-to-stories,' as it is less constrained by literary techniques (and thus editorial influences) than the novel or poetry, and so enables a more direct expression of oral narratives.

### **The Reasons for the Proliferation—the Australian Publishing Industry**

From the perspective of many Indigenous authors, the autobiography is a proper format for oral-based literature, for it is a genre that is distinguished by immediate and non-literary modes of narration, as well as constructs of truth and concepts of history-telling that are heavily influenced by once predominantly oral cultures. This in particular is the case with writings published during the 1970s and early 2000s when Indigenous writing was characterized by less literary and fictional styles. These—what I term genre-intrinsic reasons for the proliferation of the Indigenous autobiography—also coincided with a broader demand for Indigenous (autobiographic) histories that first emerged in Australia in the late 1960s.<sup>3</sup> This interest evolved concurrently with the increasing

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth considering that the increase in publication of the autobiographic genre also applies to non-Indigenous Australian literature. According to Nielsen book scan figures and other sources, the biography (autobiography included) is among the top-selling and hence most popular literary genres in the Australian market (Zwar; McCooley). However, there are also many differences in the

erosion of what social-anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in 1968 famously called the 'Great Australian Silence', that is, the long-practiced neglect of Indigenous history by Australian historians (25).

Many factors supported this erosion, including the influences of the emerging national Indigenous protest movements within Australia and the demise of the policy of assimilation (e.g., Hemming 21-22; Reynolds 4-5). These events, certainly instigated by the global social upheavals of the time, have rendered Indigenous Australians increasingly visible to a national audience. Indigenous people entered into a broader non-scholarly and non-bureaucratic consciousness, and thus aroused widespread interest. In addition, since the 1960s numerous Australian historians, who are dubbed 'revisionists,' have focused their scholarly works on interracial Australian history (Attwood 137). The rise in published Indigenous autobiographies was thus not merely an isolated phenomenon, but rather was part of a larger pattern of demand for an interracial and/or Indigenous Australian history. The subsequently published Indigenous autobiographies, I argue, complemented these academic studies with seemingly authentic, first-hand accounts by those who had lived through this long-neglected past. In an interview, Linda Westphalen, a non-Indigenous Australian author of a doctoral thesis on Indigenous women's autobiographies, describes her personal yearning for authentic Indigenous autobiographic histories:

I think, historically, we felt like we've been lied to. I did. I felt like I'd been lied to. Here was this past that we were taught in the schools that was passed off as being the truth about the past. Then Sally Morgan's book appears and then Auntie Ruby Langford Ginibi's book appears and it's not what I knew. No one told me this. How come this has happened? What? I don't know! My parents were told so far as the Stolen Generations were concerned, when they were growing up, that these children were orphans and have no parents. And so that's challenged by an autobiography or a history that comes out and says, 'no, no, we had parents, we were taken from them'. (2004)

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production, marketing, funding, and dissemination between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian autobiographies.

I discern a possible connection between the achievements of racial liberation spawned by global social upheavals of the time, the incoming policy of self-determination during the late 1960s and 1970s, and an increased visibility of Indigenous Australians in the public domain. Together, these factors provoked a general interest in Indigenous Australians, and hence an interest in Indigenous 'stories' in the Australian media. This emerging interest, I assert, has consequently inspired many Australian publishers to focus on Indigenous literature, especially on autobiographies.<sup>4</sup> Publishers sensed this burgeoning demand and began to publish Indigenous autobiographies, a genre that has become the most representative of published Indigenous literature until the mid 2000s.

Elsewhere, I compiled a bibliography of published Indigenous Australian autobiographies. A total number of 177 books were published between the 1950s and the year 2004 (Haag 2008). A cursory look at subsequent publications revealed that this number has since exceeded 250 publications. As Figure 1 shows, there were several major peaks in the market coinciding largely with the heightened awareness of Indigenous people in the public domain. As discussed more fully below, this pertains especially to the years surrounding the Bicentenary of the non-Indigenous settlement in 1988, the Sydney Olympics in 2000, and the intense media coverage of several incidents relating to interracial Australian history in the early and mid 1990s. These incidents included a landmark court decision on Indigenous land rights in 1992 (the Mabo decision), the publication of the reports on 'Aboriginal Deaths in Custody' in 1991, and the release of the 'Bringing Them Home' report in 1996 that investigated the forcible abduction of Indigenous children from their families.

The bibliography reveals that while the first book-length Indigenous

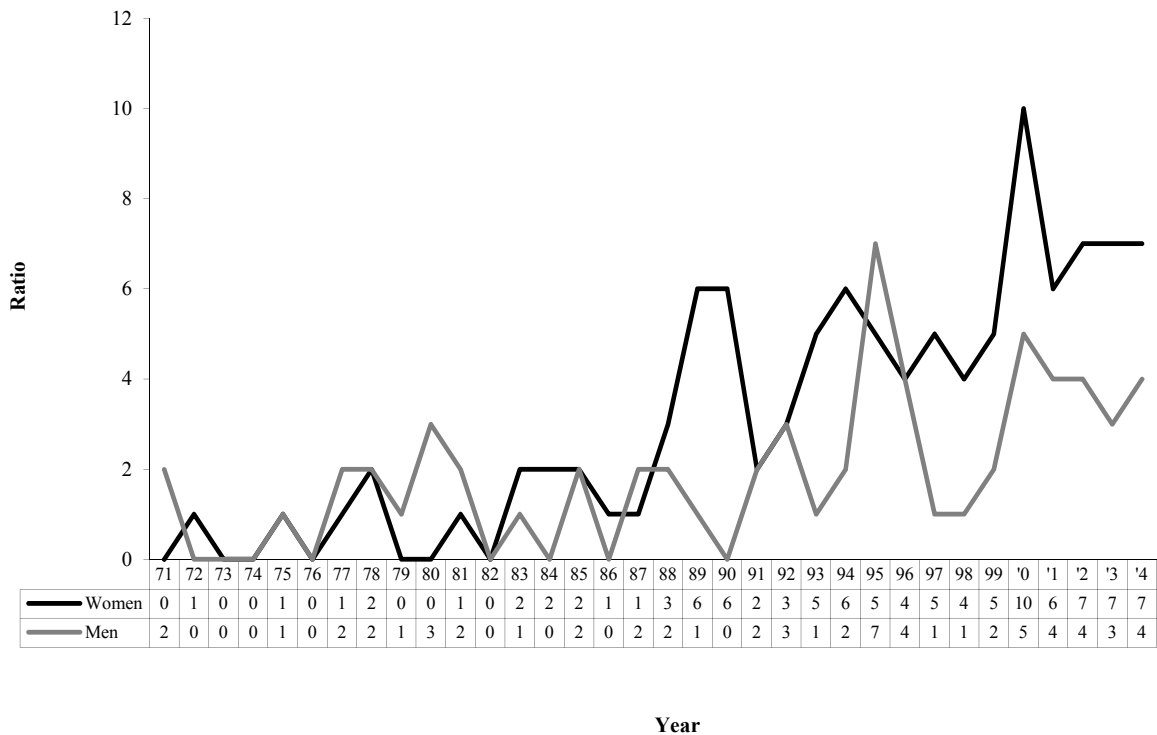
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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that (private and public) funding also played a vital role in the production and subsequent proliferation of Indigenous autobiographies. Significantly, there has been a perceptible increase in government funding of Indigenous literature and arts since the 1980s (Hoegh Gulberg 97), which has coincided with the emergence of a systematic pattern of publication of Indigenous autobiographies at the time.



Australian autobiography was published in the 1950s, David Unaipon's *My Life Story* (1951), the first period of a systematic (i.e., year-to-year) pattern of published Indigenous autobiographies did not emerge until the late 1970s.

Fig. 1. Published Indigenous Australian Autobiographies--Year Specific (1970s-2004)



As Figure 1 illustrates, the period surrounding the Bicentenary of the non-Indigenous settlement in 1988 and the mid 1990s witnessed significant increases in publication. It is possible to infer from the bibliographic data that the Indigenous (anti)-celebrations surrounding the pageants of the Bicentenary and the public debates in the course of the Stolen Generations did, for good or ill, generate a greater demand for Indigenous views of Australia's past, which in turn provoked the awareness of the mainstream publishing industry.

This bibliographic evaluation backs the hypothesis described above concerning the correlation between an increased visibility of Indigenous people, a greater demand for stories, and the publishers' interests in Indigenous autobiographies. Such a correlation has already been proposed by Adam Shoemaker in a comparison

between the rise in Indigenous Canadian and Australian literatures. Shoemaker contextualizes the proliferation of Indigenous literatures within a framework of broader socio-political incidents:

It is that major social upheavals involving Native people have been accompanied by an explosion in literary production. This happens for a wide variety of reasons: international media exposure, government funding for special projects, changing school syllabi, the readiness of publishers to test and develop markets, and, above all, the ever present talent of indigenous writers. The interplay of these factors is fascinating. They can be observed peaking in importance at various times since the early 1980s: in Australia during and following the Commonwealth Games of 1982 and the Bicentenary of 1988. (75)

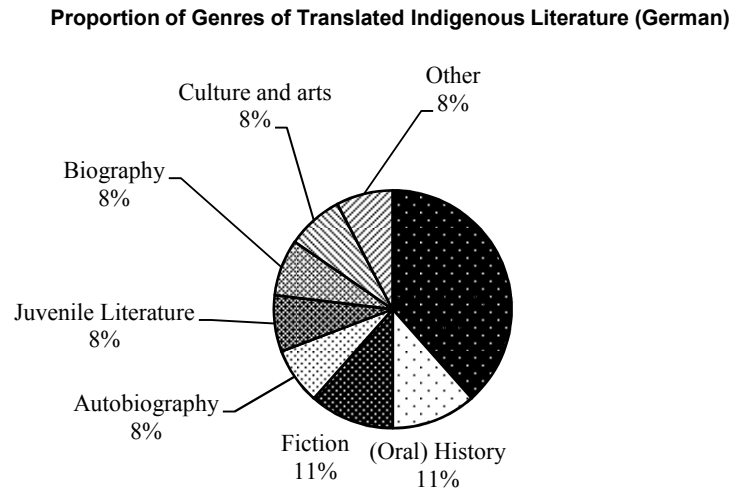
Indeed, particularly in the period immediately preceding the Bicentenary, (Indigenous) Australian autobiography became an increasingly popular genre (Korporaal 12-13). Another year of proliferation was, as Figure 1 demonstrates, in 2000 when the Olympic Games were held in Sydney. As Shoemaker surmises, there is indeed an obvious correlation between periods of specific socio-political and popular cultural relevance, such as national anniversaries, and the increase in publications. Publishers concentrated on these periods of a broader demand in Australia to produce Indigenous autobiographies.

Significantly, a scrutiny of the dustcover texts of published Indigenous autobiographies also reveals that Indigenous autobiographies were directly marketed as truthful and authentic histories: "Mabel Edmund's true-life stories begin with her happy childhood spent among Aborigines and freed slaves" (Edmund); "*Very Big Journey* provides an extraordinary insight into the modern history of indigenous Australia. It is a story of oppression, of injustice, of courage, and of achievement against all odds" (Jarman Muir); and, the blurb on the 2003 edition of Sally Morgan's *My Place* reads, "the sort of Australian history which hasn't been written before, and which we desperately need". Australian publishers have conceived of, and advertised, Indigenous autobiographies as historical, enlightening and authentic. The genre of the autobiography is a central vehicle in this very advertisement, for it

comes closest (among literary genres) to such claims of authentic history.

## German Translations

Indigenous literature has drawn increasing interest not only within Australia, but also overseas, particularly in Germany<sup>5</sup>. As a result of another research project, I compiled a comprehensive bibliography of translated Indigenous Australian literature and conducted a statistical survey based on this bibliography (Haag 2009). Overall, between 1977 and 2008, 81 books were published in 17 continental languages. The European language into which the works were most frequently translated was German (32%), followed by French (19%), and Dutch (9%). German-speakers comprise the largest market for this literature within continental Europe. As the following figure shows, the genre of Indigenous literature that is most often translated into German is the anthology, followed by fiction and history.



Compared to the frequency with which the autobiographic genre is published within Australia, the Indigenous autobiography is far less popular in the German-speaking market. The German translations do not mirror the Australian trends in terms of the popularity of

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<sup>5</sup> Germany is by far the largest of all German-speaking markets for translated Indigenous Australian literature. As far as the involvement of translation presses is concerned, the markets in German-speaking Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and Austria are numerically miniscule.

specific genres.

In some instances, the German translation presses have even marketed the original autobiographies as a different genre. For example, the German version of Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), *Ich hörte den Vogel rufen* (1991), was published with the genre-specific subtitle 'a novel' (German: 'ein Roman'). In contrast, the original version does not include a subtitle indicating a genre. Hence, while German publishers have published more translated Indigenous books than any other European press, and have thus shown the largest interest in this literature in continental Europe, this interest does not apply to the genre of autobiography.

As has been elaborated above, Indigenous Australian autobiographies are shaped by a discourse that identifies their historical value as well as their portrayal of a (counter-) historical perspective. This discourse has emerged within a specifically national context; it surfaced within Australia, where Indigenous voices had been sidelined and largely unheard by the broader community before the first nation-wide Indigenous protest movements and the final end to the policy of assimilation around the 1970s. The Australian interest in the Indigenous people has been influenced by a specifically national history. In contrast, this interest has not been moulded by such historical moments in German-speaking countries, but rather by romantic and exotic imaginings of Indigeneity that conceive of Indigenous people as traditional and close to nature, hence the term *Naturvolk* (lit. 'people of nature'; Erckenbrecht; Haag 2009; Hanstein). The exoticizing interest explains the large numbers of German translations in the genres of 'culture and arts' and 'anthology', the latter of which contains mostly mythological and what is called traditional stories. Together, these genres of Indigenous Australian literature constitute 45% of all works translated into German and, quite obviously, meet the spectrum of the interest in Indigenous cultures and literatures in German-speaking countries. There has not been a comparable desire in German-speaking countries to know more about the historical experiences of Indigenous Australians as has been the case within

Australia, for the Australian demand for these autobiographic stories has been unique and could not be translated easily into overseas contexts.

Furthermore, the Indigenous Australian autobiographies, in stark contrast to the body of fictional literature, have a very regional and local focus. This focus is partially a result of the Indigenous ethics of not speaking about unrelated people, which potentially prohibits the telling of another person's life story, especially someone to whom the narrator is not related. Another more obvious reason for the local focus is the perceptions of place and the telling of place, which are integral parts of Indigenous autobiographies. For example, the (re)connection with ancestral land is a common theme discernable in contemporary Indigenous autobiographies (e.g., Huggins and Huggins; Nannup et al.; Morgan 1987). Julie Finlayson remarks about authors of Indigenous Australian autobiographies: "What they do have is an ability to read the landscape as text wherein the stories of their own biographies are contained" (36). In this context, place can be comprehended as a text wherein social or collective memory is embedded, as the following extract from Ruby Langford Ginibi's *My Bundjalung People* (1994) illustrates:

The north coast of New South Wales is a sacred place for me because it is the tribal home of my people, the Bundjalung people. Through my experiences and what I have been taught by the elders I am now able to teach other people about the different areas and customs in the Bundjalung land. To begin with, the name Wollumbin means cloud catcher or weather maker in the Nganduwal dialect group. It is a very sacred place to the tribes of that area. Only initiated men could go there; it wasn't a woman's place. The wuyan-gali went there to hold their sacred ceremonies....

Here are the names of some of these sacred sites. Tooloom Falls or Dooloomi, which means "headlice". It is said that headlice abound in the deep pools beneath the falls. Nimbin Rock is another sacred area. Only initiated men could go there, and it was a very sacred place, where the wuyan-gali taught the initiates how to throw their spirits and to levitate. They had much power in the physical world and this area is well-guarded by the spirits even today. The name Nimbin comes from the name Nyumbunji, which is the name of a little spirit man who has great supernatural powers. Mount Lindesay, tribal name

Julbootherlgoom is the sacred home of the hairy men spirit. Julbootherlgoom is a lonely mountain in dense forest far from the cities. If you go there, be warned that Nimbunji may be angered if he is disturbed. (194, 196-197)

Knowing her place is, to the author, the essence of who she is: a Bundjalung elder, custodian of her lands and the past. Writing about that place is both a personal history (autobiography) and simultaneously a broader regional history. This history includes the (re) naming of country, the warning of restricted sites, the documentation of the Bundjalung language, spirituality, and, most importantly, the meaning of place. However, the scope of this autobiographic history is geographically narrow, rendering it difficult to market to international audiences, most of whom are probably completely unaware of New South Wales. The particular characteristics of Indigenous Australian autobiographies, especially locality and the focus on the family, make them difficult for translation and publication abroad. This difficulty is also emphasized in interviews with German editors and translators.

I interviewed three German translators, critics and editors of Indigenous literature, including those who had previously rejected submitted translations.<sup>6</sup> One representative of a smaller publishing house directly stresses the difficulty in selling Indigenous autobiographies on account of their 'parochial' character:

I haven't read that many books by Aborigines yet. I know Sally Morgan and another writer because we once got a manuscript that was an autobiography. The main problem was that the subject was too limited to attract interest in readers. Nobody here is interested in what has happened in some small town on the other side of the world. And the book was just focussed on these narrow events; it didn't look beyond, so that readers could connect.

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<sup>6</sup> The interviews took place between 2009 and 2010. Upon request, the names of interviewees (employees with German publishers and freelance translators) have been rendered anonymous to protect their privacy. The interviews have been recorded in German; all translations from German into English are the author's.

When asked why the translation of a book that was originally published under the genre autobiography had been issued as a novel, a translator replied:

The dialogues suggest it is rather a novel than an autobiography ... how is it possible to remember so many dialogues? This is clearly not an autobiography. Readers wouldn't expect something like that from an autobiography. I think that's why it was called a novel. You have to know that many readers are well-acquainted with literary forms and styles; they know how a novel and an autobiography look like. So they might have asked, "what has been published here under the label of autobiography?" ... But I'd also say that it was the story rather than the genre why the publisher had been interested in publishing the book.

The translator believes that the dialogues in the Indigenous texts would render the Indigenous book not autobiographic, but rather fictional. Indeed, many Indigenous autobiographies do not meet the formal genre characteristics of the autobiography, especially in terms of what the respondent refers to as the 'dialogic structure,' a characteristic that stems from the oral heritage of Indigenous storytelling. However, in an Indigenous context the dialogue is not an indicator of truthfulness or fiction (Muecke 95); rather, it is a particular narrative technique. This culturally specific background was not considered by the press when issuing the book as a novel. Instead, the publisher tried to domesticate a genre and narrative technique that seemed unfamiliar, and adapted the original genre to a genre that was thought to be more familiar to their readers. The publishers' expectations of German-speaking readers reigned supreme. Another respondent further described these readers thus:

Many people are very interested in Aborigine culture, but they aren't interested in reading about a life story of an unknown person, living 20,000 kilometres away. They want to read more general things, about traditions and customs, and not when and where an author was born, how school was, and all that autobiographic stuff. This you only have with well-known personae, say, [Rigoberta] Menchu or Mandela and so on, but not with unknown persons.

This answer suggests that an author's publicity and locality have a bearing on the publication of an autobiography. From this, it is possible to infer that the publication of an Indigenous autobiography becomes increasingly difficult if locality and popularity are considered 'unfamiliar' and 'low' to German-speaking readers. The close relationship between author and story, so central within the Indigenous Australian context, seems to hinder rather than promote the publication of Indigenous Australian autobiographies in German-speaking countries.

Moreover, the exotic interest in Indigenous cultures and literatures in German-speaking countries appears to be directed towards culture and tradition rather than the personal life experiences of individuals. Says one respondent:

For many readers it is certainly new and interesting to read about legends, and living out in the desert, and stuff like that. Even if this is one-sided, I know that, it's a fact...We know that there is also a problem with racism in Australia, but I think few readers would be interested in reading a political story of an Aborigine. I don't know about any such person, though I'm sure there are those, but they are too far away from Europe. You know, not geographically, but they are not in our consciousness. This is different from America. And then with daily life experiences of ordinary people, oh my God, even less people would be interested in that. When you read about adventures in the outback and culture and all that, this is different from reading about an individual.

The mentioning of political issues, especially the 'problem of racism in Australia,' is worth discussing more fully. The respondent, well aware of racism in Australia, thinks this topic may be of less interest to German-speaking readers than racism in the United States. The reason for this supposition is the assumption of racism in America being more widely recognized in German-speaking countries than racism in Australia. Therefore, German-speaking readers are thought to be interested in 'adventure' and/or 'exotic' stories involving the desert. The use of the term 'outback' further corroborates the exotic interest surrounding Indigenous literature in German translation. This answer reveals how German-speaking readers of Indigenous



literature (autobiographies included) are believed to be primarily interested in cultural contexts that are severed from contemporary socio-political issues. Autobiographic accounts are not deemed appropriate to convey this repository of cultural knowledge, for they are thought to be too personal and individualistic. However, in actuality, Indigenous autobiographies can hardly be deemed 'individualistic' because they draw on family experiences and genealogy (Moreton-Robinson 1, 16; Jones 209-210). Thus, this attitude is informed by a narrow concept of the autobiography as a completely individualistic story without a broader societal value.<sup>7</sup> The interest in a specific topic is linked to its level of familiarity, meaning that because Germans' socio-political knowledge of Australia is thin, autobiographies from this region are less likely to be published by German-speaking presses. This problem in particular applies to the genre of the autobiography because it is seen to be individualistic and local, without any autobiographies of globally renowned Indigenous Australians and political leaders.

Yet another factor rendering the publication of autobiographies abroad difficult is the lack of the momentum of national identity in translated works; in presenting the life stories of 'ordinary' as well as 'exceptional' members of the nation, the autobiography is a genre that easily lends itself to a re-imagination of national identity. Australians can read about other Australians—daily and ordinary heroes—and thus re-imagine and re-construct Australian identity. This momentum loses its significance once a book is produced and disseminated within another country. It makes little sense for German-speaking readers to identify with Australian authors as members of the same national community.

The Indigenous autobiography seems to be quite unattractive for German publishers. They have published very few Indigenous Australian autobiographies and sometimes pursued a strategy of translating and publishing Indigenous autobiographies under different genre designations, which, in their eyes, seem to be more

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique of the European, white, and androcentric understanding of autobiography, see, e.g., Anderson 86; Stanford-Friedman 34-36.

appealing to German-speaking readers, possibly due to the following reasons: Indigenous autobiographies do not meet the conventional criteria that define the autobiography but rather cross different genres, such as history and fiction; in the context of Indigenous Australia, German publishers do not deem the autobiography suitable for German-speaking readers, as their knowledge of Australia is limited; and the highly regional bias of Indigenous Australian autobiographies renders them difficult to engage overseas interest and marketing.

## Conclusion

As I have argued in this article, the autobiography can be ideal for an oral-based literature that is becoming increasingly literal, allowing the author to 'translate' oral narrations into a literary genre. It is ideal both for authors and for publishers in a specific context—in this case, the national or local context of Australia in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, the autobiography can also be far less ideal, if not problematic, in a more global context, as is the case with German translations of Indigenous Australian books. While genre categories exert a considerable sway on publishing, the importance of particular genres differs, quite obviously, from region to region as well as from context to context.

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