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INTRODUCTION

Elleke Boehmer and Katherine Collins

The surface of the Southern Hemisphere is almost entirely water and, as such, has been called the blue hemisphere.¹ The South Pacific, South Atlantic and Indian Oceans wash into the Southern Ocean that surrounds Antarctica, which forms the pulse of all the world's currents.² Storms here turn clockwise and summer runs from December to February. The Southern Hemisphere is famously home to albatrosses, penguins, marsupials, llamas, capybaras, maned wolves and many other creatures that do not occur on the northern continents. Landscapes range from the dusty sandstone rocks at the Cape of Good Hope to the white sand and turquoise waters of islands in the South Pacific; from the stone-grey Patagonian shore to the dense green of the Amazon; and from rolling humps of pampas with snow-capped mountains in the distance to lonely blue-white icebergs reflected in the sea.

However, though the Southern Hemisphere makes up one-half of the earth's surface, southern geographies, histories and lives tend to be defined from a northern perspective. Consider the expressions 'down under', 'upside down' or 'the far side of the world', and the many phrases we use that take as read that the north is 'the top', the right side up. Think about how maps and globes give prominence to the northern continents. Meg Samuelson, writing on the Anthropocene, rightly points out that not only does the dominance of northern perspectives 'cast more than half of the world into its shadow, but the attempt to view the planet from a singular vantage point must also introduce blind spots which would obscure the very totality that the Anthropocene is expected to represent'.³

It is this apparent overlooking, and the associated tension between addressing the exclusion of southern perspectives while resisting the tendency to universalize, that drives this collection of essays on life writing and the Southern Hemisphere. On the premise that life writing presents singular views from the vantage of specific situations, the book brings together life stories, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and poetics set in the south, or told from the perspective of southern lands, that give views on the hemisphere from within. Contributions are drawn from scholars and writers living and working in, and on, South America, Africa, Australia, Asia and Europe. Our continental representation, therefore, includes three of the major southern continents and makes prominent reference to the fourth, Antarctica.

As Elleke Boehmer points out in the first chapter in this book, the phrase 'the Southern Hemisphere', to anyone writing from the Global North, is also likely to mean, among other possibilities, distance and faraway-ness. For Elleke, born in the south, this farness has a sound, 'the ringing, shirring sound of a device like a high-frequency

Life Writing and the Southern Hemisphere

radio, out of focus, trying and failing to communicate across the miles.⁴ Another aspect of distance, of course, is time. Not simply travel time but time measured by the sun's path across meridian lines. We felt this distance most acutely when organizing the three workshops that crystalized this collection, which, for reasons of distance and the Covid-19 pandemic, all met online or in hybrid form. In this way, we experienced a disconcerting sense of remote togetherness, despite some of us being nearly eighteen thousand kilometres and fourteen hours apart.⁵

Hemispheric demarcations and long distances, however, are far from the only media through which 'the south' has been or can be understood. Various terminologies, which attempt to capture not just the south as a geographic designation but also as the intersection of histories of northern colonialism and economic inequity, have risen and fallen in popularity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in a multitude of disciplines. Different essays in this collection speak to and sometimes combine these varying definitions. True, many have been contested, such as the contemporary term 'Global South', the coining of which is often attributed to Carl Oglesby, an American political activist writing on the Vietnam War in 1969.⁶ The South African Australian writer J. M. Coetzee regards the term as a wholly negative construction that, as an analytical category, can mean several things.⁷ Even so, this term and its opposite, the Global North, have largely taken over from terms like Third World or developing world.⁸ As Archie Davies writes in this volume, the Global South is often used as 'a kind of spatial metaphor for underdevelopment and coloniality'.⁹ It has also served as a category descriptor for alliances such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 at the United Nations. And, more radically, it has been suggested that the grouping 'reterritorializes global space in the interests of repossession by the dispossessed'.¹⁰ Though the term has been criticized for the ways in which it may elide the many differences between the lands and peoples it includes, for Siba Grovogu, therein lies its importance:

as a movement, the Global South has no central structure, no central command, and no appointed spokesperson. It has had multiple custodians, all of them self-selected, in reaction to the deepening and multifaceted violence experienced at different moments by its members.¹¹

The aspect that these economic, political, postcolonial, conceptual, semantic and even geographical definitions have in common is that they originate in the north. So, too, do cognate terms such as 'Northropocene' that Meg Samuelson and others have discussed. Nirmal Puwar has written about the 'staging' of Global North individuals and institutions in the attempt to centre southern knowledge, asking '[w]ho gets recognised? Whose tracks are in the sand? What do we risk tracing over? Who is illuminated? What is leap frogged over?'¹² Elleke Boehmer, in her previous work, posits, by contrast, an understanding of the south rising from the 'contact zone' of 'cultural and political exchange' between southern peripheries, one that allows us to be in 'intellectual partnership with epistemologies grounded in south-south relations', sharing conceptual ground whilst also reflecting critically upon it.¹³ Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis, who have also contributed to

this work, further suggest that a combination of Indigenous and Black knowledge can help us to question the predominance of northern ways of thinking, thereby integrating southern worlds with the rest of the planet in a process that they call worlding the south. Citing Isabel Hofmeyr, they explore a more 'southern latitude' in their work by tracing and creating ways of seeing lines of connection and exchange across the hemisphere.¹⁴ Likewise, Marcio D'Oliveira Campos and Paulo Freire's concept of 'Sulear' seeks to counter the ways in which the north is presented as the universal referent.¹⁵

The scholarly discipline, if not the genre, of life writing can be aligned to northerly institutions, perhaps most clearly in the case of travel writing, which tends to be written from the powerful vantage-point of the European, with their 'imperial eyes'.¹⁶ And yet life writing can also give a view from below. If the generic idea of a life nearly always features a northern subject, whether in sports, in politics or in literature, southern life stories can offer countervailing and alternative perspectives that open up our understanding of what counts as the subject of life writing, to say nothing of *how* we understand life stories whether in the north or the south.

The *Life Writing and the Southern Hemisphere* essays all explore the idea of lives lived, written, and narrated in and from southern places. The lives include animal and plant life, as well as musical lives, and lives captured in performance, the visual arts and photography. Collectively, the essays ask how southern lives and life writing from antipodean and other southern compass points impact how we understand and read life writing and even, in some cases, how our planet is perceived.

To define life writing can be complicated, comprised as it is of an eclectic array of sources and both shorter and longer literary forms.¹⁷ As well as letters and diaries, journals and emails, the genre also embraces the 'vast literary netherworld of court reports, ledgers, household accounts, marginalia, and graffiti'.¹⁸ 'Netherworld' in Patrick Hayes's formulation is an interesting image construct in the context of the Southern Hemisphere. Literary forms of life writing include memoir, biography, case history, creative-critical writing and testimony, as well as hybrid genres such as auto-fiction, biographical fiction, the non-fiction novel and auto-theory, not to mention responsiveness to the lives of artists and thinkers when reading their texts. Attention to what might be called the margins, peripheral or subaltern perspectives has come more recently, with scholars such as Gillian Whitlock, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's focus on the lives and writings of enslaved people, refugees and women experiencing various forms of oppression world-wide.¹⁹ What might be termed 'southern' forms of life writing include the Latin American form *testimonio*,²⁰ of which perhaps the most famous example is *I, Rigoberta Menchú*,²¹ and the Indigenous Australian *story* or *yarning*.²²

However, with the legacies of colonialism including language loss and archiving practices that prioritize some lives over others, the 'authoritative life' still tends to be the northern life, as are the dominant historical narratives. And so, in this book, we turn to different forms to give a more complex and attuned picture of southern lives – including the lives of objects, stories of hauntings and ghostly presences, lives lived and written in and through southern waters and airwaves, and ways of reading historical accounts differently – all of which may allow us better to conceptualize the planet from

Life Writing and the Southern Hemisphere

below, from its nether-regions, if you will. As Obari Gomba, one of the scholars who contributed to this volume, said during our meetings, ‘Let’s not assume that we’ll be able to put a definition or cap on what life writing is or what it isn’t. It’s impossible, because the very idea of creating either life or art means that the borders will constantly be shifted.’ Therefore, we have approached this book as involving a multidisciplinary conversation spanning all compass points, which includes many more voices than ours, and which we hope will continue to grow.

We have grouped the essays in this collection broadly into five themes: reading the south; imagining spaces and spatiality; reading and writing in southern waters; sounds, images and resonances in the far south; and embodying the south. In the first section, ‘Reading the south’, Elleke Boehmer reflects upon what it is to think and write about the state of being far and south, and how life writing might help to bridge the hemisphere’s mythic vastness by attending to the lives of objects crafted by peoples of the south, to southern etymologies and to southern thought-worlds. Emma Parker’s reading of Doris Lessing’s (1919–2013) and Janet Frame’s (1924–2004) autobiographical writing extends Siba Grovogu’s interpretation of the Global South, emphasizing these two writers’ anti-colonial critique. Through both authors’ descriptions of their respective fathers’ prosthetics and discarded souvenirs from the First World War, Parker shows how they eschew a shared sense of colonial belonging and instead offer interlocking accounts of a collapsing imperial identity. Elizabeth Chant’s reading of Chilean writer Francisco Coloane (1910–2002), a member of the first Chilean Antarctic Expedition in 1947, shows how Coloane’s literary nationalism furthers Chilean interests while simultaneously critiquing the human occupation of the Antarctic and the environmental damage it causes. In this way, Chant seeks to unravel the personal and the political in what are some of Coloane’s most overtly nationalist ruminations, while also underscoring the didactic concern that echoes across his corpus. Priyanka Shivadas offers a comparative reading of two texts produced collaboratively and cross-culturally, one Indigenous Australian, the other Adivasi/tribal Indian literature. Her analysis spans questions of orality and textual and paratextual elements, highlighting ways in which the Indigenous memoirists of these texts assert agency and control over their written narratives.

In various forms, figurative and geographical, Katherine Collins, Obari Gomba, Archie Davies, Pablo Wainschenker and Cristóbal Pérez Barra explore southern spaces and spatiality. Through the lives of two objects, a stick chart and an ostrich-egg water carrier, Collins traces what she terms ‘abyssal’ metaphors for the imbalance of information and representation of the lives once lived around these objects. She outlines a metaphorical cartography originating in the amity lines of the sixteenth century, extended today into a compound metaphor that represents physical division and epistemic and economic inequality. Gomba considers the life of Ken Wiwa (1968–2016), son of acclaimed writer and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was one of nine Ogoni activists judicially murdered by the Nigerian state in 1995. He demonstrates that the ways in which Nigeria’s region of south-south is minoritized and subjugated relates critically to the marginalization of the south in other geographical contexts. The name ‘south-south’ on its own seems to enforce a double *southness*. Davies’ contribution

deepens this insight, showing, through his analysis of the lives of three intellectuals of the Brazilian Northeast, how geographical categories – like the south – come into being in relation to individual biographies. His study thus offers different pathways through which we might think about southern-ness. During their lives, his three subjects, Josué de Castro (1908–73), Milton Santos (1926–2001) and Beatriz Nascimento (1942–95), moved southwards, outwards and back to the Northeast in imaginary, intellectual and physical terms.

Staying with South America, and specifically its Southern Cone, Wainschenker and Pérez Barra both consider continuities across southern spaces. Wainschenker's chapter explores the idea of the far south as a continuous space, both in a North to South sense, where Antarctica can be seen as a part of South America, and East to West, in which Antarctica and the Southern Ocean are seen as an entity in themselves. Pérez Barra presents a fascinating case study of the South African Australian J. M. Coetzee's aim to build bridges between the literary communities and cultures of hemispheric cities like Buenos Aires, Cape Town and Sydney without the intervention of the Global North, namely New York or London.

In the section titled 'Reading and writing in southern waters', Charne Lavery, Confidence Joseph and Tinashe Mushakavanhu each consider southern oceans, rivers and lakes through various lenses. Drawing upon the non-fictional prose of novelist Amitav Ghosh, Lavery highlights the ways in which the Indian writer theorizes the differing capacities of life writing and literary novels for conceptualizing environmental futures and the centrality of the oceanic south in that vision. Joseph explores how water spirits have been represented in southern African literature as figures of resistance for social, political and environmental purposes, and thus how mythic and the material are inextricably intertwined with how lives are lived and perceived in the Global South. Mushakavanhu poses several provocative questions about the life of the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera and his canonical text *The House of Hunger*. Mushakavanhu wonders what would have happened if editorial intervention hadn't changed the book's title from the original, *At the Head of the Stream*. What if we search again for the stream which so inspired Marechera's work?

From water to ice, the section 'Sounds, images and resonances in the far south' contains chapters by Joanna Price, Carolyn Philpott, Elizabeth Leane and Elizabeth Lewis Williams, all concerned with the Antarctic. Price's subject is the work of Jane Ussher and Judit Hersko, two artists who have engaged with Scott's *Terra Nova* hut on Cape Evans. A plankton net, hanging near the door, captured both artists' attention and embodied in their work, for Price, both the 'intimate immensity' of the hut and the threshold between human and non-human worlds. Philpott and Leane both write about aspects of Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition in the 1910s. Philpott's chapter draws upon diaries, musical items and the expedition's 'newspaper', the *Adelie Blizzard*, to recognize the role of music in these men's lives in Antarctica. It reveals how they used music to fill space and mark time during the expedition and how they (ironically) adapted northern music and traditions to suit their own experiences as 'Southern' men and to aid their survival in the far south. Leane excavates the life and achievements of little-known

Life Writing and the Southern Hemisphere

radio operator Sidney Jeffryes (1884–1942) who accompanied Mawson. This pioneer of Antarctic telecommunications was admitted to the Hospital for the Insane (as it was then called) a few weeks after the expedition returned from Antarctica. Leane argues that the pressures that surrounded his efforts to send telegraphic messages across the Southern Ocean had a significant effect on when and how his illness unfolded. The section concludes with poet Elizabeth Lewis Williams's reflections on remoteness and the poetic imagination, illustrated with poems that explore how the technologies of remote imaging and sensing, as well as meteorological observations and radio communication, become metaphors for relationship: with the self, with others and with the planet.

In the final section, 'Embodying the south', Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis show how interiority models of life writing fail to give an account of the plural and fragmented lives of the late eighteenth-century Indigenous Khoi resistance leader David Stuurman (1773–1830). They argue that fugitive lives require fugitive modes and methods of reading that cut across or act aslant to colonial dichotomies, so presenting life writing from the south as a means of resisting the naturalization of the subaltern status of individuals like Stuurman. Through his reading of Melina Rorke's autobiographical travelogue, *Melina Rorke: Her Amazing Experiences in the Stormy Nineties of South Africa's Story Told by Herself* (1939), Isaac Ndlovu pursues the partial recovery of a biography of Bulawayo. His chapter shows how, in the gaps, silences and absences of the colonial text, the reader can 'tilt differently' and thus imagine and recover a broader town life than one offered by Rorke's narrative. Louis Rogers and Khutso Mabokela conclude the section, and the book, with powerful creative-critical responses to southern embodiment. Rogers offers a critical reflection on his polarity-reversing play, *Two Body Problem* (2018). In a comparative reading of his script in dialogue with two key influences, Jenny Diski's memoir *Skating to Antarctica* and J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, he shows how life writing and a far-southern setting relate to performance and self-revelation for both character and author. In Mabokela's story, Mogau Grace imaginatively reflects on her painful experiences as a South African woman born in the mid-1980s. Combining autobiographical and biographical material with the motifs of god(s) and dream(s), the piece thinks through multiple forms of southern-ness in its depiction of the typical emotional and physical violence an ordinary South African township woman encounters. Together, the contributions in this section join with the essays in the rest of the collection to show that, adapting Samuelson's words, reflections on lives and life writing in half of the planetary sphere must still always recognize that 'there is only one earth.'²³

Notes

1. Meg Samuelson, 'An "International Author, but in a Different Sense": J. M. Coetzee and "Literatures of the South"', *Thesis Eleven* 162, no. 1 (2021): 137–54.
2. Joy McCann, *Wild Sea: A History of the Southern Ocean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

3. Meg Samuelson, 'Thinking the Anthropocene South', *Contemporary Literature* 61, no. 4 (2021): 537–49, 538.
4. Elleke Boehmer, 'Life Writing and Imagining across Southern Space', p. 13.
5. See also Elleke Boehmer, 'Faraway Close', *English Academy Review* 38, no. 1 (2021): 67–8.
6. Carl Oglesby, 'Vietnamism Has Failed ... The Revolution Can Only Be Mauled, Not Defeated', *Commonweal* 90 (1969): 11–12. See also Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies, 'Postcolonialism and South-South Relations', in *Routledge Handbook of South-South Relations*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Patricia Daley (London: Routledge, 2018), 48–58.
7. See J. M. Coetzee, 'Literatures of the South: Introductory Remarks', unpublished lecture, notes by Cristóbal Perez Barra, San Martín National University, Buenos Aires (11 April 2016).
8. The division of First, Second and Third Worlds was first proposed by demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952, see Eugénia Palieraki, 'The Origins of the "Third World": Alfred Sauvy and the Birth of a Key Global Post-war Concept', *Global Intellectual History* (2023): 1–30; and Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies, 'Postcolonialism and South-South Relations', 48–58.
9. Archie Davies, 'Southwards from the Northeast', p. 99.
10. Matthew Sparke, 'Everywhere but Always Somewhere: Critical Geographies of the Global South', *The Global South* 1, no. 1 (January 2007): 117–26, 117.
11. Siba Grovogu, 'A Revolution Nonetheless: The Global South in International Relations', *The Global South*, 5, no. 1 (2011): 175–90, 176–7. Or, in the words of artist Ellen Gallagher, 'all of no man's land is ours'. Available online: <https://www.museum.nl/nl/stedelijk-museum-amsterdam/tentoonstelling/ellen-gallagher-all-of-no-mans-land-is-ours> (accessed 12 February 2024).
12. Nirmal Puwar, 'Puzzlement of a Déjà vu: Illuminaries of the Global South', *The Sociological Review* 68, no. 3 (2020): 540–56, 552.
13. Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2–4.
14. Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis, 'Introduction: Southern Worlds, Globes and Spheres', in *Worlding the South*, ed. Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 1–33. See also: Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Southern by Degrees: Islands and Empires in the South Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and the Subantarctic World', in *The Global South Atlantic*, ed. Kerry Bystrom and Joseph R. Slaughter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 82; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (New York: Academic Press, 1964), 98; Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 35.
15. See the website SULEar, <https://sulear.com.br/beta3/english/>; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 218.
16. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).
17. Zachary Leader, *On Life-Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
18. Patrick Hayes, 'What Is "Life-writing" and Why Does It Matter?' *OUPblog*. Available online: <https://blog.oup.com/2022/11/what-is-life-writing-and-why-does-it-matter/>.
19. Gillian Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Sidonie A. Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Before They Could*

Life Writing and the Southern Hemisphere

Vote: American Women's Autobiographical Writing, 1819–1919 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

20. See Guadalupe Escobar, 'Testimonio at 50', *Latin American Perspectives* 48, no. 2 (2021): 17–32.
21. Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso Press, 1983). See also David Damrosch, 'Rigoberta Menchú in Print', in *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 231–59.
22. The authors thank Alexis Davies for introducing them to the concept of yarning. There are many possible citations for 'yarning' and 'storywork' as methodologies, often in health and education contexts. We have chosen to cite Indigenous scholars Carmen Parter and Shawn Wilson 'My Research Is My Story: A Methodological Framework of Inquiry Told Through Storytelling by a Doctor of Philosophy Student', *Qualitative Inquiry* 27, no. 8–9 (2021): 1084–94.
23. Meg Samuelson, 'Thinking the Anthropocene South', 539.

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