

Introduction

The Past was almost as much a work of the Imagination as the Future.

~Jessamyn West~

This book is an exploration of the processes of writing personal life narratives as a way of doing poststructuralist reflexive feminist research. It focuses on three life narratives written in different narrative styles: my mother's biography, which I have written from oral sources; my father's biography, which I have written from my own memory and imagination; and my autobiography/autoethnography. I will be exploring the reflexive, creative and imaginative journeys in writing my parents' lives and my own life as ways of doing reflexive feminist research. In my view, this project began many years ago when I was a young adolescent scribbling down little stories on pieces of scrap paper. Looking back now, I realise that while I was intrigued by my parents' lives, a large part of my storytelling/storymaking was a product of the interplay between imagination and memory. Without imagination/memory, none of the lifewriting in this book would have been possible, nor would the reflexive feminist methodology that I have undertaken to perform this research project. Hence, the first and foremost tribute of this book is to imagination and memory.

The book is organised in ways that are closely reflective of the journey of writing involved. *Chapter I – The Ambivalent Conception*, stories the journey of how this research project began and the emergent conceptual positionings informing the methodological frameworks of this book. *Chapter II – The Umbilical of Life* is the lifewriting section of the book, which includes the autobiographical writing and the two biographical writings. *Chapter III – The Ambivalent Act of Doing Research: Reflexive and Feminist Research Methodologies*, explores the various epistemological and ontological positionings informing the methodological frameworks of this book. *Chapter IV – After Birth: Reflections on*

Writing and Negotiating the Triple Braid focuses on my reflections on the writing processes adopted in each of the three life narratives and the reflexive research methodologies. Concluding the book is *Chapter V – Conclusion: Bringing Together*, which distils the new knowledges and understanding gained in feminist knowledge-making as well as the limitations of the research and the reflexive research methodology, and the implications for future/further research.

The methodology I have adopted here is a reflexive one. Throughout the book, I foreground the epistemological and ontological assumptions and perspectives that ground this research as well as the specific constraints and limitations of the chosen research methodology. The last two chapters are focused on reflections on the methodological pathways, the limitations and constraints of the process of storymaking and knowledge-making against institutional, cultural, political and ideological apparatuses. How this research developed and evolved is by no means natural or incidental. Rather, it is motivated by particular personal, cultural, institutional, social and political positionings that are historically specific. This research project was originally located within the Cultural Studies Department of the university and as a result of changes in supervision and my own professional training in psychotherapy, the research project was transferred to the Department of Social Work and Social Policy. This shift has contributed to the interdisciplinary nature of this research project and the shift in emphasis from cultural theory to the implications of life narratives on the professional practice and performance of social work and psychotherapy. My involvement with narrative therapy in my psychotherapeutic practice has also been influential in the development of this book. I have taken up a reflexive narrative approach to lifewriting, to be detailed in Chapter I. My teaching in Women's Studies at Edith Cowan University is another major factor shaping this research. The impact of women's personal life narratives on the feminist pedagogical, political and activist practice within social work and women's studies plays a central part in this research. The genesis of this research project and its development are inter-

disciplinary and this has posed both advantages as well as challenges to the research project, which will be explored in the following chapters.

Singh (1987, p. xiv) suggests, a writer “*appropriates* the past” in that the past acts as “merely a vehicle for expressing a certain sensibility, a certain sensitivity. The more the imagination takes hold of the writer and his subject, the greater the appropriation of the past.” This book explores the delicate and complex manoeuvres with memory and the past, underpinning the writing of each of the three life narratives. The past, as much as the future becomes the site of much contradiction, negotiation and ambivalence as one re-remembers, re-imagines and re-tells each of the narratives. It is therefore critical to acknowledge that each of the three life narratives is a reconstruction and a reappropriation of the past and of the lived experiences and memories as well as a re-imagination of the future.

Does the writer write *consciously* of his past and if he does is this *conscious* effort obtrusive? ... I believe a writer's sense of the past is not a sense which is easily fixed and easily understood, nor, by the same token, is it easily defined by the writer himself. In a curious way, that “sense” is not really sense (awareness) as it is the imaginative impingement or consciousness. Between the writer's sense of the past and the ever-present struggle to create, to offer fresh insights into human existence, to illuminate the dark regions of the human psyche, the writer has to choose for himself his mode of communication. (Singh, 1987, p. xv)

The writer's sense of the past is inevitably complex, subjective, interpretive and multi-voiced. By engaging in reflexive modes of writing, I offer a glimpse into the creative and imaginative process that emerged and how memory becomes the site of contradiction, contestation and creativity. I will trace how each of the different narrative styles and pathways has emerged from the reflexive feminist research methodology that has both influenced and been guided by the writing process. It is through these reflexive writing styles and modes that imagination can create and re-create the past and re-imagine the future in ways that were previously silenced. As a Chinese-Australian woman engaging in reflexive, creative and imaginative lifewriting, the challenge is to create new spaces and add different voices to the small but emerging *Asian Australian* literary field and scholarship. I have

italicised the term *Asian Australian* as an attempt to problematise its usage and the embedded politics. I do not claim to speak on behalf of other Australian writers and scholars from Asian backgrounds or to advocate for a collective voice that is *Asian Australian*. While there may be similarities in the experiences or stories told here, I speak and write only on behalf of my own specific and subjective personal, historical and cultural perspectives and experiences. The differences and contradictions in these perspectives, experiences and stories are what defy the grand categorisation of the *Asian Australian* label. My refusal for my own writings and research to be simply labelled as “ethnic,” “immigrant,” “Asian-Australian,” or “third world” is a conscious act of resistance to further marginalisation of non-Anglo women’s work and research. By crossing generic styles and forms in the writing of the three life narratives, this book aims to challenge and problematise some of the prevailing Orientalist assumptions and conceptions of ethnic minority lifewriting that continue to marginalise ethnic minority writers’ work as generically personal, mysteriously exotic and ultimately inconsequential.

In her study of migrant writers in Australia, Houbein (1987, p. 107) writes:

Writing autobiography, which is what we so automatically expect migrant authors to do in preference to any other literary form, is in fact not at all widespread. ... few writers begin with an autobiography, no matter how dramatic their lives hitherto may have been. The motivations are similar to those of mainstream authors: to weave patterns out of the chaos of the past, to write a future that may materialize if written well, to express a worldview different from that held in mainstream society, to dream, to fantasize, to teach, to record.

The relevance of personal and cultural histories in contemporary feminist scholarship across disciplines such as social work, sociology, women’s studies, cultural studies and anthropology reaches beyond the discourses of knowledge-making and scholarship into the ideological, social, political and cultural constructions of nationhood, national identity, heritage and citizenship. This book offers an investigation of how personal, gendered, cultural, racial and hybridised

histories intersect with social, institutional, hegemonic and political histories, and explores the implications this may have on contemporary understanding of the complex and diverse spectrum of what constitute Australian literature, cultural heritage, identity and nationality.

The meaning of heritage is profoundly symbolic: how and what a society values from the past says something about how it sees itself as a community today and how it projects itself into the future. ...

... Heritage is not just what must be “preserved” and “saved”; it is also what can be “built” and “created” out of a critical and creative engagement with the myriad intertwining histories that have made up the nation. As a result, however, and here we have an interesting paradox, the nation itself becomes symbolically destabilised, subject to multivocal contestations and multiple appropriations. (Ang, 2003, pp. 23, 25)

This research is in part a “critical and creative engagement” with a specific thread of “the myriad of intertwining histories” that makes up our Australian heritage. The question and challenge remain in how we can create multiple speaking positions and voices from the “multivocal contestations and multiple appropriations” that can propel us forwards into a future that represents the rich multitude of Indigenous, European, migrant and refugee histories as our Australian heritage. As historian Graeme Davison notes, “Active and ethical citizenship depends ... upon the imaginative capacity to look at the world through the eyes of others” (as cited in Ang, 2003, p. 34).

This lifewriting research carries different speaking positions, voices and tongues that seek to represent the political, the cultural, the historical, the feminist, the reflexive, the imaginative and the scholarly. It is located within both the lifewriting genre and the ethnographical genre, and it speaks from a Chinese Malaysian immigrant perspective, crossing at least three generations, three continents and three cultures.