

## The Spoor of Scattered Memories: Journeys, Landscapes and Identities in Australian Transcultural Life Writing

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The trope of place in the delineation of the narrator's subjectivity has a special relevance in Australian literature and culture. Since the first attempts by settlers to accommodate themselves to such a 'different' environment, the land has been a protagonist in the (hi)stories of Australia, rather than simply a background feature. This idiosyncratic relationship to the land was supported further by the many other journeys that contributed to the formation of Australia as a nation. Indeed as Stephen Castles suggests, Australia has played a 'classic' role in the global migration phenomena, one which was followed by an increase in 'returns home' for many Australians of first or successive generations in search of their roots, family histories and the memories of their past. As questions of belonging are associated with the relationship of the subject to, and his/her location within, the nation-space, quite often these journeys and their outcome restore Australia as a place, the land of one's birth/childhood, and become in fact "an occasion for autobiography" (Hooton 2). The journey to Australia represents that "radical change" in one's life, the "sufficient motive," strong enough to drive someone to write an autobiography (Starobinski 78). Andrew Riemer's *Inside Outside: Life Between Two Worlds* (1992) and Arnold Zable's *Jewels and Ashes* (1991) exemplify differently how landscapes and the journeys through them are intrinsic to the subject's self-awareness and sense of identity. As in the explorer journal, a genre prevalent earlier in the history of Australia, the journey and the writing, the textualization of the land and the evolving of the subjects' lives are all intimately connected. The landscapes in these two auto/biographies<sup>1</sup> are perceived predominantly in connection to travelling to and traversing another space: they emerge from journeys of flight to Australia (Riemer), or from a brief trip 'home' to Poland from

Australia (Zable), where the idea of 'home' does not necessarily imply having previously lived in the place about to be visited, but rather is developed from an emotional and cultural bond to it, born from family mythologies and (hi)stories.

In this article the idea of landscape encompasses both the idea of space and place. In both instances landscape is not merely static, but rather a dynamic concept, being part of the travel and movement that inevitably shape the lives of people belonging to transcultural milieus. As a cultural and social construct, landscape is also always open to transformations. It is, as Clifford would have it, "an itinerary rather than a bounded site—a series of encounters and translations" (11).

Both auto/biographies in this article focus on the transformative dimension within the self-representational process and feature a progressive change in the narrator's subjectivity within the text. In *Inside Outside* Riemer evolves from a Jewish-Hungarian child born in pre-war Europe into an English-speaking Australian adult, who eventually questions his identity as exclusively belonging to any one country or language. In *Jewels and Ashes*, Arnold Zable, an Australian-born child of Jewish Polish heritage, is portrayed as laden with a fractured jumble of memories originating in his parent's experience as Holocaust survivors, and as one who slowly transforms himself into someone whose identity finally feels nourished by and rounded through such an inheritance. For both Riemer and Zable, self-awareness and self-transformation are accomplished through travelling. Travelling from one place to another, facing and somehow adapting to new locations, finding the words to describe these experiences, translating from and transforming one cultural space into another, learning about one but also unlearning about or (re)interpreting the other, are all processes implying movement and some sort of journey, physical and/or psychological. The self-representational processes and identity formations of these transcultural subjects are reflected in such dynamic movements, evolving and inscribing themselves as difference in changed locations and languages, predicated on movement and not bounded within a sense of space as static. Riemer and Zable equally juxtapose rather than separate the different spaces revealing the subject's simultaneous occupation of

multiple spaces. In a paradoxical way, travelling in the outward direction becomes a physical enactment, a metaphor for the inward autobiographical journey. It becomes a decisive act of altering or reinventing the self, whether in order to build and reshape a new identity from zero or to discover and find unexpected dimensions to one's accepted identity.

### **I. The Perception of Australia in Riemer's Life between Two Worlds**

*Inside Outside: Life between Two Worlds* is the first of Andrew Riemer's four-volume autobiography. *The Habsburg Café* (1993), *America with Subtitles* (1995) and *The Sandstone Gothic* (1998), form the complete work. Riemer left Budapest with his parents in November 1946, aged ten, to reach Sydney in February 1947. Their long journey, undertaken by different means of transport, involved a train trip to Vienna, a flight from there to New York, landing in places such as Prague, Brussels, London, Shannon, the Azores and Newfoundland on the way; another train trip from New York to San Francisco and eventually a boat journey across the Pacific Ocean to Sydney, on board an old World War II hospital ship, refitted and reclassified as a liner. Nearly fifty years later, in an effort to retrace his past, so abruptly interrupted and discarded upon his arrival in Australia, Riemer travels for the first time back both to Budapest and, a couple of years later, to New York. Each continent—Europe, North America and Australia—far from suggesting a break or rupture, becomes the ground from which the rhizomes of Riemer's identity germinate and develop. These three journeys constitute the framework of his first three volumes, each of them starting with the arrival in that particular destination, Sydney, Budapest and New York respectively. His fourth volume, *The Sandstone Gothic*, deals mainly with his life as an academic at the University of Sydney. In this article I concentrate mostly on the first book, which gives an overview of Riemer's life beginning with his arrival in Sydney in 1947 and ending after his return from his first visit to Budapest in 1991.

Landscape features extensively in all volumes of his autobiography, not exclusively because Riemer's life has included a great deal of travelling. The journeys described are not linear ones, but rather endlessly

circular and helical. The locations visited and represented are places rather than spaces in which the focus is self-consciously on the subject, for whom the search for personal identity implies a search for a place or a culture in which to feel emotionally at home. Riemer's sense of exile is negotiated between past and present geographical locations, and the places remembered and described are evoked in connection with episodes relating to his sense of identity and belonging. The common predisposition for transcultural narrators to locate themselves in a cultural space relatively early in the writing of their autobiographies is also true for Riemer: "I have now spent more than three-quarters of my life in this country. My passport tells me that I am an Australian. This is the only society where I feel relatively at ease, safe and comfortable.... Yet I cannot claim to belong here fully" (*Inside* 1).

This sense of foreignness, of being written out from the dominant Australian discourse, is ubiquitous in all of Riemer's works and supposedly felt by him most of his life in Australia. Only in the mid-eighties, however, did it become possible for him to process and bear witness to his sense of displacement, an experience favoured by a number of important socio-political and historical changes. The collapse of communism in Europe marked the end of Soviet control over Hungary and allowed Riemer to travel back to Budapest for the first time since 1946. The advent of a multicultural policy in Australia supplanted years of forced indigenous and migrant assimilation, a condition Riemer subtly comments upon in the first paragraph of *Inside Outside*:

When I arrived in Australia in 1947 ... the question of multiculturalism had not yet arisen. Everyone assumed that it was the newcomer's duty to fit in, to learn the language, to adopt the customs of the country. Whatever cultural heritage you had brought with you had to be discarded; the past was irrelevant to the new life you were about to forge.... Now, almost half a century later, the wheel has turned. The dream of a multicultural Australia, a heady brew of contrasted but harmonious cultural strands, has left those of us who listened to our mentors, and tried to assimilate, in some perplexity and confusion. (1)

This double 'turn of the wheel' provided the socio-cultural conditions necessary to enable Riemer to gain a new status in the cultural map of Australia, and supplemented the language of the dominant cultural discourse with new vocabulary to express different positions within the identity norms. By 1992, when Riemer's first book was published, new identity models had already started gnawing at the base of the "exclusive Anglo-Celtic Australian identity." By challenging the dominant representations these models, supplied by literature, cinema, television and cultural manifestations, reversed (at least partially) the mainstream identity paradigm so that 'alternative,' in this case, 'transcultural,' or 'hyphenated' identities, could materialize and challenge the Australian norms of identity. It is at this particular moment of self-awareness and of questioning his own location, whether 'inside or outside' the culture of Australianness, that Riemer's first volume of autobiography begins.

Riemer asserts in his "Preface" that *Inside Outside* is not an autobiography, though his deeply self-conscious narrative, in which the author is significantly aware of his role and position, both as subject and object, contradicts him. As in one of Shakespeare's prologues, of whom, incidentally, Riemer is a scholar, we are carefully supplied with the grounds from which his writing originates:

Reconstructing that vision many years after the fact entails an alteration in perspective. I am able to look at the past only from the vantage point of my present self. Yet the memory retains enough of those initial impressions, and the present self bears sufficient scars from the past, to make it possible to capture with some accuracy and truth the predicament of those of us who were received by a not entirely welcoming Australia in the years immediately following the war in Europe. (2–3)

Anyone acquainted with autobiographical theory will recognize in this paragraph many of the problematic issues revolving around the genre. Words such as reconstructing, perspective, past, vantage point, memory, present self, accuracy and truth are terms just too specific to be condensed in the same paragraph by mere chance, especially by a literary scholar such as Riemer. However, it is Riemer's constant reference throughout

the text (as the author rather than as the subject) to a sense of identity that is important here: “you cannot change the intimate, deeply ingrained, essentially mysterious core of the personality which seems to be implanted very early in life, perhaps stamped on at the moment of birth, in the way that newborn babies are tagged with name-bands” (4–5). This Cartesian concept of the self as a unitary and nuclear entity combined with a deep awareness that one’s “otherness cannot be expunged” (Reimer 5) in a different, *unheimlich* landscape results in a yearning for another place, “a state of mind beyond fondness, or even love, for a country, beyond familiarity or the knowledge that you have carved out a life for yourself in these surroundings” (2). This sense of oneself, built upon two or more languages, cultures and countries, is often referred to as an existence between two worlds, ‘an inside and an outside’ one; in Reimer’s words, “one familiar, substantial, often humdrum and commonplace; the other a country of the mind, fashioned from powerful longings and fantasies. Such longings and fantasies are the product of a complicated network where experience and inheritance intersect” (2).

Australia’s landscape, strikingly different from any European one, has contributed to the fascination with the quest to belong, and with what it means to be at home in it. The explorers’ narratives, as Paul Carter has pointed out in his classic study of encounters with the Australian landscape, were of journeys where no road existed as yet and where, by extension, the narrative itself could not proceed confidently forward. Consequently, the historical meaning of the exploration journals is inseparable from their *spatial* occasion (Carter 10–11). Contrary to the explorers’ journals, which daily accounted for the reality they had just experienced and then drew on from their notes, the encounters between transcultural subjects, such as Reimer and Zable, and Australian landscapes are the product of a journey through long distant memories and their will to bear witness to these memories. The two different historical perspectives, of which these narratives are products, mark their difference. The notion of the ‘Antipodal,’ a space in reverse, was at the base of the explorers’ narratives and implied a miming of Europe. These expectations led the explorers to represent Australia as a lack, as an absence of Europe, a country lacking European landscape features. But the notion

of the cross-cultural permits the experience of difference as an experience in itself, not in mere opposition to or as an extension of Europe, and thus allows for the release of memories, sensibilities, and subjectivities. The Anglo-Celtic experience becomes just one among many. Australia becomes the diverse experiences and location of the many.

Not only does Australia provide a new position from which to speak, it is the arrival in the new country that brings forth a process of self-awareness. Although Riemer might have felt a similar awareness of difference before, in his childhood experiences of the Nazis' Jewish persecution in Budapest, it is only in Australia that such an awareness is consciously felt and processed. In this respect, it seems quite significant that Riemer chooses to position his arrival in Australia in the opening line for *Inside Outside*, rather than begin his narrative with any other moment of his reasonably eventful life. Sydney becomes the entrance to a new dimension of his (inner) life and his arrival in Sydney, as on a Bakhtinian 'threshold,' marks the beginning of a radical change achieved through another journey, that into the experience of himself as another (Bakhtin 61 and 170–72), in which the primary marks of subjectivity are his ethnicity and class.

What are the strategies Riemer uses to write the country and to write himself within this country? As I have suggested, Australia for Riemer is more than the security that his passport gives him or his sense of identity. It is firstly and importantly a place, represented for him by "the row of streetlights strung along a low hill" as he saw it on the early morning of his arrival (*Inside* 18). This first glimpse of Sydney inscribes itself in Riemer's imagination as the "essence" of Australia (18). His insistence on Australia's territoriality is important because it underscores how the landscape functions as a metaphor for refuge and freedom. His text follows some of the familiar associations with Australian landscape and sense of place. For instance, he insists on the imbrication of place and language in his autobiography. He states:

I learnt more English, it seems to me, from people in the street, from signs painted on shop-awnings, from newspaper-posters that I did from the little instruction I received at school.

In consequence, the discovery of language is inseparable in my memory from the discovery of place and its people.... I learnt English in the streets and shops of Hurlstone Park, but even more significantly perhaps, from the vantage point of the Strand Arcade in the city. (97)

Learning idiomatic English is associated not only with living in Australia but with specific landmarks, Hurlstone Park, Strand Arcade. He also distinguishes between the way in which some of his family's immigrant friends learn English through the written language, as a result of which "they spoke like heavily accented parodies of characters in Dickens" (84) and his mother, who learnt it unsystematically through shop signs, newspaper headlines and advertising hoardings, so that she saw "the connection between language and the social reality it conveys" (84). For Riemer the archaic forms of the family's immigrant friends' speech are emblematic of the hierarchical society of middle Europe.

Riemer also uses two different strategies to write the Hungarian immigrant into the Australian landscape. In one instance, he parallels the upward mobility of Hungarian Australians with the general economy of the nation. The immigrant group with its increasing wealth is matched in his description by the increasing popularity of vacations in Australian mountain and skiing locations, such as those of Perisher Valley and Thredbo. He suggests "a nostalgia for a European climate was joined by a nostalgia for its food, the cool breeze and soothing sunshine, imported it would seem from another hemisphere, complemented by the wonders of the cuisine" (136–37). This tracking of the growing wealth of the immigrants and that of the mountain resorts can be seen as a strategy to braid the lives of the Hungarian Australians within the history of Australia, in that one could not have happened without the other. Again, if earlier the author had admitted that furs and jewellery were not negotiable commodities in Australia (130), women in furs soon become a common sight in the mountain resorts in the 1960s. Thus Australia begins to resemble Hungary. This braiding of the two histories also renders the very landscape as hybrid, Europe in the Antipodes and European styles of living in Australia.



It is Riemer's description of his education in England, however, that reveals the construction of his identity as mediated through place. In the chapter entitled "British Subjects" he describes his naturalization ceremony in Australia, marking his transition from immigrant to settler Australian. In the following chapter, "Homecoming," which describes his trip to England to write his doctoral thesis, Riemer experiences a denial of his Australian (and Hungarian) identity due to his dark looks. Such an unperceiving 'gaze of the other' results in a strong emotional epiphany for the narrative subject, one which manifests itself in a longing for Australia. Though offered the opportunity to stay on in England, he is discouraged by the prospect of being forced to adapt once more in order to fit in with the ways of another world (199–200). Eventually, he opts to return to Australia. The place he regarded as "alien and hostile" (186) has now become home. The absence from/of Australia has enabled his Australian-ness to emerge.

I want to suggest that it is precisely Riemer's sense of dissimilarity from other Australians as well as his dislocation from the country that enables him to identify himself as Australian. Thus his identity is experienced only in negation and in the absence of the Australian landscape. His insistence on being identified as such calls into question what the "true" appearance of an Australian ought to be and thus gestures towards the immigrant status of all Australians except Indigenous Peoples. Finally, if the narrative subject's sense of identification with Australia is only possible through the process of negation, denial and un/belonging, it is one that especially partakes of the dialectic logic of negativity: his nationality can be conferred only as one term often perceived as negative in a dialectic that continually incorporates immigrants, while simultaneously negating their genuine Australian-ness and reiterating their transcultural identity. In so fashioning himself, Riemer's work underscores the fluidity of all identity, its shifting nature, and the fallacy of perceiving identity as permanent or enduring. Identity is perceived as a historical and discursive formation, an authored invention, or as James Boon would call it, "an ongoing translation" (qtd. in Clifford 24). As Riemer concludes in the first volume of his autobiography, "We are essentially rootless [...] we belong nowhere" (218). It is within this nexus

of un/belonging, negation and nationality that I wish to refer to a telling scene in *Inside Outside*. In the Christmas of 1990 Riemer was travelling on the Orient Express between Austria and Hungary with his son. At the border, as the train entered Hungary it halted for border-control passport checks. Riemer writes:

The crowd fell silent. Something was in the air. It soon became obvious that the border-guards were making their way down the carriage. People began to betray the unmistakably apprehensive look of those who have lived under (or had escaped from) oppressive regimes. I noticed that they were impressed and not a little envious as we got out our Australian passports ... And I, protected though I was by my magic passport, shared the tension and anxiety of my fellow-passengers, while my son sat beside me absorbed in the book he had been reading ever since darkness fell. For him this was just another frontier. (212)

Notwithstanding his strong passport, why does Riemer feel the nervousness of the other passengers in returning to Hungary and why does his son not? For him, it is a return home, as it is for a number of the equally-anxious fellow passengers. The notion of “home” seems ironic here, especially if, as Matthew Arnold suggests in *Culture and Anarchy*, home refers to order, cohesion and the stability of culture, whereas homelessness refers to the disenfranchised, and to a negative space in which anarchy persists and disrupts both the state and tradition (Nasta 2).

This metonymic link between home, order, homelessness and anarchy is the same as the structure evoked by Freud in “The Uncanny,” where he suggests that the uncanny refers to the “former heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning [in the maternal body ...] the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, home-like, familiar; the prefix un is the token of repression” (398–99). I want to ‘unpack’ this relationship between home and the maternal/motherland in order to understand Riemer’s anxiety upon his return to Budapest in 1990. Echoing Levinas, in *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George suggests that the home becomes a way of establishing difference, in that one’s home and homeland are ex-

clusive (2). Thus the binary oppositions of homeland and foreign spaces are replicated in those between self and the other. Home is considered to be fixed and stable. But one can see that this understanding is a very bourgeois concept, one that is deployed by those belonging to the racial or ethnic majority. Home as unproblematic then bespeaks a certain stable subject, not always possible for the minority or those in the diaspora. In his fascinating essay "The Diasporic Imaginary," Vijay Mishra explains that houses in the diaspora are hybrid, live in the borderlands, and cannot ever return to a pure condition. He likens the law of the hyphen (as in hyphenated identities) to the law of genre and states:

In classical epistemologies, the law of genre and the law of the hyphen are mutually exclusive: where the law of genre aspires to the condition of purity ('thou shalt not mix genres') the law of the hyphen jostles to find room for the space occupied by a cipher that is yet to be semanticized, the dash between the two surrounding words.... Within a nation-state citizens are always unhyphenated, that is, if we are to believe what our passports have to say about us. In actual practice the pure unhyphenated generic category is only applicable to those citizens whose bodies signify an unproblematic identity of selves with nations. For those of us who are outside of this identity politics, whose corporealities fissure the logic of the unproblematic identification, plural/multicultural societies have constructed the impure genre of the hyphenated subject. (Mishra 433)

It is this comprehension of himself as only ever having a hyphenated transcultural identity that begins to explain Riemer's deep unease in both Hungary and Australia. His nervousness at the approach of the border guards in Hungary, notwithstanding his Western passport, is a bodily memory, a shift to his childhood and his fleeing from Hungary to Vienna. The return to Budapest, then, is no simple homecoming, because previously his Jewish body had fissured "the logic of the unproblematic identification" (Mishra 433) with Hungary.

Indeed, he alludes to exactly this ambivalent feeling in the final pages of *Inside Outside*. Here, in Canberra, he celebrates Hungary's national

day in 1991 at the Hungarian Embassy. At this event, he is consistently perceived as not looking Hungarian enough, which in turn gives place to his bitter childhood memory of the Magyar Hungarians welcoming the Nazis and waving flags with swastikas. He also realizes that his lack of racial fit with the Hungarians does not align him with Australia either. In fact, in these final pages of the work, he wants no such alignment, as, speaking from a middle-class position, he complains about the over-sexed teenagers, the suburban culture, and the intellectual poverty in Australia (Riemer 207). Yet for him, Australia is home precisely because it underscores his immigrant status, his being called “a bloody wog” and his lack of ethnic and somatic (Anglo-Celtic) fit. Australia permits a critique of nativism and allows for the existence of a disaggregated identity, disrupting the very categories of identity, because it celebrates neither the national, the genealogical, nor the religious, but all of these in a dialectical tension with each other (Boyarin and Boyarin). Australia allows him to be both Hungarian and Australian and Jewish and Gentile simultaneously, but also neither exclusively one nor the other. Australia is un/homely and permits an un/belonging.

## II. Zable’s Poland of Jewels and Ashes

If Riemer’s experience is that of a newcomer to Australia, Arnold Zable’s is that of a second generation Australian who travels back to his parents’ hometown in Poland to dis/uncover his family’s past. Many children of immigrants, like their parents, inevitably live between two worlds, either agreeing with the dominant’s “dislike for the unlike,” and becoming uncomfortable with their parents’ accents, customs and the way they dress; or internalizing their experiences so that their parents’ past, as well as that mysterious place called *Der Heim*, become their own (Zwi 41).

Encountering other places and cultures, whether because of leaving one’s country to restart a life or returning to it to trace pieces of one’s own history, sets up a mirror in which one’s gaze is constantly alert for terms of comparison, where one’s identity can or cannot be confirmed. It is interesting to see which Lacanian “orthopaedic shape” one decides to assume when and after gazing at this mirror. If comparing and connecting are inevitable processes of self-discovery when living between

two worlds, what happens when one of the terms of comparison is missing? Arnold Zable's *Jewels and Ashes* (1991) exemplifies such an absence. Zable's parents left Poland during the 1930s. After settling in New Zealand they moved to Australia, where the need for a community and the urgent desire for news, comfort and friendship from their fellow-countrymen were becoming vital during the war years. After the end of the war they discovered they were the only survivors of a once very large family. The reticence of Zable's parents to remember their past, as too painful to disclose, induces the writer to travel all the way back to Poland, his parents' homeland, in an attempt to uncover, or discover, the missing pieces of his parent's (hi)stories. *Jewels and Ashes* is an account of Zable's journeys to complete his 'self-puzzle.' The events which occurred during the war and the disturbance of being so far away from it become the catalyst responsible for the need to tell this story.

The structure of this relational auto/biography is an interweaving of different stories, narrated from different discursive positions, and held together by the journey undertaken by Arnold in 1986 from Melbourne, via Beijing, to Bialystock, the place on his ancestral map in Poland. His personal story, that of his parents, and that of the Jewish community left in Bialystock, unfold as the fragments of the past, his families' memories and stories fill in the gaps, and more trips and voyages enrich the narrative. This is a fragmented auto/biography, a story that abounds with incompleteness, since memories are such precious commodities, "luxuries [one] can't afford" (Zable 5). Haunted by his parents' half-told stories he finds impossible to embody, Arnold travels back to Europe in an attempt to attain the appropriate cultural background and experience; as if in a journey of purification to expiate the sin of not "having been there" and therefore not being able to understand, but drawn to it by his double contradictory fate: that of being Jewish but of not having experienced the Annihilation; and that of being Australian, but not totally free from the heritage of these experiences. Similar to Riemer's self-awareness, Zable's self-representational process develops through the journey and arrival in Bialystock.

Interestingly, this journey unfolds in reverse to the conventional metaphorical journey from darkness to light. Leaving the sunny island of

Australia, the journey runs on the Trans-Siberian express through China and continues through the region of Siberia, which represents a symbolic limbo. The passage from one domain to the other is the passage from Arnold to Aaron, (Zable's traditional Jewish name before being anglicized to Arnold). While Arnold is the one who searches, interviews, and eventually reinvents his parents' stories from "lean and Spartan clues" (8), it is Aaron who travels all the way from Australia, through China and Siberia, re-enacting his parents' journey in reverse. It is he who finds out what happened in Poland and reveals the mystery of those deaths, unveiling the past, bringing light to the darkness, giving word to the unspeakable. His initiation begins with the search the Russian border-police carry out on Arnold's luggage. For the first time in his life he feels what it is like to find himself in "situations of complete powerlessness" (19). It is an ancestral fear that operates the subject's discursive transformation, instinctively instructing him to remain invisible, avoid eye-contact, and keep out of the way. The "lethal pantomime" of those who hold power against those who are powerless repeats itself (19) and Arnold is now Aaron. His emotions changed, he has lost his confidence, and has a different odour: "why was I the one, out of so many, singled out for such a thorough inspection? Was it because of a deeper anxiety? Did I give off the scent of an ancestral fear, the sort of scent which induces dogs to attack?" (19).

Siberia, "a kingdom of white birches, swaying and mourning" (22), is a stretch of land that has an unpleasant meaning for the Jewish community, implying accusations of political agitation against the Czar and exile. It is significant that for many Jewish migrants and refugees, Australia represents the antithesis of the land of the white birches. It is synonymous with freedom and endless possibilities, while Siberia is the symbol of hell and damnation. In Zable's text, however, Siberia seems, rather, to represent the antechamber to hell, which in this case is Poland and its dark war-secrets. Though Aaron has never visited it, his childhood memories of stories about this land unconsciously initiate the metamorphosis, reminding him of his ancestors' lives, of his own cultural heritage, and his present task: "They left a legacy of fragments, a jumble of jewels and ashes, and forests of severed family trees which their children now explore and try somehow to restore" (22-23).

The recurrent trope of a binary personality, a multiple identity, in transcultural life narratives, is constantly referred to in *Jewels and Ashes*. The split between Aaron and Arnold is sustained by a dual narrative register and two different intertwining stories: one told by Aaron starting from December 1932 in Poland to the other, told by Arnold, unfolding in contemporary Australia. The double register employed to jump from one story to the other, modulates the tension and reduces the dramatization of the truth Aaron slowly brings to the light. Simultaneously, this way of moving swiftly in the text through time and space, as in a series of movie sequences, allows Zable to create a clear distinction between the particular and the general, the inner and the outer. As he himself has admitted, he was both writing for himself and at the same time representing his generation, where many people, one, two, three or four generations back, come from somewhere else (“Jewels” 13). Towards the end of the narrative, as the tension of the denouement increases, the interweaving of the two stories becomes more frequent and intense, allowing Zable to free himself emotionally. By now the dual register is even wider, as Aaron comes to represent the inner Zable, while Arnold speaks as if telling a story which is common to a great many Australians.

This intentional way of ‘not telling’ his personal experience as a transcultural Australian, by following the traditional chronological narrative scheme, makes Zable’s auto/biography stand out among others written in the same period in Australia. Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s influence and his style of moving back and forth through time and space is palpable, but Zable’s chrono-spatial passages are swifter and more immediate than those of Marquez. Although there are divisions among chapters, their function is to allow the reader to pause and ponder; the absence of titles is indicative of a wish to consider the story as a whole, although a fragmented one, governed by a past that refuses orderliness, and is “always intruding into the present with disturbing hints of a world of irredeemable chaos, forever spinning out of control” (102). Through this decentralizing technique Zable uncovers his own personal (hi)story without falling into too much pathos and sentimentality, until he slowly unveils the terrible truth of how, where and when all his family members died.

It is a journey through the landscape and dreamscape of the survivors that cannot stop there. The grim inheritance he carries has to be told, tales have to be completed, following his forebears on their final trek, wherever it may have taken them, and beyond, far beyond, so that he “will never have to return” (102).

The discovery of his family’s tragic end and the uncovering of similar (hi)stories by European Jews of his parents’ generation, bridges some gaps between the two generations. The emotional strain Zable tries to avoid throughout the whole narrative proves to be an unavoidable passage for its whole denouement. Aaron’s discoveries and Arnold’s emotional processing of them provides both a common emotional stand between him and his parents but also sustains Zable’s new perspective:

I see them as they are now, in their old age. Father’s natural tendency has always been to fly, to soar on impulse and grand ideas. Yet for the fortieth year in succession he looks down upon the same patch of earth, as he composts, digs, plants, and moves toward an inner balance, an integrity. And mother, who has always cooked and cleaned and sewn and served, is softening, her gaze moving upwards, through distances, towards the heavens, towards surrender. And I see my reflection in them both. My eyes are green, in between; while within, I sense the first inklings of a harmony, the first intimations that a long journey is nearing its end. (200)

By the end of the book, Aaron/Arnold achieves such a powerful knowledge of himself and of his parents’ history that he is able to understand and process what he could never have before. No longer missing the cultural background that created a barrier between them, he acquires the ability to translate his mother’s silences and communicates with her through the same silences: there are some that resonate with defiance, while others suggest an irredeemable loss. Others are softer, like a surrender, a letting-go (164).

This new way of communicating symbolizes the achievements that the journey to Poland has offered him. Back in Melbourne, Aaron and Arnold are not two distinct entities anymore, but two, albeit contradic-



tory, sides of the same. They contribute to sustain a new subject, as a new person is the one that has slowly written this book:

My earliest of memories: a rare gathering of relatives and Old World friends after a day of picnicking. I am feeling my way through a forest of legs. Smoke drifts down between the trees. As I crawl besides them, I come across a white object. I grasp it in my hands and weave my way through the forest until I find my mother. She bends over, lifts me up, and carries me to the kitchen where she performs her feat of magic. She drops the dented ping-pong ball into the kettle of boiling water and, minutes later, it re-emerges, smooth, restored, fully rounded, a glowing white sphere. (210)

The “feat of magic” performed by his mother becomes a metaphor for Zable’s achievement in the writing of his self-representational process.

The representations of the perceptions of other peoples and cultures and the ways of encountering and approaching other lands and landscapes often tell more about the person portraying the picture than the subject itself. After all, is not landscape itself the work of the mind? Is not its scenery built up as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock (Schama 6–7)? Schama makes the same trip as Zable to Bialowieza (Bialystok) and to a Jewish cemetery in Lithuania. In both descriptions of the cemetery, the common idea of stones, Hebrew lettering, and the collective memory of suffering have become geological layers, inseparably imbued in the landscape, becoming the landscape (Schama 36; Zable 102). Had the Holocaust never happened, Zable and Schama might have known each other through their close connection to Bialystok. Their theme, the history of Jewish roots in Europe, Jewish bodies in Jewish cemeteries, becomes a part of the national landscape of Europe, and is the counter-discourse to that of the Jewish people in perpetual diaspora, constantly scattered throughout the globe, in constant motion, only being able to revisit the intimate spaces of their parental homes as tourists or through the aid of memory.

Though these narratives tentatively point towards a reconciliation of the contradictory positions that the subject inhabits in these differ-

ent autobiographies—middle class, immigrant, transcultural, child of Holocaust survivors, intimidated/Western traveller, and so on—what emerges is the undercurrent notion, whether plainly asserted as in Riemer, or more softly implied as in Zable, of the postmodern, dynamic subject, that changes over time and is the effect of multiple and contradictory discourses at a particular historical moment (Bergland 134). The journey to the ‘other’ country becomes a hunt, a desire to suture the fractured selves that different landscapes, languages and memories bestow on the autobiographical subject. In Derridean terms, the hunt is for the trace, or the scattered spoor of the past, an absence that always structures presence. From this point of view, Australia is the space in which presence, and its structuring absence, finally become simultaneously visible, at least within the pages of the texts.

### Note

- 1 I use the term “auto/biography” to “encompass all the ways of writing a life and also the ontological and epistemological links between them” (Stanley 3).

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