

## **Narrating pre-migration lives in a country of immigration**

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### **Abstract**

Only seventy years ago, Australian society was comprised almost exclusively of people who were British migrants or the descendants of British migrants. Since then, the country has accommodated millions of non-British migrants. Since the 1970s, successive Australian governments have officially embraced cultural diversity and promoted multiculturalism. Since the first introduction of multicultural government policies in the 1970s, migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds have published well over a thousand memoirs and other biographical or autobiographical book-length texts; last year alone, there were almost a hundred such books. A handful of books – for example, Vietnamese-born Anh Do's 2010 autobiography *The Happiest Refugee* - have become bestsellers, but the majority have been self-published with a very limited print-run.

Initially – at a time when migrants were still expected to have left their pasts behind – many of these memoirs began with the author's arrival in Australia, and did not feature pre-migration experiences. Increasingly, however, authors write in great detail about their pre-migration lives. In this paper, I discuss two sets of issues arising from a survey of this corpus of writing. First, how do migrants remember and narrate their pre-migration lives? Which aspects of their pre-migration pasts do they privilege? How do they reconstruct a former sense of home? How do their memories migrate? Second, how do non-British migrants' recollections of their pre-migration lives become part of Australian culture? How do migrants' published memories challenge the notion of Australian history as the history of a territorially-bounded nation-state (rather than as the cumulative history of everyone who has ever lived in Australia)?

I argue that these issues are not unique to Australia, but I also demonstrate that there are important differences between the ways migrants remember and narrate their pre-migration lives depending on their origins and on the country of immigration.