

Intimacy

Intimacy might seem a curious inclusion in a book on the transnational aspects of life stories, since it evokes the ties that bind individuals to a beloved home, not the impulses that send them roaming across the earth. It is, however, precisely that tension—the yearning towards home of the migrant or wanderer, or the ties that keep the cosmopolitan mind bound to a finite geographical space—that makes intimacy a vital component of this volume.

The essays in this section deal with migration stories. Maggie Mackellar reads the ambiguities of 'Home' in the letters of early Western District squatting families: home as a site of nostalgic yearning, home as emblem of new attachments, homes unthinkingly destroyed in the very act of colonising. Kate Bagnall traces the unhappy story of a marriage between an Anglo-Australian woman and a Chinese-Australian man—a relationship that collapses after the couple visits China, the affection between two people inadequate to combat cultural difference and Australia's discriminatory immigration laws. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson both focus on the generation of British migrants who formed the postwar 'British diaspora'. Thomson shows how Dorothy Wright's letters home provided her with a 'reflective space' in her 'hectic life': a space in which she could articulate and explore the ups and downs of domestic life, and reach out for the advice, support and sympathy of her mother and sister in Britain. Hammerton shows how the 'lens of migration' takes precedence over any other way of constructing a life story in the narratives that migrants tell of their lives. Drawing on his interviews with British migrants in the second half of the twentieth century, Hammerton shows that there has been a growing trend for migrants to understand their lives as inherently adventurous, mobile and cosmopolitan, to migrate serially and to manage a far-flung family life. Francesco Ricatti tells how postwar Italian migrants in Australia wrote with lyrical intensity of their idealised 'first loves', lost either as a cause or an effect of migration. Here, the 'lens of migration' facilitates the operation of fantasy and nostalgia, producing stories of romantic perfection across a gulf of rupture and loss.

Migration strains intimacy—not only for those divided by migration, but for those fragments of families compelled into propinquity and precarious dependence by their migration to a strange land. In different ways, all these essays show how migrants struggled, using words, images and memories, to shore up those intimate bonds, and to create new ones. A stream of words has issued from the attempts of thousands of migrants to make sense of the experience of displacement, to make and remake connections. As Kate Bagnall shows, however, sometimes the deepest ruptures are papered over with silence. In the essays that follow, intimacy is both a casualty and a product of migration stories.