Yvonne Allen and Joy Noble (eds), *Breaking the Boundaries: Australian Activists Tell Their Stories* (Wakefield Press, 2016)

Merlinda Bobis and Belén Martín-Lucas, *The Transnational Story Hub: Between Self and Other* (Centre d'Estudis Australians, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, 2016)

Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi (Bhaktal and Sen, 2016)

For Gali Weiss, ‘the sharing of marks on paper is a political act with a political intent’, one that can ‘involve us – participants and viewers – in a way that the media, or even social media, cannot or has stopped doing’ (BB 110).

Here are three books that do just that.

The first, *Breaking the Boundaries: Australian Activists Tell Their Stories*, edited by Yvonne Allen and Joy Noble, anthologises 46 powerful narratives about ordinary peoples’ extraordinary efforts to drive change. This includes Weiss’s account of how she conceived and organised ‘Unfolding Projects’ – a transnational collaboration between Afghan and Australian women who, across divides of culture and geography, worked together to write and illustrate books that were exhibited to raise public awareness about the struggles Afghan women face. It also includes accounts from activists who have rallied for causes including but exceeding Indigenous recognition, refugee rights, environmental protection, transgender rights, healthcare awareness, fundraising for research, end-of-life care, and social justice broadly.

*Breaking the Boundaries* doesn’t shy from acknowledging the significant struggles activists endure. Yet in the face of challenges, its voices nonetheless resonate with energy and hope, making this book a deeply inspiring and empowering read for anyone who has ever dreamed of making a difference. Tales of small-yet-significant successes demonstrate how ‘ordinary people can change the world’ (Chris Loorham, BB 165) and that ‘there’s room for everyone in the puzzle’ (Mia Pepper, BB 208). Particularly inspirational are the beautifully-written accounts from school-aged activists Phoebe Brice, Savannah Brice, MacKenzie Francis-Brown and Maddison Day. So too Tessa Henwood-Mitchell’s account of how she established the aid organisation TIA when she was just twenty-one. The book is a great strategic resource for aspiring activists, for it shares approaches that have and have not worked well in the past, and it signals common snares. This can help activists avoid wasted effort and maximise the impact of their campaigns.

Another fascinating aspect of *Breaking the Boundaries* is its interrogation of what activism is and can be. The book reflects how activism is changing in response to developing technologies – for instance, through the rise of social media activist campaigns, as Mel Irons explains (BB 10), and through changed approaches to more traditional approaches like lobbying, as per Margaret Reynolds, who concludes:

…by all means continue with the professional presentation of facts and figures, but do remember that a creative lobbying strategy is often the one that makes the best impression for reform. (BB 59)

The collection also tackles thorny issues of privilege – particularly the activist’s capacity for inadvertently causing harm despite worthy intentions of helping. As Henwood-Mitchell sensitively

**Book reviews:** Three titles: *Breaking Boundaries; The Transnational Story Hub; Surviving in my World.*

Amelia Walker.

Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

explains, this is a particular risk when those from relatively privileged backgrounds seek to ‘save’ those experiencing injustice, thus reinstating hierarchies of helper/helped and powerful/powerless. To combat this, Henwood-Mitchell urges would-be activists ‘to work side-by-side with these communities, to learn from them’ (BB 94). Examples of strong side-by-side models can, I suggest, be located in the book’s many chapters regarding the role the creative arts and writing can play in creating social change. Weiss’s chapter (discussed earlier) is one example of this. Others include Judy Blyth’s discussion of her work as a banner painter (BB 170-4) and Anne Riggs’s account of the huge difference creative expression can make for people experiencing crises (BB 67-72). Regarding writing in particular, anti-pulp-mill activist and published author Anne Layton-Bennet champions the pen as her peaceful ‘weapon of choice’ (BB 36-7) and Jenny Scott offers an insightful account of how community archiving helps honour lives and perspectives that dominant histories might otherwise overwrite (BB 79-83). Indeed, Breaking the Boundaries itself offers, in my view, a strong example of writing’s political force – for stories of activism are stories that remind us, we do not have to accept the world as is. We can reject injustice. We can pursue better ways.

The power of the pen is similarly strong in The Transnational Story Hub: Between Self and Other edited by Merlinda Bobin and Belén Martín-Lucas, the second publication under review here. Produced at the Universitat de Barcelona’s Centre d’Estudis Australians, the e-book shares outcomes from a case study that involved participants from Vigo, Spain and Wollongong, Australia, ‘listening to and imagining their respective and each other’s coastal and regional cities … in order to investigate the negotiation of difference’ through collaborative poetry, storytelling and cross-genre writing (TSH 18). The project’s strong modelling of a rigorous yet creative methodological model for knowledge generation makes this book a very worthwhile read for anyone considering, undertaking or supervising postgraduate research in creative and/or cultural fields. Regarding its own research contribution and cultural impact, The Transnational Story Hub confronts issues of racial discrimination, ongoing colonial violence, and Indigenous rights abuses. Yet the tone is optimistic, focused on possibilities of and for moving beyond injustice. The book celebrates cultural diversity, challenges stereotypes and promotes positive social connections, creatively envisioning more harmonious ways for global citizens to be and interrelate.

In addition to its worthy political objectives, The Transnational Story Hub is remarkably beautiful to read. For instance, note the striking imagery and musical cadence of the following lines, from the poetry of Mariló Gómez:

Our conversation unfolds like colourful petals of winter flowers
Filtered through a prism of time, of maps and invisible borders,
Faceless loved ones and unheard conversations
Tears in the evening after the terror of the day. (54)

and from Joel Ephraims:

Book reviews: Three titles: Breaking Boundaries; The Transnational Story Hub; Surviving in my World. Amelia Walker.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
…an impermanence of girls and seashore
upheld the cacophony raised like a city…

…what do your sharded oscillations whisper?
did your slippery, rebellious flash
go travelling twice, populous with words? (TSH 231)

The third book under review here – Manohar Mouli Biswas’s *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* – enacts a similar balancing of aesthetic wonder with political punch. The book is split into three sections: the first is a set of critical pieces that helpfully introduce an unfamiliar reader to Biswas’s important work, contextualising *Surviving in My World* in relation to his broader oeuvre and his impressive contributions to literature and culture; the second is the work itself, an autobiographical narrative detailing Biswas’s experiences of growing up in Matiargati, a remote village in Khulna (now Bangladesh), as a member of the Namashudra community; and the third is an interview transcript in which Biswas speaks with Jaydeep Sarangi, Angana Dutta and Mohini Gurav about his lifelong work as a human rights activist. Once again, the political power of the pen shines brightly, particularly in the interview, where Biswas declares literature as a ‘torch of liberation’ with the capacity to ‘demolish cultural hegemony’, to ‘open the doors of learning and culture to oppressed people’, and to ‘destroy oppressive culture’ (SMW 98). In Biswas’s view, literature can be not only ‘the source of inspiration for the oppressed people’, but also ‘an instrument which ignites consciousness and courage’ (SMW 97).

The autobiographical narrative of *Surviving in My World* is, in my view, a perfect example of the argument for the political capacities of writing that Biswas presents in his interview. The Namashudra people have been subject to rabid discrimination, socio-economic inequality, exploitation and violence, physical and cultural. By witnessing the impact of these historic and ongoing violences, Biswas raises awareness about the continuing injustice, about the need for change. Of the intergenerational impact of discrimination and poverty, and the colossal challenges entailed in breaking the cycle, Biswas writes:

This pattern was not of one life, but that of generations. It was living like a prisnika – a water hyacinth – living on the verge of death and dying on the verge of life! (SMW 39)

Yet Biswas does not write purely of suffering. Vitally, his account also demands attention to the cultural and intellectual richness of Namashudra life. This is important because it defends and carries on the valuable cultural knowledges and ways of being that oppressor cultures have tried to deny and suppress. *Surviving in My World* is filled with themes of community, friendship and support through times of crisis; of the power invested in sharing, even or especially when there is so little to go round; of the paradoxical ways in which hardship can breed gratitude, appreciation and generosity; and overall, of living boldly despite endless hardships – as the title suggests, of *surviving*. For instance:

the people were poor almost to the point of starvation, yet they did not sell milk, not even the excess. Rather, if there were relatives among the neighbours whose cow had not yet delivered a calf, the excess milk would be given off to them free of cost! It was a gift of love. The
person knew that if ever his own cow delayed in delivering a calf, he too would get milk when he needed it. (SMW 18)

Also notable is the sheer aesthetic prowess of Biswas’s writing. His lively, lucid prose can transport a reader from tears of joy to pain and back again within the space of a few pages, and his textual voice is warm, like that of a dear friend, while his skill for imagery conveys vivid full-colour pictures in the mind. Translators Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi must also be congratulated for this – that is, for rendering Biswas’s Bengali original so exquisitely in English. For instance, consider the following description of the Khulna wetland:

by standing in a village along one of its edges, the villages on the other side appeared minute. The trees appeared short; the golden hued ripe rice fields were like courtyards neatly smeared with cow dung in the early morning. In someone’s huge sesame garden flowers had blossomed on each bush in clusters. Their existence was not visible from afar. Innumerable yellow flowers had blossomed in the huge field of mustard. From a distance it seemed that a village woman had spread wide her yellow saree. The small mango or betel nut gardens in some people’s houses were standing with their heads raised in a dark cloudlike canopy. The cows and calves that were grazing in the fields appeared to be standing still. Their movements would remain indiscernible. (SMW 18)

These aesthetic strengths of Surviving in My World vitally deepen its political impact. For, recalling Gayatri Spivak’s vital question of the late 1980s – ‘can the subaltern speak?’1 – Biswas’s answer is a proud demonstration not only of ‘speech’ (through writing), but of eloquence, indeed song, a melodious voice that through its beauty compels one to listen, to appreciate the value in what historically silenced speakers have to say.

Like Breaking the Boundaries and The Transnational Story Hub, Surviving in My World is therefore, in my view, a very important book – one with the capacity to drive real and necessary social change, not only in the Bengal regions about which Biswas writes, but beyond them, for Biswas offers a model of how situations of social injustice may also be challenged and remade in other global contexts. For these reasons, all three of the books reviewed here are, I contend, essential reading for anybody interested in activism, writing, cultural research, cross-cultural collaboration and/or the pursuit of more liveable societies through these and other means. I warmly thank and commend the writers, translators and publishers who have brought these wonderful works into print. Each page, each word helps nudge this world just ever so slightly towards better, fairer lives and relations, towards enhanced opportunities for all.

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