Displacement, Identity and Belonging
An Arts-Based, Auto/Biographical Portrayal of Ethnicity and Experience

Alexandra J. Cutcher

Displacement, Identity and Belonging is a book about difference. It deals with ethnicity, migration, place, marginalisation, memory and constructions of the self. The arts-based and auto/biographical performance of the many voices in the text compliment and interrupt each other to create a polyvocal rendition of experience. The text unfolds through fiction, memoir, legend, artworks, photographs, poetry and theory, historical, cultural and political perspectives. As such, it is a book that confronts what an academic text can be.

Written in the present tense, it weaves its narrative around one small Hungarian migrant family in Australia, who are not particularly special or extraordinary. Their experience may appear, at least on first blush, to be paralleled by the post-war diasporic experience for a range of nations and peoples. However in many ways, this is not necessarily so. It is this crucial aspect, of the idiosyncrasies of difference that is at the core of this work. The layering of stories and artworks build upon each other in an engaging and accessible reading that appeals to a multitude of audiences and purposes. The book makes significant contributions to the literature on qualitative research, and in particular to arts-based research, auto/biographical research and autoethnographic research. Displacement, Identity and Belonging is in itself an experience of journey in the reading, powerfully demonstrating a life forever in transit. This work can be used as a core reading in a range of courses in education, teacher education, ethnicity studies, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, history and communication or simply for pleasure.

"Displacement, Identity and Belonging offers an excellent example of the use of novel approaches to social research that are designed to raise important questions and provide unique insights. The multigenerational perspective of Hungarian migrants to, and immigrants in, Australia, disclosed and examined herein, is not merely a fascinating and urgent topic in itself. It also encourages and enables the reader to imagine analogous social phenomena in other places and times. This fact, in conjunction with an extraordinarily effective format, is what makes this, for readers of all sorts, an important and empowering book – one that I heartily recommend." – Tom Barone, Professor Emeritus, Arizona State University (USA)

Dr Alexandra Cutcher is a multi-award winning academic at Southern Cross University, Australia. Her research focuses on what the Arts can be and do educationally, expressively, as research method, language, catharsis, reflective instrument and documented form. These understandings inform Alexandra’s teaching and her spirited advocacy for Arts education.
Displacement, Identity and Belonging
TEACHING RACE AND ETHNICITY

Volume 2

Series Editor

Patricia Leavy
USA

International Editorial Board

Theodorea Regina Berry, Mercer University, USA
Owen Crankshaw, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Payi Linda Ford, Charles Darwin University, Australia
Patricia Hill Collins, University of Maryland, USA
Virinder Kalra, University of Manchester, UK
Marvin Lynn, Indiana University, USA
Nuria Rosich, Barcelona University (Emerita), Spain
Beverley Anne Yamamoto, Osaka University, Japan

Scope

The Teaching Race and Ethnicity series publishes monographs, anthologies and reference books that deal centrally with race and/or ethnicity. The books are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate classes across the disciplines. The series aims to promote social justice with an emphasis on multicultural, indigenous, intersectionality and critical race perspectives.

Please email queries to the series editor at pleavy7@aol.com
Displacement, Identity and Belonging

*An Arts-Based, Auto/Biographical Portrayal of Ethnicity and Experience*

Alexandra J. Cutcher
ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

DISPLACEMENT, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Displacement, Identity and Belonging offers an excellent example of the use of novel approaches to social research that are designed to raise important questions and provide unique insights into complex issues in various fields of the humanities. The inquiry and representational strategies employed here, as the subtitle suggests, arise from within what is known as arts-based research. This is a form of inquiry that honors the premises, principles, and procedures employed in the creation of works of art. And indeed the text itself resembles a talented work of artistry in both form and substance. Here, the particular form of arts-based research and scholarship is that of auto/biographical portraiture. So the text evidences various discursive modalities — some gloriously poetic; others decidedly prosaic — in the presentation and discussion of findings. The more aesthetic, storied forms of representation enable the reader to relive empathically the life experiences of the characters portrayed in the book. This arts-based dimension serves as ballast for the more lofty, scholarly discourse that, in turn, allows the text to escape what one might call the tyranny of the local and specific. Moreover, the complex discursive format of the book is in a mutual relationship with the important and timely content (or aesthetic substance) of the book: the immigrant experiences that are present in various parts of the world today. The multigenerational perspective of Hungarian migrants to, and immigrants in, Australia, disclosed and examined herein, is not merely a fascinating and urgent topic in itself. It also encourages and enables the reader to imagine analogous social phenomena in other places and times. This fact, in conjunction with an extraordinarily effective format, is what makes this, for readers of all sorts, an important and empowering book — one that I heartily recommend.

Tom Barone, Professor Emeritus, Arizona State University (USA)

Alexandra Cutcher is an empowered Gypsy metaphorically weaving together fiction, art, poetry, and narrative to create a rich tapestry of memories and stories as she examines some of the most important issues of our time: displacement, identity and belonging. This compelling auto/biography grips the reader in a seductive way, reminding us that many nation states of today welcome displaced persons, immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees and transnational persons, and yet, much work needs to happen if we are to truly understand what these transitions mean to individuals and their families. Arts based research offers a distinctive array of aesthetic engagements that help us grapple with these stories in powerfully revealing and instructive ways. Cutcher does a remarkable job of bringing her auto/biography to life and ultimately provides an exceptional example for others.

Rita L. Irwin, Professor, Art Education and Curriculum Studies, The University of British Columbia (Canada)
This rich and layered book explores Alexandra Cutcher’s transformative search for a sense of belonging and identity through rediscovering her Hungarian heritage. Originally a ground-breaking and highly visual arts based doctoral portfolio, the research journey has fared well in its translation to a book. Through the well-crafted and warm personal stories and images we as readers are able to consider our own search for meaning and purpose and the resonances with our own lived experiences. At the same time and on another level Australia’s search for identity and struggle with difference and diversity, with inclusion and exclusion, can be explored. An important, highly readable contribution to this burgeoning field.

Robyn Ewing, AM, Professor of Education and the Arts, The University of Sydney (Australia)

Displacement, Identity and Belonging is an evocative, beautifully-written love letter to arts based research. Written in the first person, present tense, it compellingly urges readers forward in this blend of Hungarian legend, contemporary researcher, and feminist perspectives. We experience, first-hand, how these narratives are interwoven in the experience and voice of the author. Blending part history of Hungary after the war and Australia after post-war migration, the author importantly points out that this is “a particular story,” but a universal one. It is universal in the migrant experience, the leaving, the arriving, the suffering.

The structure of the text is itself an unfolding, modelling the journey that the author narrates so that we readers can experience it for ourselves. Travelling, in this way, is also a central experience alongside displacement – that is, travelling or movement is itself a kind of emplacement, one that co-exists with the notion and experience of displacement. Indeed, as the author says, “I have felt forever in transit,” and this text takes the reader on her lifelong journey right along with her, sharing the gypsy consciousness that pervades this wonderful book. Cutcher argues (as all good arts based researchers do) that telling is just not as good as doing, and this book is a first-hand ‘doing’ that every reader, every migrant, every parent, child, artist and scholar should experience for themselves. Go buy a copy now! You won’t be sorry.

Anne Harris, PhD, Monash University, (Australia)

This work has qualities which rank it on par with the very best research texts with which I have engaged. It is at once, thought provoking, polyvocal, narratively and visually coherent and, most of all, there is a strong and purposeful relationship between the various two-dimensional art forms and the written text, between the purpose of the scholarship and the bound work itself. It is a courageously successful piece of scholartistry, which combines the very best qualities of traditional, intellectually strong, vigorous scholarship with qualities which make for fine artistry.

The power of narrative stories and the compelling nature of personal arresting, artful experience is very evident in this work; it is a sweeping manuscript. Cutcher has represented complex human experiences in a manner that is largely
seamless. The polyvocal forms of the work are powerfully evocative and one can hardly not be moved by the textual narratives, the photographic narratives and the conceptual artwork and, together, these work to induce high levels of resonance; I was alternatively moved, face tear-streaked, inspired, informed, challenged and impressed. This work is accessible to many readers and the writing is gloriously strong.

_J. Gary Knowles, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto (Canada)_
This work is dedicated to my noble parents Zita and Lászlo,
to my valiant grandparents Juliánna and Gábor
and to the extraordinary women
who are our children:
Bronte and Remy.

This book is for you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Orientation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Gypsy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Journeys and Investigations</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journey Begins</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to the Hows and Whys of This Work</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Whys of This Work</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Gypsy</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Hungary Hungarians; Australia Hungarians</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian Geography, Ethnicity and Character</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarians in Australia</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Laci (I)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Zita (I)</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Australian Immigration</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Context</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Gypsy</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: Displacement, Dislocation and Ethnicities</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity: A Context</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern Notions of Identity</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: Laci (II)</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12: Zita (II)</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 13: Lexi 165  
Chapter 14: Gypsy 195  
Chapter 15: Transitions, Resolutions and Belongings: Identities, Images and Stories 219  
Orientation 219  
Belonging 221  
Chapter 16: Australian Identity Today and Tomorrow: Guests, Strangers and Understandings 233  
Contemporary Multicultural Australia: Implications 233  
A Final Word 243  
Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research 245  
Epilogue 249  
Afterword 253  
References 255  
About the Author 265
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the first instance, I am and will always be grateful to Patricia Leavy for her faith in this work and the inspirational example she continues to set to all of us, but especially to those of us who dwell in the margins of the research world. Indeed her efforts are instrumental to bringing us all with her to the fore. Thank you also to Peter de Leifde for the chance he has taken in agreeing to publish this very personal story; Sense continues to be a gracious leader in the publishing world for practice-based educational research.

In the original doctoral inquiry that this book is based upon, Professor Robyn Ewing as my research supervisor gave me my first suite of permissions; she has always believed in my work. Robyn is the earliest and most influential proponent of arts-informed inquiry in Australia and has argued energetically on my behalf on more than one occasion. Robyn’s support, advice and contributions cannot be underestimated. For all of this and more, I am so very grateful.

Professor Elliot Eisner has had a profound influence on my work, as he has indeed upon many others’ in Arts education and Arts-based research. In so many ways, Eisner is arguably ground zero of the form. His thinking has been an anchor for me with respect to research, but also with respect to my own objective of improving the education and Arts experiences of children in schools. This research would not have happened in the form that it has, were it not for Eisner’s leadership, intellect and influence.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, as with the original research that gives this book its breath, I acknowledge the absolute and constant support my husband Stu has enthusiastically, yet calmly offers me in both thought and deed. Stu is my champion, my best friend and my most constant ally. He has continued to encourage me for almost 35 years, gently urging me onwards and inspiring me to see the world anew. In countless ways, Stu continues to support me, in making all of this possible.
“…everything I say, therefore, is incomplete”
(Elliot Eisner, 2011).
PROLOGUE

It is 1966 and I’m sitting on his knee. To me he is my Nagyapa, my Grandpapa. I feel his solid and loving presence curved around my little back like a pillowy buttress, monumental and safe. He smells of tobacco, Old Spice and brandy. The bouquet is distinctively Nagyapa and is a scent that will stay with me always, despite the fact that he has only months to live.

It is Saturday afternoon, and together we watch the cartoons, as is our habit. Our favorite is Bugs Bunny, and today the reel is “Rhapsody Rabbit”. We watch Bugs’ antics with a magic piano and a pesky mouse as he attempts Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2.

Nagyapa chuckles during the lassan; I can feel him shaking with mirth, and looking up at him I giggle too through the friska, because he is. The particular Hungarian Rhapsody in this cartoon is perhaps the most popular of Liszt’s compositions. It is my father’s favorite.

But I don’t know any of this now; I am only three. Together we doze, and ever so gently we float into sleep, me in his lap, safe and warm and unaware and loved, Nagyapa relaxed and snoring softly. This is our habit; it is our Saturday afternoon routine.

As the cadence of our breathing synchronizes, we become conscious together, in another place.

I am grown and with Nagyapa still, but this can’t be so because I know he will die soon. Nevertheless we are here together, he is still 55 and I am almost 40, yet it is strangely ordinary.

He is holding my hand and walking with me along a lingering sweep of sand and ocean. I look up at him; we are alone on the beach. It is a cool, sunny day and the azure canopy stretches above us for miles. The reflections of the clouds are mirrored on the wet sand as we walk close to the edge of the water. Its lacy patterns and deep green texture are punctuated with white froth here and there. I half expect to see Aphrodite rise from its foam, though it’s not a Greek goddess I’m about to encounter, but something else entirely.

“Édesem [sweet one],” Nagyapa says gently as he turns to me, “there are things you need to know”. I look up at him curiously as he continues, “You need to know you are Magyar. You need to know who you are!”

He is emphatic, and almost distressed. I’m bewildered at this, because in my three-year-old mind I know that of course I am Lexi and I am Hungarian. We speak Hungarian, we eat Hungarian food, and we go to Hungarian gatherings. Everyone I know is Hungarian. I mean, what else is there?
“Lexi, listen to me,” he says, sensing my confusion. “You need to know this. I need to show you, so that you know, so that you’ll always know.”

And with this last, he stops and I look into his grey-green eyes as the sky darkens. The night drops suddenly around us like an opera curtain. Nagyapa takes my hand and holds it tightly and together we walk into the gloom.

I rise.

I rise and I lift. With every breath I feel myself floating upwards into the ether, up into the air. I become weightless, insubstantial, ephemeral. I am of the earth no longer, almost dissolved. I am conscious of my tiny, wispy, gossamer self as I float and flutter, drift and dash. I am aware of Nagyapa’s presence with me, but I cannot see him.

The dark sky parts ahead of me as the light rises to greet my almost-nothing self. I find myself in movement, surging ahead at speed. I soar over the landscape, close to the earth beneath us and at one with the sky; it is glorious, it is liberating. I feel complete.

Suddenly and without warning, I halt and hover as a tableau opens below. I am curious and I look; the scene holds my gaze. I see the giant Nimrod, the mighty hunter, son of Kush, great-grandson of Noah, King in the land of Shinar. I can see that it is between two generous rivers.

I sense Nimrod’s strength and his individuality and know that this warrior is a man of extravagant power. He sits calmly by a magnificent yet docile panther and beside his beautiful wife, Eneth. Subconsciously I know her name means ‘deer’. They are both richly robed and glorious and lounging at their feet are their virile twin sons, Hunor and Magor. I come to realize that this is a place of abundance, of wisdom, of science and culture and civilization. I know that this is an ancient place and instinctively, that this family is my kin.

Unaware of my presence Eneth and Nimrod rise and move to retire to their tents. I notice movement beyond the court and see that a hunting party is readying itself, horses and tribesmen are gathering. Almost immediately I see Hunor and Magor mount their horses and depart suddenly and at great speed, warriors themselves and mighty hunters too, their father’s pleasure and delight is obvious as he watches them take their leave.

Instantly I am with the brothers, galloping forwards. I can smell the horses underneath and hear their heavy blowing. I feel the cooling wind whip my hair and the unmistakable thrill of the hunt. We travel on and on and ever onwards without sighting worthy prey for hours as the twins grow weary and malcontent. In time, we dismount and we rest; I hear the susurrus of displeasure amongst the tribal hunters. Ever so gradually, in a clearing beyond our campsite, I become aware of a majestic and serene presence. Hunor and Magor turn as one to see, as the Fehér Szarvas is revealed; I feel Nagyapa quiver with barely contained excitement at my side. It is the White Stag who stands just out of reach, an enormously powerful, glorious creature,
silvery and silent in the fading light. He stands on the rise just beyond us, his head and mighty antlers proudly raised to our scent.

In this second of stillness, I feel the legend begin.

A flurry of movement and the camp instantly collapses. We are off. I feel the exhilaration of the tribe, the anticipation of the brothers and the vitality of their purpose.

At once I realize I have left them but am moving still, as I see the landscape clearing before me. I feel the strength in my breath, in my four legs and in my hindquarters, the weight on my head, the thrill and fear of the escape, the strength of my resolve, the integrity of my purpose. I glide tirelessly ahead. The twins get close enough to release their arrows, but they never find me for I am too quick, too temporary. Hunor and Magor stop to rest the horses, then again they thunder on. They chase and stop, chase and stop for days, yet neither will surrender. They shoot and I fly away. They feverishly pursue as I lead them ever westwards through familiar terrain, out into the marshlands and beyond. Onwards we thunder, through alien territory, on and on. Out into the open spaces of Scythia, into the sun and the verdant green.

For only a moment I am fully revealed in this exposed space. As abruptly I am gone, disappearing once more into the ether, concealed for all time. Surprised and disheartened, Hunor and Magor hold each other’s gaze, blowing hard from the effort, perplexed, frustrated and disbelieving.

I can feel their frustration as Nagyapa and I regard them from above. With my mind, I entice them to look beyond themselves and their impossible prey to the opportunities that present themselves beyond the hunt. In the pursuit of the majestic White Stag, Hunor and Magor have found a new land.

The brothers have indeed been displaced; they have unwittingly journeyed to another place far beyond the borders of their own. It is unfamiliar and strange, yet beautiful and bountiful. There are game aplenty, ample and varied sources of water, plants in abundance. There are timber for tents, fish in the waters and birds in the air. Silently, the twins become aware of their surroundings and begin to see the prospects that present themselves in a new life. They make plans for their newfound futures as they rapidly return and report to Nimrod, begging his indulgence to migrate permanently to this new land. With excitement and great energy, the brothers tell him of the magnificence of Scythia, of the opportunities and of their schemes.

I feel Nimrod’s pride and also his sadness; I feel Eneth’s despondency and her acceptance. The parents release their sons with blessings and wealth; they take their parting sorrowfully. They know it is the last time.

Full of ideas and enthusiasm and vigor, Hunor and Magor leave their homeland never to return. They ride out of their father’s camp without so much as a backward glance, moving ever westwards towards their destiny.

As I stand beside a desolate Eneth, I watch them go and Nagyapa whispers close to my ear, “Édesem, it is your destiny too”.

xix
I follow Hunor and Magor on their final migration westwards, watching from above, and at times below as camp follower. Life is in constant movement, in constant flux.

In this quest, this journey, I am a gypsy, a wanderer, a nomad, a migrant. As I follow these beginnings, this land-taking, Nagyapa is a stable and constant guide, ensuring that I notice, that I see, that I know.

I watch as Hunor snatches Ilena and Magor kidnaps Temese, the Alan princesses from King Dula’s untended camp.

I watch, as they are married.

I watch, as they begin new lives; from their unions will spring all Huns from Hunor and all Magyars from Magor. And I witness the sweep of history unfolding before me.

I see Hunor’s descendant Attila and his pastoral, rebellious Huns, who generate a vast empire from China to Siberia to Persia to Western Europe. I watch Attila, a short yet powerful warrior with dark skin, a massive head, flattened face and the same beady eyes, high cheekbones and sparsely bearded face as my father. He is fierce and unrelenting, a consummate horseman and an aggressive prince.

I join him as he obliterates Pannonia and the Holy Roman Empire there; he is the scourge of Europe, striking fear into all peoples. I watch him with the Isten Kardja, the fiery Sword of God, and know that whomever possesses it is indestructible, destined to rule the world.

He does.

I see the Turul Madár, the turul falcon, bearing the Isten Kardja to Emese, wife of Ügyek, descendant of Attila. I lay with her as she sleeps and bear witness to her dreamings, her vision of a pure and luminous stream moving westward into an expansive river, flowing directly from her womb. The symbolism of this prophecy is not lost on me; I watch as Emese and Ügyek animate a dynasty of noble and heroic Magyar leaders who continue to migrate westwards.

It begins with the birth of their son Álmos, who in his time sires the gallant and courageous Árpád. I watch this Árpád, with his expert military skills and his generous wisdom become the founder of the Hungarian state, conquering the Carpathian basin and Danube plain, the land that is Magyarország: Hungary.

I am in Etelköz when the Covenant of Blood is settled between the Magyars and the other Hun tribes.

Nagyapa whispers close by, “Édesem, this is important, a great moment for the Magyars”.

I am with Árpád as he occupies the Carpathian Basin in a series of carefully planned diplomatic and military manoeuvres. I observe him as he and the other Magyar leaders hold their first assembly at Pusztaszer, establishing the Hungarian state on the foundations of a solid constitution. I see that Hungary is a sophisticated culture, internally stable and externally secure.

I bear witness to the settling of the Magyars in their land as pastoral peoples, free and faithful to only one God. I see their broadmindedness, their tolerance of different
religions, other races, foreign languages, new cultures; all are welcomed. It soothes me to know this.

Hungary is an unusual place, I see. She has a strong identity, her language is unique and her ethnic character intact. I notice the myriad advancements in craftsmanship, horsemanship and military concerns, personal hygiene and medical knowledge. I cast my gaze around the rest of the terrain and I see it isn’t so elsewhere in medieval Europe.

As Nagyapa continually shows me, I understand that Hungarian nationality is not exclusive, but rather open to all peoples regardless of their ethnic origin. People are invited, rather than forced to assimilate.

Nagyapa holds me close and tells me quietly, “All citizens enjoy equal rights under a democratic tribal system Lexi. This society is peaceful. People are well behaved, personal honor and strong moral standards are important”.

I soar over the landscape, light in being, secure in my growing understandings and enriched by my experiences, and I observe Hungary as she changes. Nagyapa and I are thrust forward through the ages. It is at once unpredictable and enchanting.

Christianity comes to Hungary; the church becomes all-powerful. As the year 1000 approaches and the world does not end, I watch as the beloved King István, applies to Rome to recognize his status as monarch. I observe Rome’s response in the shape of the distinctive crown and apostolic cross, gifted to the King; as I peek down through the corridor of history, I see them become symbols not only of István’s rule but also of Hungary’s nationhood.

On a wintry Christmas Day I bear witness to a celebrated coronation and see that István is majestic. I am soothed to notice how his people adore him, and delighted that he is regarded as a sincere, moral, ethnically tolerant and merciful monarch. Afterwards, I sit by István’s shoulder as he drafts a letter of advice to his son, Imre. “Guests and strangers”, he writes in faultless script on the vellum page, “must occupy a place of their own in your kingdom. Make them welcome and let them keep their languages and customs, for weak and fragile is the realm where a unique language and a unique set of customs hold sway”.

I ponder this as he reloads the quill and continues, “Do not ever fail to be equitable and kind to those who have come to settle here; treat them with benevolence so that they may feel more at home with you than anywhere else”.

This notion of a tolerant monarchy is beguiling to me as I admire the King’s restrained insight as well as his perfect penmanship.

It comes as no surprise to witness István’s beatification in 1083.

Time rushes by again and Nagyapa and I are in the wind once more. We witness János Hunyadi as he stops the Ottoman invasion at Nándorfehérvár in a triumphant victory.

Nagyapa whispers close to my ear, “This conquest is still celebrated in Hungary today Lexi. At midday everyday, the bells of every church in the country ring in honor of this achievement. This was ordered by the Pope, and has continued for five centuries”.
PROLOGUE

As the temporal becomes reality, we witness Hunyadi’s son Mátyás Corvinus assume a thirty-year reign and put his energies into a short-lived flowering of Renaissance culture. I find this moment particularly captivating as I sit in his extensive library, reveling in the beauty of the books. I observe, as it becomes celebrated throughout Europe. It is with regret that I take my leave; Nagyapa is urging me onwards.

Centuries pass like pages in those manuscripts and I watch from a distance, the Turks, as they persist in their yearning for Hungary’s lands. I see them as they try again and again to occupy her and eventually, succeed.

And as always, time marches ever forwards.

I see the Hapsburgs triumphing and Ferenc Rákóczi II leading a failed war of independence.

I see the manipulation of the monarchy, a joint kingdom giving birth to itself, the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

I see the remarkable resilience of the people as Hungary continues to develop culturally and economically. The Hungarians persist, and the land flourishes. We soar over the landscape as I watch and learn.

And then it all comes to an ignominious, inglorious end.

I sense rather than see Nagyapa by my side, quaking with impotent fury, “Hungary is about to enter the Great War Lexi,” he tells me with controlled gentleness, “And lose.”

At the same time as the fatal shots are fired in Sarajevo, I see my grandparents as small children. I see my grandmother growing up in a two-roomed, thatched house in the small village of Györszemere in northwestern Hungary. I see Nagyapa as a young boy, living in the nation’s capital of Budapest.

I ponder this; I know that it is my family, yet it is so strangely unfamiliar. I wonder and I pause. Unable to shake this disquiet, we move onwards.

I am there at Versailles when The Treaty of Trianon is signed. I see firsthand that it is achieved under duress, as Hungary’s historic lands are demolished.

It is the end of the war and it is also the end of Hungary. I hear the timeless echoes of the multitudes exclaiming through the years, “A dismemberment!”

“A vivisection!”

“A monstrous dissection!”

“A mutilation!”

I see that despite Hungary’s remarkable powers of recovery and vitality, the people are left feeling oppressed, deeply disheartened and determined to fight for their freedom, whatever the cost.

In the next moment, I watch as my father grows up poor, his own father dying so young. I see my mother being birthed in a wine barrel bath under an arbor of summer grape vines. Nagyapa looks across at me, and for a quiet moment, he beams. It is all too brief.

Again, I feel this disquiet, this unsettlingness. It is peculiar…

I cast my gaze below again and notice that in these years of the Second World War, Hungary struggles to remain neutral. I see too much bloodshed, untold evil and
extreme domination; people are stolen and tormented. As I watch the ruthlessness and persecution, I see Hungary ignored and used in equal measure. I see pacts signed and trampled and land given and withdrawn; Hungary bullied, abandoned, used and overlooked. And then she joins in.

As this is happening, Nagyapa holds me close. He senses my fear and my dismay. I see below as he and my grandmother grasp my six-year old mother and flee their homeland forever, making it to the relative safety of Germany.

I see my seventeen-year-old father begin his peripatetic existence all over Europe.

I come to understand that back home in Hungary, things are becoming frightening. I watch as the Russians advance through the country. I watch as my father and his friends listen to Admiral Horthy on the radio, announcing that negotiations with the Russians are taking place.

I observe the Russian armies occupying two-thirds of Hungary as conscription is introduced, even for the middle-aged. I see that the threat of physical and mental abuse is very real. Refugees, women and children are fired upon and old people are slain.

As the army starts retreating and the English and American bombers raze Budapest, I bear witness to trainloads of refugees escaping the Russians who are advancing without delay. I see fourteen-year-old boys being taken from their families under threat of execution.

Budapest falls to the Russians; it is a wasteland. The Soviet Army plunders, loots and rapes; they imprison, inter and torture. Armistices and treaties are signed and ignored, a farcical election is held.

A new constitution is described, which mimics the Russian’s. The People’s Republic of Hungary is born.

I can see unambiguously, that the glorious days of Nimrod, Attila, Árpád and István are gone forever.

I watch as my parents leave their beloved Magyarország behind, tormented, traumatized and in shock. I watch as my grandparents and my father make plans for newfound futures as displaced persons and refugees.

I watch as my family departs and I see that they, like Hunor and Magor before them, have indeed been dislocated; they will journey to a new land far beyond the borders of their own. It will be unfamiliar and strange, yet full of possibility.

*

In this moment of realization, I find myself spinning in Nagyapa’s arms, falling, floating down and down, wafting downwards. As I glide gently towards the beach where we started our journey, I see the port of Naples in the distance, the ships, the people, the heartbeat and the hope.

I pirouette from this view to watch my grandfather fading, vanishing. I reach for him and I miss.

“No!” I scream.
In my anguish, I race through my memories, our time together and the lessons Nagyapa wanted me to heed. In this moment and in my distress, I can feel his calming presence and his warmth. Yet, in my confusion I am still anxious about his earlier warning.

The disquiet lingers and my sense of panic blooms. I wonder at its meaning, I wonder at his message.

“Don’t leave me!” I shriek, my distress is absolute, “You can’t leave me! Nagyapa!”

He is disappearing. I can still smell him around me, the scent of tobacco, Old Spice and brandy linger, like a cloak. I continue to sense him, but it doesn’t comfort me.

“Lexi!” he cries into the ether, locking eyes with me as he fades. His next words are said deliberately and slowly, “Don’t forget ődesem. You are Magyar!”

And with this last sentence echoing into the void he is gone, forever.

For the first time in my life I feel utterly alone.
Art is among the few occupations where it is not an initial disadvantage to be a foreigner – indeed, to have come from certain countries is almost an advantage, and Hungary may be counted among these. (Kunz, 1985, p. 109)
CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION

This is a story of trauma, loss and gain, of place and displacement, of identity, alienation and belonging. It is a story of survival.

This is a particular story, but it is not a peculiar one. It takes as its central premise one small Hungarian immigrant family to Australia, who are not particularly special or extraordinary. We are a small family, relatively isolated, devoid of a large ethnic community with which to connect and thus we have always been somewhat self-contained. Our experience may appear, at least on first blush, to be paralleled by the post-war diasporic experience for a range of nations and peoples. However in many ways as you will come to know, this is not necessarily so. It is this crucial aspect, of the idiosyncrasies of difference that is at the core of this work.

Many families do indeed share the superficial aspects of the experience of diaspora and some may be of the view that since the surface details of this ‘other’ are quite similar, then the experiences of each cultural group must therefore be the same. Such homogenizing of difference fails to acknowledge and represent the encounters of the smaller collectives and the individuals within them; not all of us have had the same experience nor are we left with the same constructions of ethnicity and identity. The experience of difference can differ greatly within the larger collectives, and it is within the details of the specific that we are able to (and should) expose the particular. Silence and assumption are fertile spaces for ignorance and misunderstandings to propagate, with sometimes-dire consequences.

The experiences shared within this book are to be viewed through the primary conceptual framework of displacement, belonging and alienation, supported by the concepts of transformation and the constructions of identity. This is a somewhat grand assertion, given that this is also a deeply personal story and one that was pursued for profoundly private reasons. These tensions are both purposeful and self-conscious in the text, as will become obvious in the reading.

As may have already been presumed from the tenor of the prologue, although this is a book about ethnicity and constructions of the self, it is also a work of arts-based, auto/biographical research. As such, it is a book that confronts what an academic text can be. History, culture, experience, memory, theory and the spiritual have been creatively entwined in this account in order to be both provocative and informative, whilst as importantly, be engaging for the audience, who is invited into the story through both their feeling and thinking.

Thus, expressiveness in the context of this story and for arts-based research (ABR) in general, is a primary vehicle for learning (Eisner, 2011). Attention is given
to the qualities of the representation, as well as to meaning. Form and content in this work are inextricably entwined; meanings are revealed rather than reported and it is the aesthetic qualities of the work that will determine the type of reading experience that transpires.

In many ways this is a true story, full of lies, deceptions and inventions intentionally designed to generate understandings of difference, of ethnicity and of migrant experience. There are also many ghosts in this story, both discursive and real, to be encountered on the journey who will appear, disappear and reappear in the reading. As you will come to know in this work, the very form of the ruptured narrative is indeed a fundamental metaphor for the shifting constructions of multiple identities and moments of belonging in which I find my self.

THE RESEARCH

This inquiry revolves around several components. Essentially it is about an auto/biographical expression of the Hungarian migrant experience in Australia and is underpinned by notions of belonging and identity. These aspects are wrapped in a cloak of stories, constructed in language and in imagery. It is a creating-through of the self, using words and images (Trezise, 2011); a self-portrait.

Story is the central motif in this work; this portrayal is what Battiste calls a langscape (2011). The languages in this langscape are both verbal and visual. Thus, contained within this text are a myriad of creative representations including: the contextualizing legend in the prologue; artworks arranged in strategic places throughout; photographs; fictionalized memoir that interrupts and illuminates; metaphor that is deliberately provocative; poetry embedded in places; historical passages that give context; cultural material that informs; and academic theory that intrudes. These voices purposefully compete with and complement each other.

Although the chapters, imagery and stories are designed to build upon and disrupt each other for an in/complete view of the langscape, it should be noted that a linear reading is not necessary, although the book has indeed been designed this way. However, some readers may find it equally enlightening to view just the images or the narratives or the theoretical chapters or the fictionalized memoir or any combination of these in any sequence, in order to get a glimpse of the langscape within. Such incomplete readings may indeed be sufficiently satisfying and instructive.

Further, a minimum of academic jargon is utilized so that the texts are ergonomic: ‘readable’, available and comprehensible for a range of readers. This is also a purposeful device and one that speaks to my deep philosophy regarding the accessibility of research to a wider audience than the merely academic. As someone from a non-English speaking background, notions of language are profoundly recognized. Further discussion regarding democratic access to the language of research is explored in Chapter Three.

Issues of self and authorship within this text may be confounding. The stories are representative of the multiple and varied expressions of the self and identity, and it
this multivocality that is a metaphor for the contemporary self, amongst many other things. The polyvocal nature of this research speaks directly to the complex issues of identity and belonging that this inquiry reveals.

In this story, there is duality and contradiction with respect to notions of the self, other and the necessary entwinement of self and other that is inevitable when one writes about their own experience. Although I claim that the work is polyphonic, in the sense of many voices and visual and verbal texts, it is also acknowledged that by virtue of the monologic nature of writing, it is my voice that is ultimately in control of framing the story. Such contradictions are self-conscious and intentionally employed, which is one reason I privilege the term auto/biography.

Thus, in much the same way as we can express differing constructions of identity, there are many voices in this work that the reader will recognize as the author/artist. Beginning with the voice of the granddaughter introduced in the prologue, we are provided with a glimpse into the character of the protagonist.

Later, we encounter her as another identity when the gypsy passages disrupt the reading. The gypsy is a provocative character whose very identification as ‘gypsy’ may be challenging for some; this gypsy is a nomad, forever travelling and rarely still. She is utilized as a deliberately confrontational device and speaks to unresolved identity issues. She positions herself as the commentator who interrupts the other readings, as well as providing a narration, or back-story. Her tale is both integral and transcendent of the research.

Later still, the reader will encounter Lexi in her account of experience and memory, in which she expands the accounts of her parents into the second-generation. This voice and this story moor all of the other identities.

Further, scattered throughout the text are several artworks created as yet another layer of reading, of identity, narrative and meaning. As in many auto/biographical accounts, photographs and other documents are also included by way of illustration, embellishment and description. In this work, this type of imagery in embedded into the narratives to both interrupt and enhance.

It is envisioned that all of these expressions be read both separately and together, as they are both transcendent of and embedded in the work.

Although the layers of meaning throughout and within all of the texts both visual and verbal, are analyzed in the theoretical passages, these particular discussions are not privileged over the other stories; they get equal exposure. Indeed the use of artistic devices in the presentation, creation and analysis of the evidence is a central feature of this work. A more fully articulated discussion of the specifics of the methodology is explored in Chapter Three.

**Originals and Reproductions**

This inquiry was initially undertaken as a doctoral dissertation. It was a work that was highly visual, with coloured folios that signified the separate sections, full colour pages of paintings and hand-coloured prints, works of digital imagery and
visually embellished narratives (or illuminated manuscripts). It also employed literary devices, on equal par with the highly visual representations of the story. Such are the creative freedoms of contemporary doctoral dissertations.

I delayed publishing it as a book because I know of no publisher (or reader for that matter) who would be willing to shoulder the cost of producing more than two hundred full-color pages, along with the more traditional written text. Representation continues to be an issue for works of ABR. Meanwhile, the years rolled on and the field of ABR evolved and grew, most significantly (for this work) the literary iterations of the form. Concurrently, I began my second career as an academic, after having spent almost three decades as a high school Visual Arts teacher.

It was within this scholarly environment that my attention turned more vigorously to writing and to grappling with notions of the complexities of representations of ABR works in traditional text-based formats (see Cutcher, 2013; Cutcher, 2014). Then, wondrously, a combination of attendance at international conferences and the explosion of social media gave me the gift of confidence and contact with the leaders in my field. My live encounters with these leaders and continuing dialogue with their work (e.g. Elliot Eisner, Tom Barone, Gary Knowles, Rita Irwin, Kit Grauer, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, Carl Leggo, Richard Siegesmund, Graeme Sullivan to name but a few, with Patricia Leavy being especially significant) motivated me to think again about how this work might be translated into a further iteration of the original text, one which might privilege words in a black and white format. More importantly these giants of the field, and Patricia most notably, gave me the permissions to explore the possibilities of writing, to explore another experience of crafting research-as-artwork, of translation, of interpretation. I was inspired anew.

Thus, this book differs somewhat from the original reportage of the research, which gave it life. As the book form of the doctoral dissertation upon which this is based, it operates within literary, color and formatting constraints, in much the same way that the original, highly visual thesis worked within the extant academic constraints of the time it was written. As such, it takes its creative liberties with words and only black and white imagery, a somewhat foreign territory for someone who has always identified themselves as a maker of colorful images and objects, and quite confronting for someone whose first language is the visual. Rather than seeing this as restrictive, I have chosen to view it as a challenge, one that has been both stimulating and remarkable. With the enthusiastic support of the relatively small but ever expanding ABR community, who are generous, impressive and encouraging and who continue to energize and inspire me, I no longer feel alone on this journey.

My hope is that the reader does not simply read and disregard this work after the demands of whatever the purpose in reading is over. My hope is that these stories touch you, enhance your knowing, resonate with you and expand your understandings. My hope is that you return to the stories again and again, if only in your memory.
During a recent conversation about this book, an old friend asked what my ethnicity meant to me. The question surprised me, since we’ve known each other for almost twenty years. I began by saying that ethnicity could be many things – mask, weapon, consolation, sentimentality, gesture, even a kind of inner voyage. On a roll, I gave examples of these, some historical, others anecdotal. But I didn’t speak of myself.

My friend listened patiently and then persisted: “What do you feel about being Hungarian?”

Finally it occurred to me that I should tell a story. (Teleky, 1997, p. 165)
The last time I saw my grandmother she bit me.

It was only a small bite and a loving one. It was lucky that I quickly withdrew my hand from her mouth, otherwise, who knows what would have happened? How would I explain a wound to my anxious Mama, fussing around behind me making sure my grandmother’s things were in order, her laundry folded and put away, the bed tidy? It was lucky that I acted quickly, but I fear that the sudden removal of my fingers from her mouth may have dislodged her false teeth.

I didn’t want to upset Mama any more than necessary. She had been my grandmother’s primary carer for the past eighteen months, and it had been especially stressful. Her responsibilities and obligations are so many – a mother who was virtually dependent on her for everything, an elderly husband who was as challenging as he was adorable; and a middle aged daughter, strong willed and spirited.

I didn’t want to upset her. Mama had spent the last year and a half watching her mother slide into dementia. It started with a few falls, in the bathroom once breaking a rib, and once on the path outside her little home. It was the beginning of the Alzheimer’s. Mama had sensed it you see, the decline, but the rest of us told her not to be silly, that she was being overly dramatic. Drama is an enduring motif in our family.

In this case, however, Mama was quite correct. Her feeling of impending doom was exactly right, and it is her, after all, who has had to deal with all of the challenges that caring for a demented, geriatric parent entails. Mama is an only child; her difficult mother has always been demanding, often unkind and constantly calculating. In her time, my grandmother was strong, dominating, charming and cruel, but always, always the ultimate survivor. After sixty-six years with such a prevailing presence in Mama’s life, it’s a wonder that she has endured it with such grace. But then Mama is used to hardships; they are old friends really.

As I watched Mama buzz around, I wondered why my Nonya had decided to sink her teeth into me. Was it because she was trying to kiss my hand but had forgotten how? Was it that she was trying to eat me? She had forgotten how to feed herself, but also how to eat, as the result of the last stroke. The carers at the transitional care facility had just told Mama that they had found Nonya’s wedding ring in her mouth yesterday. Was she trying to kiss that too, and slipped? Or was she trying to swallow the ring in some attempt to absorb the love of her darling Gábor, dead now for thirty-
six years? Perhaps she was returning to her infant self, mouthing everything by way of sensory exploration.

These questions will of course go unanswered, as will all my questions of Nonya now. She is living inside a still physically healthy yet decimated body, with a shrinking mind and the likelihood of more of what the doctors call ‘cerebral episodes’ happening to her.

As I looked at my Nonya, her small shrunken body still and unmoving in the bed, her eyes locked into mine, none of these thoughts were in my head. I was simply thinking that although the animation of her body language, her mobility and most of her speech were now gone, she spoke volumes to me with her dark, ebony eyes. She looked at me, and she looked into me, and at that moment her eyes said more loving things to me than I think I had ever heard from that once beautifully shaped mouth. The fierceness and the bitterness were gone. The hostility and discontent had moved to another place. There were a few things left, however. Her fighting spirit and her tenacity were obvious in her struggle to stay connected to me. Occasionally her eyes would glaze over and I could tell that she didn’t recognize me. At other times, her mind simply went somewhere else, but through sheer effort of will, she’d struggle to the surface to talk to me again, without words. My Nonya is a fighter.

She brought my hand to her mouth again, and kissed it. Once, twice, four times. I told her, with my mouth and my own dark eyes that I loved her dearly, and she smiled. High, unmistakable cheekbones, face rosy with health, lined by experience and time. White hair against the white pillow, white sheets, white blankets, white bed.

And a dark swarthy countenance that gave lie to the fact that she had not been outside in months. Her black velvet eyes, her spirit and her strength. She’s denied it forever, but deep down I know. My grandmother is a gypsy.

* 

I am a second-generation-Hungarian-Australian woman.

Notice all those hyphens? I’m neither one thing nor the other, neither one identity or both. This is the way I have felt my whole life, nothing singular defines me. I find myself now actively defying any sort of definition. I resist being classified. No, not even resist it – I despize it. Such definitions have had such an enduring effect, enduring since my childhood of loneliness and isolation.

The consequences of this traumatic childhood linger with me still, more than thirty years later. This is both a blessing and a curse.

“Oh, come on”, some of my friends say to me, “That was so long ago.”

They are well meaning really, these friends, just impatient with me.

If only it were that easy. Most of my current friends didn’t know me as a child, so they cannot possibly understand. Some of them don’t remember what it was like back then; most of them have forgotten.

The biggest insult I have ever had when I was young, and one I didn’t really understand at the time, was, I think, intended to be a compliment.
“Don’t be silly Lexi; you don’t look like a wog…”

In 1960s Australia when I was a child, the wogs were the migrants, the refugees, the Displaced Persons. People from Europe were “greasy, dirty wogs”. We were the untouchables, the social pariahs; responsible for all that was wrong with Australia at that time.

These heartfelt platitudes were sincere and said so generously, as if I could hide my difference, as if that was a good thing. I was OK to them because I didn’t stand out too much, I didn’t look too different. You know, with the correct lighting and a little bit of makeup, I could look just like them.

Until of course, they came to my house, or met my parents, or saw the contents of my lunch box. Or smelt it.

Really? This was meant to be a compliment?

Some of my friends don’t understand my perspective and they don’t want to, impatient in a culture that now proclaims its tolerance. But some of them know; they know what I mean, without having to say it. They understand, because they empathize, because to an extent we have a shared history. We know what it’s like to feel alienated, in the most vivid sense of the word; like aliens from another universe, speaking an entirely different language, eating different foods, having different habits, different rituals. So incredibly foreign, so incomprehensible.

That’s a funny word, ‘wog’. A reclaimed word in the Australian vernacular these days, an empowerment. It has become shorthand for something entirely different, something to be admired. A badge of honour; and at times, a weapon.

Life is funny don’t you think? That same word had so much power to wound us, to make us feel small, insignificant, like a nothing, as if we had no right to breathe the same air. How quickly we forget what it was like to be a wog in the sixties in Australia, especially if you didn’t live in Sydney or Melbourne.

But perhaps not. What we are doing to our newest Australians these days makes me think we haven’t learnt anything from the flowering of multiculturalism. The ‘One Nation’ political party has a lot to answer for; a lid was lifted in the ‘90s and the xenophobes, contained for so long, flew back out. Pandora had nothing on Pauline Hanson. And the way asylum seekers and refugees have been so utterly demonized, driven by politics and swept into a fury by the media, makes me feel like I’m still living in the sixties. All of a sudden it’s OK to be racist and small-minded again.

Have we learnt nothing?

Anyway, I digress. Those women, my friends who know what I mean, in a sense know the real me, without having to ask questions, spend girly time or bond. They know the me deep inside myself. The me that had to live two lives, but fit into neither. The me that knew what it was like to suffer the torment of a salami sandwich on black bread when all around me were the culinary triumphs of vegemite sandwiches, and devon and tomato sauce on ‘white boy’ bread. The all-pervasive smell of mutton cooking; the variations of steak and egg, steak and chips, a mixed grill as your choices at a ‘restaurant’, or a ‘café’. Milky, cold tea or a sherry. People have forgotten.
CHAPTER 2

Those women, my friends who know are wogs too of course. They are like me and yet they are not. Almost all of the ethnic women of my acquaintance hail from one of the majority minorities in Australia. Their vigor and their ability to maintain their cultural strength comes from their large numbers, their political clout, their (it’s ironic really) cultural omnipotence, their credibility. It’s cool to be Greek, Italian, French, Spanish.

The Anglos now envy us! We were all once so despised, and now, over a dinner party table, or a dark, noisy corner in a smoky party haze, I get, “I wish I was Italian” or “I wish I had a heritage that was exotic, historical, interesting”.

Can you imagine? Once told, pressured, forced to assimilate, we are now being urged to embrace our ethnicity, to flaunt it, to be proud of it. It leaves me scratching my head. From where does this mass acceptance come? Surely it cannot be all about the food?

Anyway, for me, it’s a little different. I belong to one of the minority minorities; there aren’t many of us in Australia. Even today, when people realize that my heritage is Hungarian, one of two things will happen. They will say, “Do you ever get hungry? Are you hungry? Ha, ha, ha!”

I couldn’t possibly calculate the amount of times I have heard that one. Not very original. The other reaction is one of awe. Mind you, I had to wait until I developed breasts to earn this one. It’s, “Wow. You’re Hungarian, you’re a gypsy. That’s so sexy.”

I have two issues with this. Firstly, it’s usually lascivious, ignorant Australian males that react this way, and secondly, any Hungarian would take this as an insult. Racist? Yes, but you need to understand the history. Being a gypsy in Hungary has no cultural (or any other) capital. And although I find this appalling, that’s the way it is.

* 

Beggars, thieves and troublemakers. This is the image of the gypsy in the Hungarian consciousness.

“It’s like calling her a bag lady!” Mama gasps, livid when I say that this is how I see Nonya.

“I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all. Hungarians will think that you’re serious. It’s insulting.”

I try to explain to Mama that in the Australian consciousness, the connotations of ‘gypsy’ are far more favourable. Australians see gypsies as exotic, artistic, clever, passionate.

“I don’t care”, she says, “I don’t like it at all. And your grandmother would have a fit!”

This last comment I think, is amusing under the circumstances. The purposes of this latest phone call between my mother and me, is to tell me that Nonya has had yet another stroke. She has now lost her vision, her hearing and therefore her ability to communicate and understand.
This is heartbreaking. I feel that she is now lost to us forever. The good news, however, is that Mama has found a permanent nursing home place for her at pretty Fingal Bay, north of Newcastle. A beautiful facility I am told, four star. A long way for Mama to travel to see her, but Nonya will have good care. Will she even be aware of it at all, I wonder?

I ponder this question over the next days, and in my despair, I find myself going back through the photo albums to see her as I remember her at that last, difficult Christmas. Still in possession of most of her faculties, still herself, slightly disconnected from us all, but aware and happy.

For all intents and purposes now, however, she has slipped away. Even though the last time I saw her I thought she had quite an engaging internal life, a dialogue that she would sometimes participate in, evidenced by random and (to us) disconnected mutterings and half sentences, she was not herself. She had softened, and all of the harsh edges and prickliness were gone. Strong she most certainly is, still. She is fighting this newest challenge, unwilling to give up, unable to let go.

It is largely because of her that my grandparents and my mother established themselves so quickly and efficiently firstly in Germany during the war, and then six years later, in Australia. She has been a wanderer, a dark-eyed beauty; shrewd and ingenious. She constantly used to say, “I always know what to do”, and that is an absolute truth. Nonya has always been enduring, hardworking, inventive, steadfast. She is, quite simply, a survivor.

She inspires me to look further backwards in time. I want to see her face when she was my age, and younger. I want to see if I had inherited anything from her. Mama always says that I have her eyes and her mouth, and as I look through the photographs, I see that this is true. She was beautiful in an archetypal European sense, more elegant than pretty, more stylish than fashionable.

I am not satisfied. I look at photos of her as a girl, a young woman, a mother, a grandmother and an old woman and I realize that the only sense I have of her was within these documents and the relationship I have had with her. Neither is very satisfying, and both are intangible to me.

In that moment I understand that my direct and physical connection to my history and that of my daughters, is also slipping away. Soon it would be gone forever.

Who is this woman? This woman that I see in the pictures, born thousands of miles away in the early years of last century, in a small land-locked country at the heart of Europe? I know Nonya, but only as her granddaughter. She is a formidable woman of great courage and verve, her presence and personality has permeated the lives of all the people in my family, over four generations.

This realization leads me to some big questions.

As I think about them, I look at her reflected gaze in my favourite photo of her, taken by my grandfather with the small box brownie camera that now sits on the shelf in my lounge room. Nonya is dressed in black and is smoking a cigarette — a real femme fatale. The room is harshly lit, and large shadows are cast on the walls and floor in angular shapes. She is posing, as all the women in my family do when
a camera is pointed at them, and her expression tells me that she is powerful and confident in her belief of both her own beauty and her formidable strength.

Over the next few hours and days, the questions in my head will not be silenced. We are losing her. She is not the beloved old granny, innocent, doting, involved in our lives. She never has been. My feelings towards her have always been complex. But somehow, I feel a large open wound blossoming inside of me, and a rising sense of panic. I have work to do.

Focusing, I begin to tease out my idea, and pondering Nonya's beginnings and her journey, I also begin to think of my father. He too had been a nomadic youth. For many years he was a man without a country. Hungary was always home, but its situation after the war had become unbearable for him.

It also occurred to me that over the years I had let their often-repeated stories wash over me. I have stopped listening to them decades ago; through boredom and repetition, I have switched off.

Now I was ashamed.

I have to write these stories, I have to document them somehow – they are my history, the history of my people. Gypsies we may not be, wanderers we have definitely been and Australians we now are. But just how did we get here?

And in my reverie, it begins, this journey of mine into unchartered territories. Nonya, because she is our oldest living relative in this country, is our matriarch. From her and my Nagyapa, now gone from our lives for 36 years, came my mother and myself. Similarly, Dad came to Australia, but this was a journey he made alone. He met and married Mama in that working class bastion of Newcastle, that had a tiny and now almost extinct Hungarian community.

I start the journey backwards, in time and experience; mine and those who came before me, as well as those who paralleled my life in a different country, my unknown, huge, extended Hungarian family.

This family had not existed for me as a child, except as thin blue letters that came about once a month, with foreign stamps and untranslatable pages. These people belonged to another place; caught forever it seemed, in time and my parent's memories, half a world away in a tiny but proud country, somewhere in the middle of Europe.

My search begins with Mama. She is the essential link between my grandmother and me. Ironically, she is the lynch pin of our family. I say 'ironically', because her relationships with all the family members this side of the equator are somewhat complex.

Mama is far from the indulgent mother or the traditional subservient, dependent wife, although she loves us all dearly. She is however, a dutiful daughter, wife and mother, and always has been, often at the expense of her own fulfilment. Mama is the
epicentre of our family, and she is directly connected to all of us – her mother, me and of course to her husband. Much like the centre of a flower, my mother anchors all the parts together. This is why I went to her first.

*

Over the bones of yet another family feast at my parents’ house, my children watching television in the next room, the menfolk snoozing. Mama and I sit, as is our tradition, sharing the last of the fizzy wine, chatting over the catastrophe that was our lunch.

“So this is what I want to do,” I say to her as I explain my deep need to connect myself to a past that exists for me only as a ghost. “I want to find out all I can about you and Dad, and Nonya and Nagyapa, and our Hungarian family that I’ve never known, and about the journeys you all made to get here. I want to know who we are and where we belong. I need to know who I am. I need your help...What do you think?”