

# Research Intersections in Language Studies



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**Abstract** Language studies in Australian universities have weathered considerable crises over the last two decades, and they have done so possibly better than in most English-speaking countries. Many language and culture programs have proved astoundingly resistant, and undergraduate numbers are not only stable, but over the last decade they have been on the rise in many places. Our disciplinary home bases continue to expand to include other areas of the humanities such as film studies, cultural history and socio-linguistics. Recent changes in the higher education sector, such as the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Engagement and Impact Assessment (EIA), present us with a further set of challenges. One way forward, which can capitalize on our transdisciplinarity, is offered by Ottmar Ette, who suggests that we reconceptualize the humanities in terms of what kind of knowledge they produce, and how. In considering this approach, I will explore strategies for developing research collaborations across schools and faculties with cognate and complementary disciplines.

**Keywords** Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) · Engagement and Impact Assessment (EIA) · Higher education · Transdisciplinarity · Humanities · Research collaboration · Language studies

## 1 Challenges for Languages in Australian Universities

Over the last three decades Language studies in Australian universities have faced considerable challenges, or crises, as indeed have their counterparts in most Anglophone countries. The tertiary education sector has weathered passably well many of these crises—the transition to greater managerialism and corporatization,

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the shift to a knowledge economy and globalization of markets—, as it has various administrative restructurings and reforms at the local level. We have arguably weathered *less well* the global shift towards greater monolingualism, or what Michael Clyne and John Hajek have called the “monolingual mindset” (Hajek and Slaughter 2014). Despite the diversity of languages that are spoken in these countries, Anglophone countries are at real risk of becoming nations of “second language illiterates”, as Russell Berman lamented (Berman 2011). Language learning is increasingly seen in Australia, in schools and universities, as difficult, and high-level linguistic competency almost as unobtainable.

Yet, many language and culture programs around Australia have proved astoundingly resilient (Dunne and Pavlyshyn 2012, pp. 11–12). In German, for instance, the number of universities offering language and culture courses—16 of them—has not decreased over the last 30 years but actually increased (Fernandez et al. 1993). Staffing resources may have dwindled, and conditions of employment become more precarious, but student numbers have been relatively stable over the last decade. In some places they have even risen significantly although this trend now appears to be reversing, and will probably continue to fall in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The introduction of so-called breadth or broadening subjects as a compulsory part of every degree in a few universities has revealed a demand for language study that has taken language staff rather by surprise. Growth in student numbers has been accompanied by growth in diversity in the student body, as more and more students from outside the arts and humanities elect to study a language. As student cohorts continue to diversify, so too do our disciplinary home bases. Staff in language departments are increasingly coming from a broader disciplinary base in the humanities and social sciences that include linguistics and applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics, literature and culture, film and performance studies, philosophy, cultural studies and cultural history, and gender and sexuality studies. Although this could be construed as a loss of core disciplinary identity, this breadth could equally be considered an asset. Particularly at a time when the higher education sector is undergoing changes in the way it measures research productivity and activity, I argue that this diversity can and must become the language disciplines’ best friend.

Managerialism, with “its language of performance indicators, rankings, quality assurance processes” (Kalfa and Taksa 2017, p. 687), has not only impacted on traditional ideas of collegiality (Knights and Clark 2014), it has also affected academics’ research agendas and behaviours (Nickson 2014). In the latest of higher education reforms introducing “engagement and impact” into the 2018 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, universities are required to evaluate, in addition to quality, the impact of research on the community, as well as levels of engagement, or outreach, with non-academic partners. Changes introduced by the Federal Government of Australia in 2017 to the allocation of Research Block Grants to Higher Education Providers, specifically those relating to funding for research training (Research Training Program, RTP) and to support the systemic costs of university research (Research Training Scheme, RTS) are leading to substantial shifts in research cultures across the sector. New methods of calculating the block

grants which give more weight to national competitive grant income and so-called “engagement” monies stemming from other government or industry partners, tenders and consultancies, including international funding bodies, will see staff in languages coming under increasing pressure to generate far more research income than has hitherto been the case.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, it is not enough for us to publish, and publish internationally, which is something languages staff do very well. What we need to be able to do is to navigate the shifting terrain of academic and administrative research better and more creatively. As the cartoon (Fig. 1) about life on the metaphorical “island of research” captures so aptly, we all bring an “ocean of experience” to our research work in our doctoral training, and are equipped with a veritable “sea of theory” and ideas. Yet, teaching and researching in an environment that is both increasingly global while still being predominantly monolingual can for languages staff feel as if we are marooned on a desert island. All too easily, we embark on projects from a sound disciplinary vantage point, venturing forth in our enquiries from the “city of hope” only to have our hopes dashed, cruelly, not only on the “peaks of confusion”



**Fig. 1** The Island of Research. First published in 1966 by Ernest Harburg as “Research Map” in *American Scientist*, 4, 470. Reproduced with kind permission from Ernest Harburg, as a mark of respect for Charles Pierce’s famous call: “Do not block the path of inquiry” (Pierce 1998, Vol. 2, p. 48)

<sup>1</sup>See Research Block Grants Calculation Methodology (Australian Government. Department of Education and Training 2019).

or in the “canyons of despair,” but even on the “deltas of dirty data”. Our best efforts at pursuing large-scale research projects are frequently thwarted on the treacherous “money passes” in the “mountains” of research and data we collect. They are dashed above all in that most inhospitable terrain of all on our island of research, that “great fundless desert.”

## 2 Individual Versus Collaborative Models of Research

In future, languages staff will most likely be expected to meet research income targets, whether from national funding schemes such as the ARC Discovery Projects, Discovery Early Career Projects and Linkage Projects or from other government and industry sources. Staff members’ performance is now measured on their ability to attract other sources of funding such as category 2, 3 and 4. In some universities, Arts faculties are debating whether the definition of research active needs to follow these broader national trends and adopt a far harsher set of criteria that makes research income almost mandatory for senior levels of staff.

Research in the UK indicates that the imposition of such targets is having significant impacts on the life of individual researchers and research culture in general (Nickson 2014, p. 61). In a study of one UK university, Nickson identified both enabling and restrictive impacts of management practices on the individual researcher (p. 71), finding among other things that many researchers successfully negotiated their engagement with new regimes of monitoring research so that they could pursue their own agendas. Researchers were thus able to “achieve their goals in spite of management practices, rather than because of them” (p. 71). By the same token, many perceived the new managerialism as restrictive, and were feeling isolated, under pressure, and undervalued (p. 71).

There is sufficient anecdotal evidence to suggest that Australian researchers are responding much in the same way. I propose that one way languages staff can “survive” on the “island of research” and continue to value collegiality and academic freedom, while negotiating new managerial imperatives, is to rethink some of our habituated ideas of how we conduct research and with whom. In the humanities and social sciences, the traditional model has long been the lone scholar, who “squirrels” away at his pet topic, collecting research materials over the course of a career which he painstakingly crafts into a life-long individual research profile that bears his own unique stamp and identity. Indeed, in the past the lone scholar has been something of a “lone ranger”, predominantly western, white and male. As Clegg has revealed, the ideal of the traditional academic is typically encapsulated by an elite in academia which is “mostly white, male and middle class” (2008, p. 331).

The Lone Ranger, as we know from the American radio series, the postwar TV series and films that became popular around the globe, was brave and intrepid; he overcame adversity because he believed that one man had the power to “make the west a better place” (Andreychuk 2018, p. 2). Modelled on the historical Texas Rangers of the early nineteenth century who fought for Texas’s independence from

Mexico, the original radio character created in 1933 was a hero in the “vein of a Zorro or Robin Hood” (Andreychuk 2018, p. 10). The Lone Ranger was dubbed “lone” because all the other Texas Rangers were dead, and he was the only one left. Like so many superheroes of the modern age, the Lone Ranger is a frontier hero, infinitely resourceful, needing little aid from outside to get by, and is always prepared to go it alone. Moreover, the original Lone Ranger “symbolize[s] courage, fair play, and honesty” (Andreychuk 2018, p. 12).

The model of the lone scholar, like the Lone Ranger, embodies many of the “heroic” virtues that have traditionally informed academics’ sense of calling and professional identity. The lone scholar, who today may indeed be female, sees herself at the frontier of knowledge creation; she values independence, collegiality and the freedom to choose her research topics, although these values are under threat by the corporatization of universities (Nickson 2014, p. 52). She is content to gather her data alone, to analyse it alone, and to publish her findings in single-authored publications. The lone scholar, like the Lone Ranger, is also a master improviser and good at adapting her behaviour to achieve her professional goals to meet the exigencies of the teaching and research environment (Bennich-Björkman 2007, pp. 351–356). In fact, the individual researcher in languages has in the past proven extremely adept at adjusting to changing student and institutional demands. One way she has responded over the last 30–40 years to these pressures has been to reskill and to either shift the focus of her field of research to an area deemed more relevant or move sideways into different fields of research altogether. Some trained medievalists in the 1970s in French and German upskilled to become experts in language pedagogy and audio language laboratories, and in the 1980s some rebadged themselves successfully as computer-assisted language learning experts. In general, many academics in language departments have branched out from their original disciplines into neighbouring fields such as literary theory, philosophy, sociology, film, history and linguistics. Many of the generation now over 50 have diversified their research fields or moved sideways into cognate fields—literary historians often add film, cinema studies or performance studies to their domains of expertise. Literary theorists often expand their reach into philosophy or aesthetics, psychoanalysis, media or systems theory. Cultural historians find themselves adding value to their skills by becoming sexuality, economic or military historians as well. Like the Lone Ranger, the lone scholar endeavours to make the most of the equipment she has but she also ensures that she has a greater range of equipment to hand.

While we might admire the lone scholar’s tenacity and persistence in the face of adversity, the language academic might be better equipped to withstand the pressures of managerialism in her institution if she abandoned her isolationist stoicism and brought additional expertise on board from outside. By drawing on others who have similar interests but with different skill sets, language academics may be better served by creating project-specific teams or collaborations and thematic networks, thus sparing themselves much of the pressure to reskill. Teams or clusters of researchers based on a meaningful division of labour between experts can save time and work. Members of teams are more likely to have credible track records and hence greater success in securing external funding, whether this be from national

competitive grant schemes such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) or from external bodies.

Research in the United Kingdom into changing research cultures has shown that academics engage in “informal” strategies to pursue their own research agendas within “formal” management frameworks (Nickson 2014, pp. 72–73). If we include among such informal strategies the choice to join a particular research network or academic-led initiatives to form a specific team to carry out a collaborative project, informal solutions may also offer languages staff in Australian universities palatable ways to navigate the tricky territory of new management frameworks and imperatives. The advantage of such collaborations is that they can capitalize on our existing transdisciplinarity while extending our reach into other topics and fields. These research clusters or collaborations do not need to be with the same colleagues as in our teaching, and may involve colleagues from areas inside the humanities and social sciences as well as outside. This opens up many possibilities for projects of different kinds, for transnational and disciplinary ones, for national-based but transdisciplinary ones, for intercultural and interdisciplinary, or even transdisciplinary and transnational projects. Projects can be either theme-focused, problem-oriented, genre-based, medium-based or historically grounded.

This is certainly not to suggest that research collaborations or concentrations, especially larger scale ones, are easy to forge or without their own intrinsic challenges. In institutions where languages staff are integrated into larger humanities or social science organizational units, there are fewer structural hurdles to overcome to find partners with similar interests. Even so, they can require an enormous effort and time-commitment to mount, and the success rate with ARC projects is relatively low. For the last 10 years the success rate has been around 20% for ARC Discovery Project grants.<sup>2</sup> Of the 17 Discovery Projects funded under the Language, Culture and Communication code (Field of Research code 20) in 2018, only three had single chief investigators.<sup>3</sup> For 2020, single-researcher projects in the 2-digit FoR code 20 were funded at a rate of 2:18. For the same year the ratio of successful projects funded for single-researchers versus teams in the history and archaeology codes (FoR 21) was similar at 4:19.<sup>4</sup> There is a distinct trend in recent years towards larger project teams with multiple investigators. There are other issues too. Apart from the logistical matters of finding suitable partners, there are other things to consider, such as tight restrictions on eligibility for individual schemes, which may change from year to year, and the effort needed to bring the constituent parts of a grant application into a harmonious whole.

Transdisciplinary projects in particular can be complex bridge-building or even diplomatic exercises. Participants must tease out the communalities and affinities

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<sup>2</sup> See ARC Schemes (Australian Government. Australian Research Council 2018) and also Aidan Byrne (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Scheme Round Statistics for Approved Proposals (Australian Government. Australian Research Council 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See Scheme Round Statistics for Approved Proposals (Australian Government. Australian Research Council 2020).

between the disciplines in “big picture” or meta-disciplinary ways that we are often not accustomed to. In this context I will explore one fruitful avenue for building an innovative conceptual foundation for collaborations between the cognate disciplines of history and literature, which can provide a basis for research collaborations between literary and cultural historians, and by extension, between literary historians and potentially a range of other disciplines.

### 3 Rethinking the Humanities as Life Knowledge

Rather than regarding collaborations simply as a pragmatic response to institutional imperatives, I argue that we should build them on far more solid epistemological ground by heeding some recent suggestions about how to reconceptualize humanities research more generally. An interesting innovation in literary studies in recent years is the “life science turn” exemplified by the work of Ottmar Ette, Professor of Romance Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Potsdam. In a series of influential conference and research publications Ette has provided a blueprint for rethinking the humanities. His research poses the question of what kinds of knowledge (*Wissen*) the humanities produce. Ette’s first essay on his vision for the humanities was prompted in 2007 in the Year of the Humanities in Germany by perceptions that the humanities had long been on the back foot, and in the distribution of resources taken a back seat (Ette 2010, p. 13).

For Ette, literature offers a unique way to bridge the gap between the sciences and arts. For it to do so, however, he contends that we need to rethink literature in relation to the specific contribution it makes to society. Ette understands his new approach as part of a recent rediscovery of the significance of *reference*—a “return of the real” and a rediscovery of “life” (Asholt and Ette 2010, p. 9). Together with his collaborator Wolfgang Asholt, Ette attempts both to breathe new life back into literature and to reposition it in relation to the sciences, as the title of Asholt’s 2010 essay suggests: “new life (in/for) literary science. Literature as knowledge about life?” [*Neues Leben (in) der Literaturwissenschaft?*] (Asholt 2010, p. 65). Intellectual inspiration came from Michel Foucault, who in *Les Mots et les Choses* (The Order of Things) speaks poetically about the emergence of the term “life” in the nineteenth century: “Life is the root of all existence,” he writes, “the nucleus of being and non-being; there is being only because there is life” (Foucault 1989, p. 303).

In his programmatic essay for the volume, Ette argues for reconceptualizing literature as “life knowledge” (*Lebenswissen*), and as a particular way of knowing about life (Ette 2010, p. 11). By extension, literary studies (and here we could add in history) can be seen as a “life science” (*Lebenswissenschaft*) that describes and interprets different forms and aspects of life (*Leben*). Literature is concerned with life in various modalities and temporalities, past, present and future or even with hypothetical forms of life as exist in fantasy and science fiction. Literary studies and

literary history all explore various facets of life that include experience (*Erleben*), survival (*Überleben*) and modes of living together or coexistence (*Zusammenleben*).

Ette's second mission is to address the hijacking of "life" by the pure biological and technological sciences. He argues that the literatures of the world have not banished the concept of life—on the contrary. Hitherto, he contends, literary studies have responded somewhat helplessly when confronted with the term "life". Life has become so obvious in literature that it runs the risk of disappearing or of being subsumed by concepts of reality and society. Yes, as Basseler remarks, if literature is not intimately connected to life then how can it purport to know anything about life (2010, p. 208)? Philologies would be well served therefore in salvaging the term from its exclusive usage in the life sciences—where it denotes mere physical life, rather than how life is lived and experienced.

Ette's project arguably deals no less with life, and life in all its stages and forms. It deals with individual and collective lives, past life and present life, new life, which is closely related to the question of *Überleben*, survival, living on or after, afterlife or aftermath. Ette's life turn also encompasses what Giorgio Agamben calls the "bare life", that form of biopower structured as a state of exception, which is oblivious to the quality of the life lived (Agamben 1998). Bare life is particularly relevant for analysing works that tackle themes such as the plight of refugees in contemporary Europe as well as during previous waves of flight and migration before, during and after the Second World War. There are many other forms of life that literature explores, such as the thirst for life (*Lebenslust*), and the relationship between life and sex/eros, as well as between life and food and hunger.

Ette insists that literature—and we could argue along similar lines for other media such as film, theatre, performance and television—possesses competencies concerning life that are not dealt with by other disciplines. He and his collaborators thus ask if it is not timely in an age of increasing globalization to reposition the humanities in relation to the life sciences for the sake of our own disciplinary survival (*Überleben*). To pose the question as to what literature's specific contribution to knowledge of life is, is by no means trivial. It may seem, Ette realizes, after years of theoretical discussion about literature's self-referentiality and autonomy, rather like a provocation to talk about *the use of literature*. To speak about how we use literature and why we need it, even as a form of life knowledge, could moreover be seen as reducing the complexity of literature. After all, literature, like related media, has its own logic and internal rules. Instead, Ette suggests, we should rediscover what this logic is, and assert it in relation to other disciplines, say, to history. We should thereby not seek to distance literature from these cognate disciplines but to stress its complementarity. We need to rethink why society needs each medium and its accompanying discipline.

Indeed, reconceptualizing literature as a *Lebenswissen* may help us understand better why we need literature, why it was written and why we still read it. Not only may it hold the key to communicating to the wider community why literature matters, it can also be helpful in redefining our disciplinary identity. This rethinking can in turn facilitate a collaborative approach to research, equipping literary specialists better with a rationale for how literature can advance knowledge in ways that no



other medium can. When we argue for the importance of literary knowledge with, say, non-literature specialists, Ette's insights serve to remind ourselves and others that literature bears a responsibility for our knowledge about life, and that it is our task to explain what this relationship to life is, why it is important and how it works. Literature is, says Ette "that 'mobile' of knowledge that allows us to experiment with culturally as well as socially divergent forms of life and norms of life" (2012, p. 9).

## 4 Rethinking Literature as Life Writing

One way in which this anthropological turn in literary studies can encourage us to break out of the "lone ranger" mindset is by rethinking what counts as literature. Rethinking how we define literature can help us to forge links to a host of other disciplines in the life sciences such as psychology, ecology, anatomy, evolutionary biology and ethology. By way of illustration of my argument, I propose to explore here in detail a fruitful alliance derived from my own experience, namely the alliance between literature and history. Both historians and literary historians have long used personal testimony as legitimate sources for their research. Memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, letters and other personal memorabilia are invaluable traces of the past and of past lives that both historians and literary historians draw on in their work. Literary historians tend to read memoirs and autobiography as literature (using autobiographical theory)—and historians read them as ego documents. Both usually fall under the category of memory, and literary scholars and historians alike are concerned with memory, oral and written forms of memory, though literary historians tend to stick with written memory. In German studies memory is a major field of study when dealing with the Holocaust and in recent years has focused on German wartime suffering—exploring memory in fiction and non-fiction. But there is another area of memory studies emerging in the memoirs of the GDR—German reunification has seen a massive boost in personal testimony from loyal communist writers and exiled dissidents to spymasters. Now the next generation of eyewitnesses is writing its stories—second-generation victims of the Stasi who were forced into exile with their parents, and second-generation perpetrators, the offspring of Stasi agents exposed in espionage scandals (Jilovsky and Lewis 2015a, b).

With a view to facilitating collaborations between historians and literary historians, it may be useful to rethink how we view such memory documents. What historians often call ego documents are for instance nothing other than forms of personal writing about life and survival, that is, "life writing" (Mittermayer 2009, p. 90). The same holds true for the literary historian, for whom all forms of memory—autobiography, confessions, memoirs, letters and diaries—are illuminating windows onto the past, not only in connection with literary figures but with non-literary figures. Interpreting these forms of non-fiction involves careful attentive reading for both disciplines; it requires a hermeneutics that can decode their specific discursive formations and ways of making meaning. This requires us to be sensitive to questions

of narrative and narration, to story-telling, questions of perspective and voice, as well as to emplotment.

A literary studies approach that regards fiction as a key source of knowledge about life, say, concerning the past, written in a specific mode, and non-fiction—whether this be autobiography or the life writing in security files—as a complementary source of insights into lived lives, can, I suggest, form the basis for research collaborations between literary scholars and historians. If we can widen the focus of our research projects to encompass a transnational, trans-European or even trans-continental approach to a topic or to include other disciplines, say, from education, linguistics, sociology or politics, languages researchers may be able to turn their sense of isolation into a strength. In the following case taken from my research into East German Stasi files, I argue that a nationally focused project lends itself especially well to a transnational comparison, for instance, with other security services across Eastern Europe and to the recently declassified KGB archives in Latvia and Lithuania. Cognate disciplines in this case would be history, surveillance studies, intelligence studies, cultural studies and legal studies, including transitional justice studies. Collaborations with scholars in these fields are all possible and eminently feasible. By way of an example I will explore the commonalities with history in terms of sources and methodology.

## 5 Rethinking History and the Archive

It is not only texts of memory or the histories we write that require careful reading, and reading that is attentive to the poetic and linguistic elements underpinning historical narratives, as Hayden White famously argued in *Metahistory* (2014). The archive itself needs to be read with a similar hermeneutics of suspicion. The historical imagination, according to White, is constrained by a critical consciousness and a poetic one, the latter being to what extent one can synthesize and shape the prosaic elements of the lived past (White 2014, p. 91). The historian has to choose between possible plot structures and modes of emplotment (p. 92). I contend that these plot structures and the formal and rhetorical structures that White identifies as informing the histories we write about the past—and hence the overarching meta-narratives we apply to create coherence and meaning from our data—are already present in the archives we use. Thus, when interpreting archival documents we need to pay attention to the same poetic, narrative and rhetorical frameworks we would look for in literary texts, whether we are talking about historical documents, medical case notes, government or police records and any other kind of written document that finds its way into the archives.

The challenge for historical scholarship on security files is to determine what these security plot structures were and how they worked to lock those inscribed into them into Cold War ideological straightjackets. As Dominick LaCapra has argued, police reports, for instance, can be read like novels that contain fragments of biographies of suspects, which reveal persistent “fantasies about conspiracies against public order” (1985, p. 126). Police files, like secret police files, are in many ways

variations on the genre of the criminal record. According to Cristina Vatulescu, Soviet secret police files are crime narratives that are less concerned with investigating a particular crime than with compiling an extensive “biography of the suspect” (2004, p. 32). The files share their interest in biography and the character of the suspect with Soviet detective stories. The subject of the file is not the criminal but the political enemy (p. 32). Vatulescu calls Soviet secret police files “arresting biographies,” arresting because they were compiled in order to make an arrest, but also for their arresting mode of address (p. 243). Secret police files from the Eastern bloc, especially those left behind by the infamous East German Ministry for State Security, or the Stasi, can likewise be read as a form of literature which is infused by an overbearing paranoid consciousness that starts out with a suspicion and strives to confirm the “truth” of that suspicion. We could tentatively conjecture that this narrative bears similarities to White’s genre of tragedy in which “both the hero and the common life are transformed” (2014, p. 95), and contradictions are resolved and eliminated.

The 180 kilometres of Stasi files that were miraculously salvaged after the Berlin Wall fell are a powerful archive about the internal operations of a defunct secret service and political police force that provide a riveting window onto this peculiar political consciousness. But even more fundamentally the files are about human lives and how they were formed and deformed by this political consciousness. As Fiona Capp writes: “Scramble the letters of the word ‘file’ and the result is a ‘life’” (1993, p. 3). Not only for this reason is it most useful to classify secret police files as a specific example of life writing. If we define life writing in broad terms as a form of non-fictional writing about the lives of real people, whether biographical or autobiographical, then file writing clearly seems to belong alongside other forms of writing about *real* lives. Moreover, Stasi files tell narratives not only about lives; they are accounts of secret lives and were, at least originally until they were declassified, *secret* accounts of those lives.

If to historicize is to narrativize, as White suggests, we need to turn this archival information into stories. To be able to write about the lives of those caught up in the web of suspicion of the security apparatus, secret police files, like all documents in the archives, must first be made intelligible, and this involves acknowledging their narrative character. According to Paul Ricœur, life stories, whether historical or fictional, “become more intelligible when what one applies to them are the narrative models or plots borrowed from history or fiction” (Ricœur 1991, p. 188). We can read them much as we would biography, even though we do not like to think of literary and bureaucratic biography as similar. But both forms document and construct lives of citizens, thus creating their own particular truths about them. Literary biography often captures heroic or great lives, whereas the bureaucratic secret police biography attempts to grasp the lives of ordinary citizens deemed non-conformist, subversive or dissident. During the Cold War, in western democracies such as Australia, these citizens were frequently communists; in East Germany, they were “hostile-negative elements” suspected of being anti-communists; in the Soviet Union, Ukraine or Romania, they were often wealthy peasants, members of minorities, Jews branded Zionists and counter-revolutionaries among other things.

It is useful to think of Stasi files as “hostile unauthorized biographies” of writers and ordinary citizens who were deemed potential “enemies of the state” (Lewis 2003, p. 377). They were unauthorized because they were construed illegally and without the target’s permission and often through covert practices of surveillance. Moreover, secret police files can be deeply incriminating biographies, as Fiona Capp (1993) writes of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) files on communist party writer Frank Hardy. Hence, the Stasi files are also fascinating biographies of those subjects who did the surveillance: the informants and their double, even multiple lives. In this sense, the secret police dossiers of Stasi victims and informants offer up valuable insights more broadly into the lived experience of communist dictatorships (Lewis 2016a, b; Glajar et al. 2016).

The Stasi files, like most of the secret police files from the Eastern bloc, but also like the ASIO files from the Cold War, are immensely valuable for our understanding of the past. Declassified documents of defunct regimes, for instance, of societies in transition from dictatorship to democracy, are testament to violence perpetrated on individuals and groups, often of crimes that have gone unpunished, and forms of injustice that have yet to be redressed. Hence, they are also important for truth and reconciliation, for assessing the extent of participation in these regimes and for investigating human rights abuses and civil rights violations. The Stasi files also provide chilling evidence of the willingness of citizens of Eastern bloc dictatorships to collude in authoritarian systems of power. They have been key to truth-finding, although their value for reconciliation has yet to be fully recognized.

Literary scholars can bring unique specialist knowledge to the challenging task of interpreting security archives. Versed in reading texts and their multiple shades of ambiguity, literary scholars are well trained to decode the conditions of production of a file, or the context—in the case of Stasi files the context is that of a post-Stalinist dictatorship—in which a file has been opened and archived. We have a keen awareness of the ideological subtexts in literature, which can be put to good use when it comes to reading the rises and falls in temperature of the Cold War at any particular time. We are attuned to the mix of the referential and non-referential in literature, for instance, in historical or speculative fiction. Security files contain texts that too often appear to straddle the divide between fiction and fact, paranoia and reality. To be sure, the files are bureaucratic texts, cold dry records that capture lives in a typically impersonal manner. And yet they are also an extraordinary treasure trove of mundane moments and highly dramatic turning points in individuals’ lives, revealing examples of forced exile or of major professional failures (such as the exclusion from the Writers Guild or the failure to publish a work because of censorship), and often they document the concomitant emotions and affect produced by these crises. It is useful to think of the files as containing a mix of high and low points in lives, a jarring concoction of fragments of lives, or life stories. We can think of them therefore as poetic and prosaic “file stories” (Glajar 2016, p. 57). File stories can bear uncanny resemblances to fictional stories of espionage or to love stories and romantic tales, although they often disappoint in their banality. And sometimes these real file stories can be stranger than fiction, as the saying goes: they can be larger than life, and sometimes even outrageously implausible.

File stories often start out as paranoid defensive narratives—of treason and counter-revolutionary activity in East Germany, and of communist infiltration in Australia. These narratives functioned like overarching ideological meta-narratives that framed the individual biographies of communists in the Stasi files and anti-communists in the ASIO files, and locked their targets into subversive behaviour. Over the lifetime of a file, the secret police collected evidence that cemented these hostile identities, only registering incriminating evidence and ignoring all that seemed to exonerate the target if it did not fit into the security world view. During the collecting of information, the apparatus wrote its targets into wider Cold War meta-narratives about sabotage and enemy influence.

The aim of these bureaucratic biographies was simply social control, to create acquiescent and docile social subjects. As texts, therefore, they were implicated in the workings of power, making them a pernicious “technology of power” deployed to demonize, harass, and intimidate suspects, to arrest and even to torture them. But, as Capp writes, “once people were characterized as dangerous social types—as subversives—they were written into a self-perpetuating dossier over which they had no control. They were forever under suspicion until the file was discontinued, destroyed or the person died” (Capp 1993, p. 5). After unification, targets or victims were offered the unique possibility to view the incriminating evidence collected on them, and learn the truth about the regime’s surveillance. Despite the distorted overarching view framing each target’s life story, much of what victims found in their files—incontrovertible evidence of betrayal and denunciation, sobering insights into the regime’s Machiavellian plans to sabotage their writing and ruin their lives—proved true and verifiable. While it is possible that an individual entry in a file might be falsified or embellished, it is highly unlikely that any one entire dossier was a fabrication. For victims, secret police files have therefore proven to be an invaluable resource, especially since they have been able to “write themselves out of the Stasi files” upon reading them. Before the fall of the Wall this was virtually impossible, and even after unification it has taken time for East German victims to apply to see their files, to begin to correct and overwrite them, thereby challenging their secret police record and narrating their stories from their personal perspective. For the spies who wrote the greater part of the files, it has proved much harder to write themselves out of the secret police narratives, since the legislation governing access to the files was not designed to assist perpetrators. Most perpetrators are denied access to the files, unless they are thought to be serious about making amends and seeking reconciliation with their victims.

## 6 Summary

In summary, for language scholars, navigating the island of university research has possibly never thrown up so many challenges as it has now. The paths are windy, there are treacherous passes, and mountains to climb, often it seems to little avail. In Germany there is a saying which comes from a poem by Brecht: The travails of the mountains lie behind us, in front of us lie the travails of the plains. And in East

Germany, this was often seen to mean that despite the herculean effort of overcoming Nazism, it still was not going to be an easy task to build socialism.

And indeed, on the island of research the plains look as daunting as the mountains. However, if one takes a closer look, it appears that there is some uncharted territory on the island. It is no coincidence that the big uncharted territory lies adjacent to the great fundless desert. It might be appropriate to rebadge this territory, calling it “collaboration outside of language and/or discipline base”. If the task of collaboration outside one’s home discipline seems as though it might create more problems than it solves, it is worth remembering that in the cartoon world of the “island of research” the uncharted terrain is also next door to that other island we all aspire to reach one day: the “know-it-all” island.

In terms of the broad sweep of research in languages in Australia, we need to think beyond our traditional disciplinary background in creative ways to find common ground with cognate disciplines with similar interests. This can in turn encourage us to widen the focus of our individual research topics and fields, and assist in devising projects and mounting teams to make bids for funding for projects on transnational and interdisciplinary topics in which we have a stake. The key to the success of such bids for projects may well be to mine a rich source of archival material and to find a common denominator with other disciplines that can foster further enquiry and a fruitful dialogue. Some such common denominators that can lend projects methodological coherence can be found in questions of performance, bodies and embodiment; texts; semiotics, or, in the case of the project I have outlined, in life writing and secret police documents. Finding bridges between the natural sciences and literature—reconceived as a life science—may be another way of smoothing the path to collaboration.

To return to the solitary researcher as a kind of Lone Ranger, we should not be surprised to find that despite his creed of battling the Wild West alone, the legendary Lone Ranger was never really alone. He always had help gathering his firewood, and galloping around the great deserts of the Wild West—if not from women, then at the least from his horse Silver, but also from his tireless sidekick Tonto. I suggest we ought not forget Silver and Tonto, and what the three of them could contribute and achieve together. The lone researcher will still be a model the ARC continues to fund, and the model we pursue in many projects, but it is not the only model. Thus, to steer clear of those valleys of despair and the great fundless desert we need not only funding sources but also collaborators who can complement, inspire and enhance our research, and lift us out of the lonely fog of the ranger mindset.

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