"Worth in the Telling": Tales of Trauma in Australian Aboriginal Narratives

• *Clare Bradford* •

Résumé: *Le présent article examine quatre oeuvres d'auteurs aborigènes, qui traitent de la douloureuse expérience du passage à l'âge adulte de quatre jeunes filles venant de l'arrière-pays australien. Cependant, le contexte de la production et de la réception de ces récits suscitent des contradictions internes. Par exemple, ce sont des récits écrits également pour des Aborigènes et des non-Aborigènes et qui empruntent aux traditions narratives locales et occidentales. D'une part, elles répondent à l'idéologie contemporaine de la valorisation des Aborigènes mais, d'autre part, elles conservent un caractère hybride, typique de l'ambivalence des oeuvres postcoloniales.*

Summary: *This essay examines four texts by Australian Aboriginal authors, considering their narrative modes and ideologies while concentrating on stories of trauma involving Aboriginal girls growing into adulthood. It argues that these narratives are implicated within conditions of production and reception that lead to conflicting and contradictory textual strategies; for instance, they are written both for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences and deploy a combination of Aboriginal and Western narrative traditions. On the one hand, they enter the contemporary politics of Aboriginal self-representation; on the other, they are hybrid texts that disclose the ambivalence and the shifting positions common in postcolonial textuality.*

When the British raised the Union Jack in Sydney in 1788, they deemed Australia to be *terra nullius*, a land uninhabited. No treaty was signed between Britain and the country's indigenous peoples; no concession was made to millennia of Aboriginal habitation. Between 1788 and 1901, an indigenous population of perhaps 750,000 was reduced to 66,000, and until the 1940s most Australians expected with confidence that the Aboriginal race would eventually die out. It was not until 1967, following a referendum of the non-indigenous population, that Aboriginal people were included in the census as Australian citizens. In 1992, the Australian High Court overturned the *terry nullius* doctrine, but it is still the case in 2002 that Aboriginal

people have not attained full recognition as the original inhabitants of the continent, compensation for the loss of their lands and way of life, or political economy.

Leela Gandhi notes that one of the features of colonial cultures as they become independent nations is "postcolonial amnesia" (4), a set of discursive and ideological practices through which the violence and racism of colonialism is subjected to a process of forgetting, one necessary for new nations to "imagine and execute a decisive departure from the colonial past" (6). It follows that the recovery and remembering of colonialism is a necessary element in processes of decolonization, since otherwise the colonial past lurks beneath the surface, its repression or repudiation a cause of historical and psychological unease. For a postcolonial nation to remember colonial history is not merely to recall a series of events but to acknowledge the complex and ambivalent relationships between colonizers and colonized, which Gandhi refers to as the "contiguities and intimacies which underscore the stark violence and counter-violence of the colonial condition" (11). The 1967 referendum mentioned above was followed by a time that Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra describe as "Aboriginal resurgence" (50), when increasing numbers of Aboriginal artists and writers produced works that both engaged with the colonial past and sought to arrive at contemporary forms of self-definition. On the non-Aboriginal side, processes of remembering took the form of revisionary histories and anthropological work that began to break away from an insistence on Aborigines as objects of scholarly study and to focus on issues such as land rights. Together with these cultural shifts in literary and artistic works as well as in scholarship, the task of recovering the colonial past was carried out through political and institutional processes: a series of court cases relating to land claims culminated in the Mabo judgment of 1992; the Royal Commission on Black Deaths in Custody, begun in 1987, investigated the high incidence of Aboriginal deaths in police cells and gaols; and, in 1995, the Labor Government established an inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, the results of which were published in the "Stolen Generations" report produced in 1997 and widely publicized in the Australian media (*Bringing them Home*).

These projects of remembering the past (and, in doing so, understanding the contemporary situation of Aboriginal people in Australia) have produced complex results. A series of reconciliation marches in major cities during 2000 attracted many thousands of Australians; at the same time, the conservative Howard government has wound back the processes whereby Aboriginal clans could seek the restitution of ancestral land, and the Prime Minister has consistently refused to make an apology for the pain and loss caused by past policies that involved removing children from their families. A far-right backlash against Aborigines manifested in what Ken Gelder and

Jane M. Jacobs call "postcolonial racism" (65), the effect that occurred when non-Aboriginal people who felt themselves to be disadvantaged blamed Aboriginal people for having too much in the form of government programs, land rights, and even attention and sympathy. Simultaneously, however, Australian self-representations have increasingly mobilized indigenous forms and symbols, conspicuously so during the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

The question of how the past should be written has became a major site of conflict in popular, political, and scholarly discourses. In 1993, the historian Geoffrey Blainey coined the phrase "the black armband version of history" (11) to refer to a view of Australian history that he argued places undue emphasis on the negative impact of colonialism on Aboriginal peoples and cultures and not enough on the enterprise and achievement of white settlers. Countering the "black armband" view is what is sometimes called the "white blindfold" version of history, which contends that much Australian history has failed to acknowledge not only the violence and the dispossession experienced by Aboriginal people but also the extent to which they resisted the effects of invasion as well as the role they played in the formation of the Australian nation. Connected with this debate over history are issues such as the extent to which non-Aboriginal Australians should take responsibility for events of the past, whether the recovery of the past inevitably evokes guilt and shame, and how to achieve reconciliation between the races.

Aboriginal Textuality and Projects of Remembering

Autobiography has dominated the list of texts produced by Australian Aboriginal writers since the 1960s. Several factors have contributed to the popularity of this genre, notably the pertinence of autobiographical works to the political and social agendas that have informed Aboriginal cultural production during this time period and that centre on the reclamation of traditions and narratives elided under colonial and assimilationist regimes. The recovery of Aboriginal history interrogates traditions of white history in which Aborigines figure as savages, victims, or exotica. Similarly, stories of individual Aboriginal people propose subaltern versions of the Australian past: for instance, stories about relations between white landowners and Aboriginal people who worked in the pastoral industry and about relations between missionaries and Aborigines who lived on mission stations problematize the stories of white endeavour and heroism formerly common in mainstream accounts of the "settling" of Australia. A second group of texts originates from a similar set of conditions, including novels such as Monica Clare's *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (1978) and John Wilson's *Lori* (1989), both of which employ first-person narration in tracing the lives of Aboriginal characters. The term autobiographical novel sometimes

used to designate such works seems to assume that the matter of the narrative derives from and details the experience of the author. This too-simple assumption that the "I" of the narration is the same as the author overlooks the constructedness of texts and the ways in which textuality represents the world. Nevertheless, works like *Karobran* and *Lori* disclose political and social agendas that are closely aligned with those of Aboriginal autobiographies.[1]

Another important factor in the prominence of autobiographies by Aboriginal authors has been the marketability of such narratives in mainstream Australian culture. Most non-Aboriginal Australians have little or no contact with Aboriginal people, who constitute less than 2% of Australia's population. At the same time, notions of Australian national identity, formerly centred on white, masculinist myths of life in the outback, now circle tentatively around Aboriginal culture. New Age appropriations of Aboriginality, displays of Aboriginal culture at public and national events, and the popularity (and saleability) of Aboriginal artwork all constitute expressions of a contemporary preoccupation with Aboriginality and of the revisioning of Australian history to which I have already referred. Within such a climate, autobiographical works seem to offer white readers the possibility of engaging with the experience of Aboriginal people whose lives have played out in an Australia otherwise unknown to non-Aboriginal people. Works such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) and Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1988) have been remarkably popular with white readers. *My Place* sold over 500,000 copies between 1987 and 2001, a very significant number for an Australian text; in addition, it has been published in Britain, the United States, and India, and it has been translated into eleven languages.[2] Both in its original form and in a three-part form entitled *My Place for Young Readers* (1990), Morgan's book has reached large audiences of adolescents and young adults through its use within school curricula across Australia.

In this discussion I consider some of the narratives of trauma that feature in a group of texts that trace the lives of Aboriginal girls growing into adulthood: the autobiographies *My Place* and *Wandering Girl*; the latter's sequel, *Unna You Fullas* (1991); and John Wilson's novel *Lori*.[3] Questions of reader positioning are crucial in these texts, which are full of stories that contradict assumptions deeply embedded within notions of Australian national identity — for instance, that Australia is a nation unaffected by divisions of class and race, and that relations between people are permeated by the principle of the "fair go." The episodes of brutality, injustice, and physical and sexual abuse that appear in *Wandering Girl*, *Unna You Fullas*, *My Place*, and *Lori* are harsh lessons for all young Australians. In their representations of Aboriginal experience during the second half of the twentieth century, these texts echo and refer to older stories — those of the parents, grand-

parents, and great-grandparents who were displaced from their ancestral lands, banned from the hunting grounds that had been theirs for many thousands of years, and forced to live on mission stations or to become fringe-dwellers on the edges of white culture. The texts also look forward to the flood of stories that emerged from the Stolen Generations investigation. They thus embody both personal and political narratives, telling stories that stand in sharp contradiction to the triumphalistic narratives of white settlement that were staples of the history taught in Australian schools until the 1970s.

Over the last two decades, Aboriginal autobiography has been a predominantly female form, tracing the formation of Aboriginal female identities. The feminist agendas that inform these works relate to but are not identical with white feminisms, since the struggle of Aboriginal women for equality and agency is a struggle born out of the experience of colonialism, not primarily out of women's resistance to patriarchal social formations. Kinship relationships are of central significance in Aboriginal culture, constituting a crucial element in its reclamation and protection, so that whereas western feminists often view the family as a site of female oppression, Aboriginal women writers tend to focus on protecting and preserving traditions that emphasize family relations through social practices such as communal meals and storytelling.

Autobiographical works are, of course, constructions of reality that engage in many of the same strategies as fictive works: the selection of key events, the construction of a narrative, and quite often the interpolation of stretches of dialogue. But they differ from fiction in their claim to truth, in their production of an individual subjectivity associated with an identifiable subject living in the real world. Most Aboriginal autobiographies in Australia have so far been published by mainstream publishers and are therefore apt to be mediated by white editors, ghostwriters, and transcribers, thus incorporated into western cultural practices. Nevertheless, many such autobiographies also mobilize Aboriginal narrative traditions, which are deeply imbued by principles of ownership and authorial presence. Within Aboriginal traditions, fiction is an unknown category; relying upon the invention of characters and episodes, it is outside ancient practices that insist that the *truth* of a narrative resides in the authority of its narrator, the connections between narrator, kinship group, and ancestral lands, and the maintenance and repetition of narratives over time (Muecke 65-66; Michaels 140). Autobiographies and novels deploying first-person narrations are in some ways consonant with these traditions, since they rely for their authority on a narrator present within the narrative, and they are also distanced from fiction through their emphasis on truth-telling. Moreover, they adhere to another feature of Aboriginal narrative: that no story is ever complete and self-sufficient, and that all stories relate to other stories and to their narrators in a chain of narratives. Similarly, most Aboriginal autobiographies, while fo-

cusing on one life story, intersect with other stories and imply a web of narratives detailing Aboriginal experiences of colonization and its aftermath.

Since white settlement, Aboriginal people have been obliged to guard their traditions through strategies of secrecy and concealment. Autobiographies pose a challenge to such strategies, not least in the extent to which they name and describe Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Nor is it a simple matter to disclose experiences in which Aboriginal people were humiliated, ill-treated, or abused, since such disclosure can have negative effects; the Aboriginal English expression "getting shame" refers to the effects of such exposure. Another dilemma relates to the dual readership of these texts, which is composed of both of Aboriginal readers and of white readers who may resist narratives that too explicitly describe inhuman treatment meted out by white people to Aborigines. The Aboriginal author Sonja Kurtzer explains the significances of Aboriginal autobiographies for indigenous audiences:

> [They] represent a body of knowledge which is continually added to.... Therefore issues of cultural maintenance and integrity are extremely important to the indigenous community. This notion of speaking on behalf of others becomes a further constraint upon the indigenous author. And who is it exactly who determines what is "authentic" in relation to indigenous stories? (26-27)

There are, of course, as many ways of "being Aboriginal" as of "being white." Nevertheless, Aboriginal authors carry the burden of being regarded as representative exemplars of Aboriginality. Their writing carries powerful political agendas that signify differently for indigenous and non-indigenous audiences.

Contradictory Discourses in *Wandering Girl* and *Unna You Fullas*

Wandering Girl describes the experience of an Aboriginal child taken from her mother as a baby and brought up first in an orphanage and then at a mission station. Ward's narrative begins on the day when the narrator is required to leave the mission at sixteen in order to work as a servant for a white family. The terms in which she describes the mission suggest an edenic setting: "Outside my window was a perfect picture of nature. Spring was here again in all its beauty. The tuneful melody of the birds filled the calm air" (1). Yet the mission, the setting of the first chapter of *Wandering Girl*, was anything but a utopia, as is clear in Ward's second work, *Unna You Fullas*, which deals with the girl's later experience of growing up in Wandering Mission and her troubled relations with the German nuns, priests, and brothers who staff it. In *Wandering Girl*, however, the mission is subsumed into the narrator's representation of a lost childhood — moreover, an Aboriginal

childhood spent alongside the other children at the mission — which affords a sharp contrast with the white world into which she is suddenly relocated as the servant of a wealthy farming family, the Bigelows.

The narrator's status within the world of the farmhouse is clearly demonstrated in the first few moments of her entry to the Bigelow home: Mrs Bigelow makes tea, using fine bone-china cups for herself and her husband but a battered tin mug for her servant. As the narrator cries herself to sleep in the filthy garage that she has been allocated as a bedroom, she names the feeling that causes her such pain: "that old familiar feeling called homesickness" (14). The term signifies a yearning for home, yet the mission is itself a site of displacement where children are taken to be trained in Western ways and assimilated into white culture. In her discussion of indigenous writing, Elleke Boehmer describes Aboriginality in Australia as "an assimilative state...an admission of conflicting and hybrid cultural allegiances" (229). The contradictory significances of Ward's treatment of "home" owe something to such conflicting allegiances: in contrast with the racist regime of the Bigelows, the mission takes on the lineaments of "home," even though the children living there have been removed from their homes and families. In a later episode, the narrator and her friend Anne, another Aboriginal girl working for a white family, are taken to a nearby country town on Christmas day and told that "Christmas was a time for families — theirs, that is — and we would only be in the way. They would pick us up late in the evening to clean up after their families had gone home" (148). Alone without money or food, the two girls wander about the town and listen to the excited voices of children opening their presents as the day stretches out before them. The only remedy they can imagine is to seek refuge at the local convent, where they are taken in, given presents, and invited to join in Christmas dinner. Again, the state of being "at home" is found within an institutional space; the larger themes of cultural displacement are subsumed within an assimilationist model in which Aboriginal children locate "family" within white Christian culture.

In *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (1992), Stephen Muecke describes how, at the launch of *Wandering Girl* in Broome, a local politician "said that he was so incensed at the treatment of the main character by the white family, the Bigelows, that he tried to look them up in the telephone book. While he had assumed that the names had not been changed, someone in the audience who was in the know remarked in an aside that he would have been better off looking under the 'A's in the phone book" (132). This episode discloses the difficulties attending the reception of works such as *Wandering Girl*. Readers can easily be persuaded that the book constitutes history rather than an account of the past formulated within a dual set of conventions, autobiography, and Aboriginal narrative traditions. The political agendas of the text, which construct the child Glenyse Ward as a

metonymic figure standing for the many Aboriginal children removed from their families and brought up within white culture, are thus lost in a search for individual culprits.

To compare *Wandering Girl* with Ward's later work, *Unna You Fullas*, is to notice a shift from an assimilationist to a more oppositional stance. This does not necessarily imply that Ward herself has shifted her view of Aboriginal-white relations in the time between the publication of the two texts (that is, between 1988 and 1991); rather, what changes is Ward's writing of the narrator, and her interweaving of perspectives, which shift between that of the child narrator and of the adult self reflecting on her childhood. The narrator of *Unna You Fullas* is represented as a robust and independent figure, yet one for whom "home" and "family" are deeply problematic notions. In one episode, the child Glenyse is told of the death of her father, who has been killed in an accident at his workplace. Since she has never known her father, she is unsure as to how she should behave: "I wanted to say, 'That's my father, over there. He's all right,' pointing to Fr Albertus, who was standing over by the buildings in his cassock. He was the only father I knew" (48). Readers are positioned as observers of the scene; the child's misrecognition of herself as a child of the mission is set alongside her lack of affect following the death of her father, producing a powerful sense of the disjunction between the narrator's Aboriginal identity and her internalization of a sense of being non-Aboriginal.

A related moment occurs when several of the girls at the mission resolve to run away. The narrator is asked by Bella, one of the girls planning this enterprise, whether she will join in:

> Bella glanced my way.
>
> "What about the rest of you girls, Sprattie, you coming?"
>
> 'Nah, this is my home."
>
> Then Bella put her hands on my shoulders and looked straight at me.
>
> "This is not your home." She shook me.
>
> "Where's your mum, Sprattie?"
>
> "She wakes us up every morning."
>
> I noticed tears welling in Bella's eyes again as she put her arms around me and pressed me into her bosom. Everyone just sat there quietly. I felt the back of my head getting wet.
>
> "Bella, you're wetting me."
>
> She gently dabbed my head with her pyjama top.
>
> "Sprattie, I am crying for you." (70-71)

The narrator's "mum" is Sister Ursula, the Mother Superior of the mission,

whose harsh and punitive interactions with the children are exemplified in several episodes prior to this exchange. The strategy of narrative distancing achieved through the interplay of the two perspectives serves to direct readers' attention to the contrast between Bella, who knows what "home" is, and the child Glenyse, who does not. Simultaneously, this strategy discloses the child's internalization of the mores and practices of the mission, where constructions of maternity are incorporated into the figure of Sister Ursula.

Nevertheless, the dialectic between the child's perspective and that of the adult narrator in *Unna You Fullas* works against representations that are absolute in their delineation of character and motivation. Thus, Sister Erika, seen through the eyes of the young Glenyse, is a severe and demanding teacher who insists that the children perfect their singing of Latin hymns for church services. The spectacle of Sister Erika shouting at the children and pinching their cheeks for making mistakes is set alongside another representation in which she is shown taking the children for walks in the bush, where in the midst of gullies and valleys she stands on a rock and yodels. The adult narrator sees in Sister Erika's singing her longing for her Swiss home; as she yodels to an audience of black children, against the background of blue skies and tall redgums, she plays out her own displacement among the displaced children of Wandering Mission.

One of the most fraught episodes in *Unna You Fullas* concerns the rector of the mission, Father Albertus, a favourite among the girls for his kindness to them. Following the unsuccessful escape attempt of the narrator's friends, all the children are punished for a week, forbidden to play, and given extra duties to perform. Following this period, they are summoned to the kitchen, where in front of the children and the mission staff Father Albertus flogs the young girl Banner, regarded as a ringleader. These events are narrated through the eyes of Glenyse, who is torn between shock at the punishment administered to Banner and its effects on the nuns: "I turned my head away and glanced quickly at the nuns, because Banner's bloomers were in full view for everyone to see. I saw their red faces flinch" (85). The sight of the child's underwear transgresses one of the most powerful taboos of the mission — that pertaining to any display of bodies — and the narrator's focus on the faces of the nuns simultaneously points to this prudishness and hints at their horror at the sadism that they observe. Simultaneously, the patriarchal regime of the station is disclosed in the fact that while the nuns are represented as shocked by the brutality of the flogging, they are without agency, complicit observers of the event. The question that closes this episode asks readers to consider two sides of Father Albertus: "Why did he change from a loving, kind, thoughtful person...to a cruel vicious person?" (87). Non-Aboriginal readers are doubly positioned to look through the eyes of the wondering child and at the child observing these horrors. As the narrating voice withholds judgment, it invites readers to consider an abuse of

power in which white people — moreover, members of religious organizations — are complicit with and guilty of cruelty. This carefully non-confrontational address treads delicately around the sensibilities of its readers, both Aboriginal and white. Boehmer's reference to the "conflicting and hybrid cultural allegiances" evident in Aboriginal textuality is apposite, since many Aboriginal people revere the memory of white missionaries who were, in many instances, powerful advocates of Aboriginal rights; further, at least some white readers may be assumed to be resistant to negative representations of missionaries.

A feature of Aboriginal-white relations all too common during the period described in *Unna You Fullas* was the prevalence of sexual abuse in the family homes, orphanages, and mission stations where Aboriginal children were taken.[4] Ward's references to such episodes are muted, filtered in *Wandering Girl* through the warning of Mrs Bigelow, who reprimands the narrator for entering the dining room when Mr Bigelow is alone: "I was to wait till she rang the bell and if ever there was a time that Mr Bigelow was on his own, I wasn't to go in. It wasn't very nice for a slave girl to be all alone in the presence of a male member of the family" (50). The implication that Aboriginal girls and women are by nature promiscuous is a given in colonial discourse; Ward's strategy of interpolating a reflective comment by the adult narrator compares the child's innocence with the prurient suspiciousness of her employer: "I had been stunned by the comment she made about being alone with her husband. I couldn't understand it" (51). In *Unna You Fullas*, episodes of sexual abuse are linked to two white schoolteachers employed by the mission and are again filtered through Glenyse's puzzlement at the men's actions — for instance, Mr Foley's propensity for touching the girls' bodies and Mr Pitts's sexual relations with a sixteen-year-old girl at the mission. The coded nature of these representations of abuse is, I suspect, related to the risky enterprise in which Ward is engaged, since the mission station and the characters of whom she writes are easily identified by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people familiar with the setting; further, these are books that seek to raise the consciousness of white readers but not to alienate them. Apart from the sadism implied in the flogging of Banner, no priests, brothers, or nuns at the mission are associated with episodes of sexual abuse, yet the "Stolen Generations" report shows that many Aboriginal children did suffer such abuse within religious institutions.

A concern central to Ward's treatment of institutional life pertains to the significances of the Christian and specifically Catholic culture that informs life at Wandering Mission. The children are brought up within a regime of daily prayer and religious observance coupled with living conditions whose harshness is justified by the version of religion practiced at the mission. For instance, Glenyse and the other girls sleep on ancient wooden beds whose mattresses are so thin that "we could have just laid on the boards"

(*Unna You Fullas* 3) and with grey army blankets insufficient to warm them during cold nights. The children are woken by a bell rung by Sister Ursula:

> We automatically stumbled out of bed on the wooden floorboards, lowering our heads in reverence and reciting after Mother Superior our thankyou prayers to God for our comfortable night's sleep. (3)

The irony of "our comfortable night's sleep" denaturalizes the connection between God and the harshness of the children's lives, disclosing the constructedness of religious practice. In other episodes, the adult narrator's perspective interrogates the mission's deployment of religion as a form of socialization. Toward the end of Glenyse's term at the mission, when she is around thirteen, she develops a keen interest in the music of the Beatles and other popular groups, but the girls are prohibited from singing such songs because "the nuns said...most of them were about lust and sex" (172). When Glenyse is discovered by Sister Gertrude in the act of singing Bryan Hyland's song "Jinny Come Lately," she is severely reprimanded: "She was soon preaching to me about how evil and sinful [the song] was, and about my body, how we should keep it pure and how sinful people sing about their personal parts" (174). Glenyse is directed to confess her sin to Father Maxwell, who tells her about the Ninth Commandment and asks her if she has been touched or kissed by a boy. The adult narrator, looking back at her young self, identifies a strand of independence in the child's refusal to internalize the guilt loaded on her by the priest. Such moments of resistance are important in their affirmation of the agency of children removed from their families and brought up at the mission. Acts of defiance, such as the girls' attempt to run away, may be savagely punished, but through her representation of the small victories of the children Ward insists upon their resilience and their attachment to an Aboriginal culture that survives in the sociality of the children and in their relations with one another. The world of Wandering Mission is represented as a complex and shifting field in which some of the children are complicit with white authorities; others, like Banner, are openly resistant; and still others negotiate the shifting power-play of institutional life.

My Place: Consolatory Narratives

The broader social and cultural structures within which the mission is located are beyond the reach of Ward's two autobiographies, which focus on the narrator's relations with the white people who staff the mission (in *Unna You Fullas*) and the family that employs her after her childhood at the mission (in *Wandering Girl*). In contrast, Sally Morgan's *My Place* takes a longer view, relating the narrator's experience to the lives of her mother Gladys, her grandmother Daisy, and Daisy's brother Arthur, whose stories are interpolated within the frame of Morgan's narrative. *My Place* functions, rather like

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), as a quest for identity, but the two texts are quite different in the narrative structures that they deploy. *In Search of April Raintree* commences with April's experience as a child separated from her parents and later traces her attempts to pass as white and her eventual attempt to recuperate her Native identity. Sally is denied knowledge of her Aboriginal heritage by her mother and grandmother, who seek to protect Sally and her siblings from the ignominy of being Aborigines by telling them that their forebears came from India. The narration of *My Place* thus proceeds from Sally's ignorance of Aboriginality and traces her uncovering of the past and of an Aboriginal subjectivity.

In her discussion of *In Search of April Raintree*, Helen Hoy refers to the text as "an intricate choreography of (mis)representations" (278). Similarly, the narrative structure of *My Place* is built upon disparate and conflicting versions of the past as it is recalled by Aboriginal and non-indigenous characters. When the narrator interviews Alice Drake-Brockman, a member of the wealthy farming family who employed many members of Sally Morgan's family over several generations, white-Aboriginal relations are represented in terms of *noblesse oblige*, with the Drake-Brockman regime exercising a beneficent control over its Aboriginal employees. Of Morgan's grandmother, Daisy, Alice Drake-Brockman says, "She was simply devoted. No white trained nurse had better experience. She grew up loving us and we were her family; there were no servants" (167). The narrative of Daisy Corunna tells an utterly different story, in which Aboriginal servants are sharply aware of the impossibility of equality: "I had my dinner in the kitchen. I never ate with the family. When they rang the bell, I knew they wanted me.... You see, it's no use them sayin' I was one of the family, cause I wasn't. I was their servant" (326).

What is problematic about Morgan's representation of white-Aboriginal relations in *My Place* is the extent to which Aboriginal characters are represented as wholly trustworthy and non-Aboriginal characters as devious and deceitful. As Eric Michaels puts it, Morgan "constructs criteria for evidence, history, and truth that are self-referential. Aborigines do not forget, do not lie, do not selectively interpret their memories, and so their stories are true" (168). While *My Place* thus constructs a world of white perfidy and black virtue, it also positions readers as observers of an Australia safely distanced from the contemporary world: the cruelties inflicted upon Daisy and Arthur were perpetrated by white station-owners and employers dead or very old at the time *My Place* was published, and moreover, Sally Morgan's own experiences of disadvantage are attributed to sites such as the school she attended as a child and the Commonwealth Department of Education whose official challenges her to prove that she is of Aboriginal descent and thus eligible to access a scholarship system for Aboriginal students. In this way, the text avoids threatening its readers by evoking as villains white

members of the squattocracy,[5] bureaucratic systems, or their faceless representatives. Conversely, Morgan's own negotiations with white culture (and, indeed, her reliance upon white institutions) are elided within a narrative that sidesteps the topic of crosscultural relations within her family — for instance, between her Aboriginal mother and her white father as well as between her and her white husband.

I have suggested that Morgan's representation of the racism faced by Aboriginal people avoids threatening the white readers of *My Place* by locating it in the past and within institutional sites. Similarly, the version of Aboriginal identity constructed through the text is calculated to appeal to white readers, since it addresses anxieties about loss of spiritual values, depersonalization, and materialism in contemporary white culture, hence the enormous publishing success of *My Place*. When Sally and her mother undertake a journey to trace their Aboriginal family members, their search assumes the mythological resonances of a quest or pilgrimage into a past time incorporated into a sacred space. For instance, when they reach Corunna Downs, the pastoral property of the Drake-Brockmans where many of their relatives have lived, they discover "a sense of place" (227) as they look out over the "soft, blue hills" of the station, which "seemed to us mystical and magical" (226). Having met the elderly members of their family, they "had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it" (230). The New Ageist undertones of this formulation of Aboriginality, its tendency to dehistoricize Aboriginal experiences, and its essentializing claim of a pan-Aboriginal subjectivity, produce an Aboriginality that can be admired safely, even venerated by white readers of *My Place*, and that in the main elides the materiality of Aboriginal dispossession and its effects. Thus, Arthur Corunna's account of the founding of Corunna Downs refers to its location within "the land of my people" (173), the ancestral land appropriated by white pastoralists. Yet in its identification of Corunna Downs as a "mystical and magical" place, the narrative strategically overlooks the fact that white appropriation of Aboriginal country, together with the loss of hunting grounds and food sources, effectively drove Aboriginal people onto pastoral stations where they were exploited as cheap labour or forcibly removed to mission stations.

At the beginning of this discussion, I noted that autobiography is a form that in some respects accords with Aboriginal narrative traditions. But there are significant differences between Glenyse Ward's approach and that of *My Place*. Ward focuses on the young girl's development within white culture, where she stands in metonymic relationship to the many other Aboriginal children removed from their families and country. For Sally Morgan, who in her early life had no contact with Aboriginal culture and influences, the focus is on an individual Aboriginal subjectivity validated through Morgan's quest narrative and through her "discovery" of her Aboriginality. *My Place* owes far more to Western traditions of autobiography than do *Wan-*

dering Girl or *Unna You Fullas*, and for this reason it seems to offer white readers a version of Aboriginality capable of interpretation within Western paradigms of individual subjectivity. The Aboriginal novelist and critic Mudrooroo refers to *My Place* as a romance that accords with (non-Aboriginal) Australian desires for a national identity that mobilizes aspects of Aboriginal culture: "such a story...struck a chord in a general readership who were coming to grips with what precisely it meant to shift one's origins from overseas to the land of Australia" (196-97). That is, Mudrooroo sees *My Place* in terms of a myth of origins for Australians rather than a text that articulates Aboriginal identity.

Aboriginal Subjectivity and *Lori*

Wilson's *Lori*, Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree*, and Ruby Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun* (1987) are novels whose first-person narrations focus on female experiences focalized through girls as they grow into adulthood. Whereas autobiographical narratives are constrained by the expectation that they represent situations and characters in the real world, the relations between author and focalizing narrator in novels such as these are always mysterious, standing outside the texts themselves even if their narratives seem to mimic the conventions of autobiography. All three texts focus on female lives; even more strikingly, all three trace lives degraded by alcoholism and physical and sexual abuse: Lori's mother, Miriam; the Owl's mother; April Raintree's sister, Cheryl. All three, though employing quite different narrative strategies, imply colonial histories played out in the contemporary experience of subaltern peoples.

The narrative of *Lori* opens with a reference that affirms Aboriginal traditions of reverence for female power through its summary of the story of Mundungkala, an ancient woman "one thousand years of age" (2) who creates earth as the garden with which she endows her three children, originary figures in the history of humanity. Over the figure of Mundungkala is superimposed that of Miriam, the narrator's mother, who is now old like the mythical figure but who in all other respects is horribly unlike Mundungkala, being incapable of sustaining her children and abandoning them not in a world of plenty but to the mercy of white institutions. Between these two representations of the feminine (the powerful ancestor and the degraded alcoholic) is the figure of Lori herself, whose story is both that of the individual child struggling to make sense of her world and of a representative Aboriginal subject. In the narrative's most extreme moment of degradation, when seven-year-old Lori is subjected to serial rape, her situation is related to that of other Aboriginal children:

> This [her history of sexual relations with white men] was the great and fearful secret of my childhood, which I took with me through adoles-

> cence and into adulthood, and bring with me to these recollections, so that I need not carry it alone any more. I have learnt that similar experiences to mine were not uncommon among Aboriginal children then, or now. (99)

That is, the text itself is constructed as the vehicle of Lori's confessional and therapeutic narrative, directed as much at non-Aboriginal as at Aboriginal readers. Unlike *My Place*, in which non-Aboriginal readers are positioned as bystanders absolved of agency by their distance from the white villains of the narrative, *Lori* unfolds a more complex ethical and moral world in which Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal people are capable both of cruelty and of kindness. For instance, the men who abuse Lori are white, but they are procured by her Aboriginal stepfather Leighton. Conversely, Lori's reminiscences of her experience of schooling include reference to a white teacher, Miss Turvey, who "took pains to praise us black children in front of the class, and always looked for the most positive aspects of our behaviour to comment upon" (20).

The narrative of *Lori* traces two life stories: those of the child Lori and of her mother Miriam. The story of Miriam details a descent into physical abuse and alcoholism, reaching its nadir at the end of the novel when she loses custody of all her children, who are then taken to an orphanage. On the other hand, the story of Lori proceeds from a point of relative calm, when Miriam is capable of caring for her children to a period when Lori assumes total responsibility for her younger siblings, and then jumps to the perspective of the adult writing her life. It is in the interstices between the stories of Miriam and Lori that the novel most clearly discloses how the colonial past is played out in Aboriginal experience. Living among "a people cut loose from their traditions" and bereft of "the values of my own race" (62), Lori observes the relationship of her mother and father and, after her father's death, that of her mother and stepfather. As the narrative moves from one episode to another, it positions readers to wonder at the strange inconsistencies between one set of relations and another and to seek for explanations within the colonial and assimilationist past that lies behind the narrative. Thus, Lori's father Kel mercilessly beats Miriam, with the children, huddled on the verandah, "listening to the dull low sounds of fists beating on bruising flesh" (41). Yet he shows Lori great tenderness, takes her for walks in the country, and treats her as his favourite child. These seemingly arbitrary moves in the behaviour of adults are represented through the perspective of the child as she seeks to understand her own place in Aboriginal sociality. Like the mission children in Glenyse Ward's two autobiographies and like the siblings and village children in Ruby Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun*, the most reliable source of support and intimacy is the confederacy of children caught up in the inconsistent and often violent actions of adults but also living to some extent apart from them and conducting their own critique of adult

society. However, the narratives of all three texts also disclose the fragility of child sociality, which is often disrupted through the exercise of adult power and the exigencies of poverty and sickness.

A motif threaded through the narrative of *Lori* is that of the secret space, the place of refuge, to which the child has recourse at moments of distress but which is always in danger of discovery or invasion. This is, of course, a metaphor common in women's writing; in *Lori*, it signals the extent to which the text aligns itself with female traditions (see Mills 58-62) and alludes both to the violated body of the child and to the inner life that is her source of strength. Because the secret places where the young Lori plays are forbidden to her, she associates them both with escape and with "strands of guilt and shame" (27). Again, after the death of her father, she "made a place for him" inside her (53), dampening down her unease about aspects of his behaviour (particularly his violence to Miriam) in order to maintain a selfhood that relies on memories of his love for her. The narrative concludes with the adult Lori standing in her house and looking out of a window as the dawn approaches. Her physical and psychic survival are captured in this moment, through the metaphor of the house that represents a subjectivity formed through multiple negotiations with others and with the cultural discourses (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) within which Lori forges her selfhood. At the end of her narrative, she is represented as validating her story: "I have told my story faithfully, leaving nothing out. I have not exaggerated the truth. My rememberings have left me drained, washed out. But I do not doubt that there has been worth in the telling" (122). The implication of the dawning day is that just as the new day arrives as "a unique moment, then forever gone" (122), so the formation of Lori's subjectivity is incomplete; but the dawn also promises a futurity inaccessible to Miriam, who is locked into the moment when Lori last saw her, bereft of her children and weeping for them.

Closure as Positioning

A comparison of the closures of the four narratives I have discussed reveals the variety of modes through which these texts position their readers. *Wandering Girl* concludes when Glenyse has run away from the Bigelows and has been offered a position as a nursing aide: "There was no looking back for me" (157). This utopian vision positions readers to assent to a version of the Australian dream in which all the Aboriginal child needs is courage and perseverance in order to assimilate into a brave new (white) world. In contrast, the conclusion of *Unna You Fullas* undoes the ending of *Wandering Girl*, looking back at Glenyse's life in the mission as a period of loss and pain presaging an uncertain and difficult future:

> For years after leaving the mission all of our group had to face the outside world in a struggle of trying to cope. We faced abuse and tor

> ment at the jobs we came up with, because of our lack of knowledge, being brought up not knowing who we were, or where we were bound, or what lay ahead of us. (180)

In insisting on the negativity of Glenyse's mission experience and its far-reaching effects upon her formation as an Aboriginal subject, this text refuses the consolatory closure of *Wandering Girl*. The closure of *My Place* is of a different kind again, one incorporated within a moment loaded with significance: a bird call, heard by the narrator's sister, which is "something spiritual, something out of this world" (348), and which anticipates a death. When Sally receives a telephone message telling her that her grandmother has died, she too hears the bird call: "'Oh, Nan,' I cried with sudden certainty, 'I heard it too. In my heart, I heard it'" (349). Here Aboriginality is inscribed as "out of this world," identified with a spirituality accessible to Aboriginal subjects but without the particularity or concreteness of Aboriginal traditions; a universal birdcall rather than a specific and local reference.

Non-Aboriginal readers of these texts are thus positioned in a variety of ways in regard to the tales of trauma that they encode. *My Place* offers a subject position that avoids confrontation through its universalizing discourses and its strategies of distancing readers from the acts of racism described in Morgan's narrative; *Wandering Girl* and *Unna You Fullas* reveal the lively tensions that exist between representations of traumatic events and Ward's strategic silences; finally, the fictive mode of *Lori* allows for a style of disclosure not so readily available to autobiographical narratives and offers the least comfortable subject position of all four texts. As Stuart Hall says, discourse is "always placed," always enunciated out of "a specific history, out of a specific set of power relationships" (185). The texts I have discussed work within power relationships that privilege the white readers who constitute their largest audience; but another set of expectations and preoccupations is in play for indigenous audiences. The shifting and various narrative strategies through which these texts address their audiences trace the complexities of a postcolonial setting in which the traumas of the past are not resolved or finished. This very state of unfinishedness calls for a continuing and sustained re-membering of the past and a determination to find a way out of the inequalities and imbalances produced by the colonial encounter.

Notes

1 The texts that I discuss bear striking similarities to Canadian works by Native authors, notably the novels *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier and *Honour the Sun* (1987) by Ruby Slipperjack. Although a comparative discussion is outside the scope of this essay, it should be clear to readers that there is ample room for such an approach.

2 Information from Fremantle Arts Centre Press, June 2001.

3 Although Wilson is white, the book is described in the catalogue of its publisher (the indigenous company Magabala) as an "autobiographical novel."

4 Sexual abuse was reported to the Stolen Generations Inquiry by one in five people who were fostered and by one in ten of those who were institutionalized (*Bringing them Home* 17).

5 Squatters were white people who settled on Crown land during the colonial period, initially without Government position but later with a lease or licence. They constituted the landed gentry of later Australian society.

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Clare Bradford *is an associate professor in the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University, Melbourne. She has published four books as well as many essays on aspects of children's literature, particularly colonial and postcolonial textuality.*