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Abstract

In the most important myths and songs, the choice and the arrangement of words were ... circumscribed: the rules were always more strict and less flexible in regard to the most sacred dimension of living. especially in anything to do with the secret-sacred there were unspoken assumptions that children learned to recognise, and to share. Because these are not necessarily spelt out, they can be stumbling blocks for outsiders who try to read meanings into stories without consulting the people who tell them.¹

ARLENE A. ELDER

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Aboriginal artist Sally Morgan's very popular 1987 autobiography asks two basic questions: the family-specific, 'What people are we?'² and the cultural, 'What did it really mean to be Aboriginal?' (p. 141). Approximately one-third of Morgan's book is cast as a quest to determine her proper group, Indian? White? Aboriginal?, and the last two-thirds as a determined struggle to learn for herself and express to the reader her spiritual sense of identity and Place as she laboriously fills in the details of her family's geographic, historical, and psychological wanderings.

My Place, one of at least five autobiographies by Aboriginal women since 1978, sold 110,000 copies in the first year of its publication.³ In *Australian Autobiography, The Personal Quest*, John Colmer identifies six different types of Australian autobiography. While admitting that his categories 'overlap and merge',⁴ Colmer makes the following distinctions:

- 1) autobiography as the transmission of humane values for the benefit of the reader and society as a whole
- 2) autobiography as personal therapy
- 3) autobiography as personal confession
- 4) autobiography as refracted social history
- 5) cultural and intellectual autobiography
- 6) autobiography as the voice of the neglected or misunderstood outsider

As one might expect, Colmer primarily treats *My Place* as an example of the last category.

This popular work has been widely examined from a variety of critical perspectives. It has been compared to an African-American slave narrative⁵ and to a mystery story;⁶ seen as part of the post-colonial response, specifically as contributing to the 'political debate[s] about Aboriginal self-determination';⁷ and as part of the growing body of feminist expressive art.⁸ Clearly, Sally Morgan's rich and provocative story has touched the heart of contemporary critical discourse and has been accepted as an Australian Aboriginal contribution to the growing body of post-colonial expressive art intertextually linked to historical precedents, non-traditional genres such as slave narratives, mystery stories, and autobiographical feminist expression. Indeed, these approaches all seem valid, as far as they go, and are supported and synthesized in Morgan's own explanation of her inspiration: 'My first motivation was anger – I get very angry at injustice, and I thought, "Somebody should put this down, people should know about these things."' ⁹ Yet, she and her editors made a conscious decision not to include family photographs in the text, precisely because such pictures would lead to the work being judged as social history rather than 'as an extension of the Aboriginal story-telling tradition' (*Kunapipi*, p. 102).

Therefore, I cannot help but agree with Australian critic Stephen Muecke who is disturbed 'by how comfortably' books like *My Place* have been read. 'This ease of acceptance,' Muecke admits, 'can only make the radical critic uneasy.'¹⁰ My own discomfort and consequent critical interest in *My Place* is dual and, finally, paradoxical. At once, I would like the focus of attention on the book to be on the problematic of its transformation of Aboriginal orature into written form, specifically autobiography; but, I also need to contextualize within the traditions of Aboriginal orature and western literary assumptions my own and, I suspect, most readers' responses to the difficulties Sally Morgan encounters in tracking down her ancestors.

The figure of Daisy, or Nan, Sally's reluctant-to-speak grandmother is the key to this problem. Within the text, her stubborn silence thwarts the writer's discovery of her family's history and the telling of her tale, but, ironically, it is precisely this silence that represents most surely the traditional Aboriginal heritage that Morgan wishes to uncover and convey.

The issue of the transformation of orature into literature is of first importance in the understanding of any written work coming from and purporting to represent a residual-oral culture. Some work has been done on this aspect of *My Place*, although not as much as that treating the book as social history, political protest, or as an example of feminist voicing. Joan Newman, for example, asks the crucial question:

How is Aboriginal discourse to maintain a separate identity? The more private oral communication which exists as part of Aboriginal family and community life cannot as easily be appropriated by a culture whose forms and language differ. So, in this

way, oral modes can remain authentically one's own. But what results when Aboriginal oral narratives are transcribed?¹¹

Sally Morgan's conscious response to this problem appears to be to incorporate as many features of traditional Aboriginal orature as she can. There is the mystical bird, for instance, which signifies the grandmother's Aboriginal feeling for nature and spirituality, which she can pass on to Sally and her sister, and which also signals her death. This bird appears early in the narrative, linking the older woman with her granddaughter and representing traditional Aboriginal sensibility, although Nan deliberately does not identify it in this way:

This morning, I was waiting for the bird call. Nan called it her special bird, nobody had heard it but her. This morning, I was going to hear it, too. ...

Still no bird. I squirmed impatiently. Nan poked her stick in the dirt and said, 'It'll be here soon.' She spoke with certainty. Suddenly, the yard filled with a high trilling sound. My eyes searched the trees. I couldn't see that bird, but his call was there. The music stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Nan smiled at me, 'Did you hear him? Did you hear the bird call?'

'I heard him, Nan,' I whispered in awe.

What a magical moment it had been. (*My Place*, p. 14)

By the end of the work, when the bird reappears, Nan has revealed her cultural heritage, and her role as teacher and link with the ancestors has become more poignant because of her impending death:

'Nan,' I said slowly as she looked at me, 'about that call, you weren't frightened when you heard it, were you?'

'Ooh, no,' she scoffed, 'it was the Aboriginal bird, Sally. God sent him to tell me I'm going home soon. Home to my own land and my own people. I got a good spot up there, they all waitin' for me.' (p. 357)

As Newman has pointed out, the bird operates at both the level of orature and of literature by serving as an organizing, unifying detail on the literate level and as an element of spirituality, of nature, and as a foreshadowing of impending death in the realm of orature.

It is the structure of *My Place*, however, that most closely links it to the strategies and meanings of traditional oral story telling. Its ironic, non-linear effect is aroused by a narrative expected, since it is an autobiography, to follow a chronological sequence, but which, instead, layers instance upon instance of Sally Morgan's and her family's experience, rather than providing a tidy cause-and-effect, logical progression. Sally's own narrative of her childhood and maturation, the typical stuff of autobiography, becomes backgrounded once she discovers her Aboriginal heritage and begins her search for details about her family's history. As a matter of fact, despite her discussing in frightening detail the disruption of her family life because of her alcoholic and mentally-disturbed, white father,

the first pages of her story seem prosaic compared with those coming later, generated by her efforts to discover an identity she did not know was hers until she was a grown woman. A large part of the 'mystery' element of the work rests in her compulsive analysis of clues that have been present all along and her relentless ferreting out of information from her mother and grandmother. Once aroused, this quest becomes obsessive and totally engages the reader's attention as well. Although Sally Morgan is married at the time of her discovery that she is part-Aboriginal and even has two children, the reader is no more interested in hearing about these family members than Sally is in telling about them. Our attention, like hers, is invested in discovering the variety of truths about her heritage. The story quickly becomes self-referential; *My Place* is largely a story about writing *My Place*. The details of Morgan's life before this quest seem an essential but flat background for this historical, psychological, and literary pursuit.

In a very real sense, then, the specifics of Sally's own childhood and adolescence form a pattern not unlike the suprealism of some Aboriginal paintings. Robin Dizard observes of the book, 'Not only is sequence different from other autobiographies, but also perspective seems skewed or absent. Foreground events and background appear to have the same treatment' (p. 11). Rather than their being treated equally, I would argue that the autobiographical details that western readers expect to be highlighted – Morgan's childhood experiences, for instance, – recede in importance, as information about her Aboriginality surfaces. Moreover, the focus shifts from her own life to a dual concentration upon the individual stories of family members and her efforts to discover and record those tales. The result is a flattening effect, with the oral stories of her great-uncle Arthur Corunna, her mother, Gladys, and her grandmother rising in importance to match that of the literate autobiographer's own life, both as an Australian woman and as a chronicler of that existence.

Morgan, whose vivid painting of her family's wandering was reproduced for the cover of the first edition of her book and who is a highly-commissioned visual artist in Australia today, was ridiculed in grade school by her western-oriented art teacher:

He held up one of my drawings in front of the class one day, and pointed out everything wrong with it. There was no perspective, I was the only one with no horizon line. My people were flat and floating.... By the end of ten minutes the whole class was laughing and I felt very small. (*My Place*, p. 97)

This humiliation leads Morgan to burn all her drawings, and it is only years later when she visits her grandmother's birth place and meets an old relative, a local artist, and recognizes the similarity between her way of painting and his that she regains confidence in her own artistry. 'I couldn't draw a three-dimensional picture if I tried,' she confesses: 'I never felt the

need to put in any horizon lines.... I've always liked patterns' (*Kunapipi*, p. 104). Her narrative is as patterned in a non-linear way as the painting on its cover. The most significant design linking this nominal autobiography with Aborigine orature, of which sand paintings are a basic narrative element, is its division into four life stories: Sally's, her great-uncle Arthur's, her mother Gladys', and her grandmother Daisy, or Nan's.

As John Colmer observes, 'in the art of autobiography there is an integral relationship between design and truth'.¹² The Aboriginal truth of *My Place* rests in its multi-voiced structure, reproducing the communal nature of traditional orature. Colmer goes on to note that in conventional western autobiographies, 'the other characters exist mainly in relation to the autobiographer' (p. 9). *My Place*, then, in its equal privileging of many voices and stories, rests not in the western tradition alone but, also, in that of Black and Third World writing which, as critic Selwyn Cudjoe notes, 'is presumed generally to be of service to the group. It is never meant to glorify the exploits of the individual, and the concerns of the collective predominate. One's personal experiences are assumed to be an authentic expression of the society'.¹³

More specifically, as Stephen Muecke points out, according to traditional Aboriginal custom, 'narrators are only ever the partial holders of traditions and are required to defer to the others who hold the rest of the sequence if they are available'.¹⁴ Morgan's book, then, rather than emphasizing her own life story, highlights her search for her family's experience which she expresses with minimal editing in their own tape-recorded words.¹⁵

However, this very attempt to reproduce the strategies and motives of traditional orature leads to a paradoxical complication. My subsequent discussion examines the implications of my own, I suspect representative, fury with Daisy's intransigence and recognizes that my modern expectations must be challenged in order for the genuine Aboriginal nature of this narrative to be revealed. This revelation occurs implicitly not explicitly, possibly unconsciously, even, on Sally Morgan's part.

Aboriginal critic Christine Morris has complained:

Many writers in Australia have written about the economic and social effects of the written tradition upon the various oral traditions of Australia, but few have addressed the question as to the inappropriateness of replacing the oral tradition with a written one. By this I mean it is fundamentally wrong to assume that the written word is a means of cultural preservation.¹⁶

The significance of Morris' criticism is clear if we recognize the demands of orature and of literature, at least in *My Place*, as in direct conflict with each other. In this autobiography, this cultural battleground is peopled by Daisy Corunna on one side and Sally and, for most of the book, myself as responding western reader, on the other. I have become convinced with John Colmer that 'In autobiography, it is the reader's response to the

writer's personal quest that counts',¹⁷ for, my increasing frustration with and anger at Daisy, echoing Sally's own, finally led me to a moment of revelation about the difference between conventional western autobiography and traditional Aboriginal story telling and even to speculations about clamoring modern assumptions about the reader's undeniable right to all knowledge clashing with Aboriginal decorum, which selects appropriate audiences for certain stories and determines what is to be considered the 'secret-sacred.'

From the moment Sally genuinely suspects her Aboriginal heritage, she relentlessly nags family members to fill in the details. Her great-uncle Arthur quickly and gladly complies: 'I been tryin' to get someone to write it for years' (*My Place*, p. 213). Her mother Gladys, although 'a hard nut to crack' (*My Place*, p. 99), slowly agrees. It is Daisy who will not cooperate; 'with my grandmother it was just like a brick wall' (*Kunapipi*, p. 95).

While Daisy, who has taught Sally to make pictographs of kangaroos and hunters in the sand when she was a child and to listen for the call of the magical bird, eventually reveals some of the details of her life, she refuses to tell everything and goes to her grave with many of her secrets intact. In one of the book's most poignant scenes, after being badgered by Sally for more and more details of her personal experience, Daisy, whose typical response to such demands is flight, finally turns to confront her granddaughter; 'her cheeks were wet. "Don't you understand, yet" she said softly, "there are some things I just can't talk about"' (p. 351). Earlier, she has asserted, 'I got my secrets, I'll take them to the grave. Some things I can't talk bout. Not even to you, my granddaughter. They for me to know. They not for you or your mother to know' (p. 349). Sally's quest for Aboriginal identity and public identification as chronicler of her family is so intense, however, she does not accept Daisy's assertion of silence but shouts at her bedroom ceiling, 'I'm not giving up, God. Not in a million years.... and I expect you to help!' (p. 352). Divine intervention has been slow in coming, however: "'I'm not saying nothing. Nothing, do you hear. ... I'm not talking, I'm not talking," [Daisy] muttered as she dropped her rake and put her hands over her ears' (p. 105).

Daisy's refusal to listen to her granddaughter's imprecations and to respond to them has generally been interpreted, even by Sally, as evidence of her continuing fear of white authority and her socially-induced shame of her Aboriginal origins. Certainly, there is justification for this view. After Sally receives an Aboriginal scholarship to the University, her grandmother pleads, 'You won't ever tell them about me, will you, Sally? I don't like strangers knowing our business, especially government people. You never know what they might do' (p. 137). This fear is understandable; Sally comments on having met half-cast Aborigines who were taken away from their non-white mothers as late as the nineteen sixties. As she becomes willing to admit her true heritage, rather than claiming to have

come to Australia on a boat from India, Daisy also begins to respond to news stories about blacks. However, her self-image is, clearly, conflicted:

If the story was sad, she'd put her hand to her mouth and say, 'See, see what they do to black people.' On the other hand, if black people were doing well for themselves, she'd complain, 'Just look at them, showing off. Who do they think they are. They just black like me.' (pp. 137-8)

For the purposes of contextualizing Morgan's autobiography within Aboriginal expressive art, however, Nan's insistence on secrecy, most fruitfully, can be seen as representative of the older tradition that she represents.

Catherine Berndt has spoken of 'divisions or levels or dimensions in [the] means of transmitting information ... with the mundane, the ordinary on one hand, and on the other the secret-sacred'.¹⁸ My argument is that Daisy considers her known life every bit as sacred, therefore parts of it secret, as Sally considers her previously unknown life psychologically and politically important and, because of her western schooling, appropriate as the subject of public scrutiny. Even Gladys, her mother, who finally responds fully, with heretofore unknown events in the family history, complains in an interview subsequent to the publication of *My Place*, 'I feel sick. I feel my whole life's paraded before everybody' (*Kunapipi*, p. 97).

Like a trickster, Sally taunts Daisy into providing the first information she receives from her:

I started reading her extracts from the stories my Uncle Arthur had given me, but not telling her who it was about, just that it was a man I knew. She thought it was fantastic, and she would laugh and cry, and when I told her it was her own brother's story, she got very jealous, and then she'd say, 'Well, I've got a better story than that,' and I'd say, 'Well, you're no good because you won't talk. For all we know you might have a silly story.' Eventually she came round, and then it became important to her to tell. (*Kunapipi*, p. 95)

Arthur, too, taking a detached, communal stance toward the story of his own struggles as a young man, goads Daisy into talking by implying she is ignorant, arguably, because she is a woman: 'It's history, that's what it is. We're talking history. You could be talkin' it too, but then I s'pose you don't know what it is' (*My Place*, p. 163).

Daisy agrees, at least partially: 'Could be it's time to tell. Time to tell what it's been like in this country' (p. 439). Once she agrees to speak (necessarily, for Sally's comprehension, in English, not in the Aborigine language in which, it is discovered, she is fluent), truth-telling, not fictionalizing, is of first importance: 'I got to be careful what I say. You can't put no lies in a book' (p. 325). But, as she later clearly expresses, there are truths one cannot put in a book, as well.

My first title for this essay was 'Silence as Expression, or Daisy Corunna goes "pink-eye"', using the north-west Aboriginal expression, similar to

the more widely-known 'walk about', 'a period of wandering as a nomad, often undertaken by Aborigines who feel the need to leave the place where they are in contact with white society and return for spiritual replenishment to their traditional way of life' (p. 325). Sally's insistence on knowing all, moreover, on telling all to strangers, can be seen as appearing as alien to Daisy Corunna as the white society that has denied and dictated so much of her life.

Ironically, then, despite the multitude of voices structuring this narrative, the true heteroglossia, that is, the clash of voices in Bakhtin's terms, stems from Daisy's silence. Her refusal to reveal everything about her personal life may thwart Sally's and the reader's desire for complete knowledge and frustrate their modern assumptions of their right to know everything, but this silence speaks eloquently of her representation of a culture where the word was powerful and where there was no such genre as the confessional form.

NOTES

1. Catherine H. Berndt, 'Traditional Aboriginal oral literature', in Bob Hodge and Jack Davis, eds., *Aboriginal Writing Today* (Canberra: Aboriginal Institute of Aboriginal Studies Press, 1985).
2. Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1986), p. 105. All further references are included in the text.
3. Susan Sheridan, 'Different Lives: Two Aboriginal Women's Stories', *Antipodes: the publication of the American Association of Australian Literary Studies*, vol.3, no.1, p. 20.
4. John Colmer, *Australian Autobiography, The Personal Quest* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989).
5. Robin Dizard, 'Erasing and Tracing Lines of Descent: *My Place* and the Arts of the Slave Narrative', unpublished paper.
6. Joan Newman, 'Reader-response to Transcribed Oral Narrative: *A Fortunate Life* and *My Place*', *Southerly*, December, 1988, pp. 376-389.
7. Sue Thomas, 'Aboriginal Subjection and Affirmation', *Melbourne Age Monthly Review*, February, 1988, p. 755.
8. Newman and Colmer.
9. 'A Fundamental Question of Identity, An Interview with Sally Morgan', *Kunapipi*, vol. 10, no. 1-2, 1988, p. 94. All further references are included in the text.
10. Stephen Muecke, 'Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis', *Southerly*, December, 1988, p. 415.
11. Joan Newman, op. cit., p. 382.
12. John Colmer, op. cit., p. 7.
13. Quoted in Evelyn O'Callaghan, 'Feminist Consciousness: European/American Theory, Jamaican Stories', *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, Spring, 1988, pp. 143-162.
14. Stephen Muecke, op. cit., p. 415.
15. In her interview in *Kunapipi*, cited above, Morgan reveals that her original manuscript was three times the length of the published book. Nevertheless, she insists that the printed stories are virtually word for word with the oral narration, that she

only cut and pasted, throwing out 'stories that kind of went off on tangents' (p. 108). The narratives of the different informants were different in essential ways, however, and had to be handled differently: 'In Mum's case, because she's so articulate, virtually what is written is what she said, word for word. She wrote her own story, and I just put it together. But with my grandmother, sometimes I would ask her a question, and older Aboriginal people will answer you, but not always verbally. ... So I had to decide, do I include this or do I leave it out. ... but I think what I learned when I was writing it was that you don't have to be explicit to say something' (pp. 108-9).

16. Christine Morris, 'The Oral Tradition Under Threat: The Black Australian Experience', unpublished paper, p. 1.
17. John Colmer, op. cit., p. 5.
18. Catherine Berndt, op. cit., p. 93.

JUSTIN MACGREGOR

Towards a Hybrid Discourse: The Poetry of Mudrooroo

The Song Circle of Jacky and Dalwurra: The Black Bittern are probably Mudrooroo's most successful post-colonial works. In the texts he produces a form and a content that do not subsume or marginalize an/Other; instead he liberates his writing from colonial discourse and generates a hybrid form that accepts and inscribes difference. While there may be some minor slippages in language and form that repeat the marginalization of colonial discourse, both texts produce a hybrid discourse that includes Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, escapes the vortex of the Manichean Allegory and undermines binary classifications. *The Song Circle of Jacky and Dalwurra* produce a hybrid discourse that combines two distinct archives, the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal, by speaking from the space where European and Aboriginal discourses 'spill into each other'.¹

The Song Circle of Jacky is probably Mudrooroo's most political text in that it directly addresses contemporary Aboriginal concerns. In the thirty-five poems that comprise the song circle, Mudrooroo deals with the Aboriginal struggle for land reparations, the failure of the Australian government to negotiate fairly over Aboriginal rights, the pain of Aboriginal history, and the continuing oppression of Aboriginals by the majority