



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane
Classe LM-37

Tesi di Laurea

***The Importance of Place in the Definition
of Aboriginality in Aboriginal Women's
Fiction***

Relatore
Prof. ssa Alessandra Petrina

Laureando
Sarah Vassos
n° matr.1035134 / LMLLA

Anno Accademico 2012 / 2013

The Importance of Place in the Definition of Aboriginality in Aboriginal Women's Fiction:

Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*, Gayle Kennedy's *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye*, Larissa Behrendt's *Home*, and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
I. Aboriginal Literature	
1.1 Terminology.....	6
1.2 From the <i>Dreaming</i> to Contemporary Aboriginal Literature.....	9
1.3 Literary Genres and the Gender Issue.....	25
II. Tara June Winch's <i>Swallow the Air</i>	
2.1 The Novel and its Author.....	30
2.1.1 The Metaphor of Air.....	33
2.2 Back Home.....	36
2.2.1 Aboriginality.....	45
2.3 Misery and Violence.....	49
III. Gayle Kennedy's <i>Me, Antman & Fleabag</i>	
3.1 Aboriginal English and Family Ties.....	55
3.2 Aboriginal Humour.....	65
IV. Vivienne Cleven's <i>Her Sister's Eye</i>	
4.1 Trauma and the Gothic Novel.....	73
4.2 Mundra and the Whitefella.....	82
4.2.1 The River.....	87
V. Larissa Behrendt's <i>Home</i>	
5.1 History and Storytelling.....	90
5.2 The Place where the Rivers Meet.....	96

5.3 The Denial of Aboriginal Identity: A Comparison with Sally Morgan's *My Place*.....103

VI. Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

6.1 A Liminal Place: Reality and *Dreaming*.....111

6.1.1 Singing the Country.....118

6.2 Carpentaria: A Contested Land.....122

Conclusion.....128

Bibliography.....131

Introduction

Writing this dissertation has been a challenge to me for several reasons. The topics are very controversial, and sometimes reading is struggling; it is important to stress that even though I am dealing with fiction, all stories are based on historical facts occurred to Aborigines with the English colonization. There are no words that can be appropriate enough to express the sorrow and grief of a population that has been almost exterminated; no wonder that the wiping of Australian Aborigine has been considered a genocide. Apart from the atrocities, the reading has been sometimes difficult for the peculiar use of language, the frequent use of lingo in some texts and the use of Aboriginal English, which is a continual reminder of the outsider feeling of me as a white reader. In addition, I am aware that I am neither Australian nor Aboriginal; on the one hand, this encouraged me to be very precise in my work, trying not to avoid anything. On the other hand, I know that my intent to criticize some Aboriginal writers might look like a pretentious attempt to put white authority on Aboriginal writing with the consequence of only increasing the misinterpretations that had been given to Aborigines in time, especially by anthropologists, or works such as Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under* (1994) or Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987). However, my goal is not to give universal interpretations on Aboriginal literature.

My study is a journey of understanding with no claims of being an expert or of telling the truth. During my work I have always tried to keep in mind that there is and there always will be a distance between me and the writers I am studying; and I have tried to use this distance to strengthen the Aboriginal potentiality and not to lessen it. Many Aboriginal critics and writers do believe that *only* Aborigines can write on Aborigines; this idea puzzled me at the beginning of my work and I was very often concerned whether to start my work or not. I accepted the challenge with many doubts, but bearing in mind that just because I am a complete outsider from the Australian world I could look at a different facet of the whole Aboriginal matter. There is no reason why the Aboriginal issue should be confined to Australia only. I have faced this challenge with humility,

being aware that I was writing on the side of the colonizer, but I tried to draw away from the position of authority and depict things as I saw them. Needless to say, my European background has influenced and shaped my work in many, if not all studies (I could come close to Aboriginal issues only for six months, the short period that I spent in Australia).

The works I am dealing with are about the land and the relationship of people with the land. This relationship is so important that it frames the identity of the people. A deterioration of the relationship causes the rupture of a normal balance. Due to the historical events that afflicted Aborigines, the matter is worsened in their case where the quest for one's *belonging place* has become the norm and not the exception; and where there is always the necessity to show how things are from the fringe perspective. The first chapter shows the influence of political and historical matters on Aboriginal literature. Then I have chosen five texts because they stress the importance of place in relation to the Aboriginal identity; some of them in the same way, others differently; nevertheless, in all of them the land is fundamental in the definition of Aboriginality. I have chosen to analyze contemporary texts, written in the last two decades, belonging to diverse literary genres (semi-autobiography, short stories, gothic, and "magic realism") to see the different development and way of facing the topics I was dealing with.

The first work I will deal with is Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*, both a semi-autobiographical novel and a work made of short stories. Her work is about May's journey of self-discovery to find her *belonging place*, but it also confronts other important Aboriginal issues. Starting from the title, I will look at the metaphor of air and breathing as a symbol of several things: asphyxia becomes a metaphor to express the lack of normal relationships, or the instability of things in life, or the character's need to escape, or, ultimately, the insecurity of one's identity. May's journey will be analysed taking into account the 'place-identity theory' of Proshansky et al. and their categories will be applied to understand the several phases of her journey: from her abandoning the Sydney suburb to reach the squalid squat; from her journey up to the Territory in search for her father, back to Sydney again, at the Block; again on the road to the Lake Cowal,

towards the mission, and finally at her mob's place. The issue of Aboriginality will be faced as a problematic issue for many characters; and misery and violence will be underlined in a reality where cruelty is normality and family is no shelter.

The second work I will analyze is Gale Kennedy's *Me, Antman & Fleabag*. This collection of short stories, which can also be read as a unique story, gives another portrayal of Aboriginality. Family becomes a form of resistance for the characters who, like May, set off for a journey to find their *belonging place*. Again, dispossession and the Stolen Generations are the starting point for these two works and for their characters' quests. Aboriginal humour is used with both Aborigines and non-Aborigines with several goals; amongst them, challenging stereotypes, and temper harsh realities. As in *Swallow the Air*, storytelling is seen as a means to re-enable Aborigines into society and carry on their tradition in the face of modernity. Aboriginal English is adopted as a form of claiming Aboriginal identity: it becomes a form to promote cohesion and resistance against white reality. The polyphonic narrative is used as a prism to show its different facets; once again, authenticity is challenged.

Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* is an innovative critical novel and the third one in my study. Its genre, the gothic, is analyzed in a broader view where the colonized subject and the post-colonial discourse are interrelated with psychoanalytical trauma. The genre is used to disclose Aboriginal trauma, in particular in relation to some characters, such as Archie Corella/Raymond Gee, where the repressed part of the self is ultimately freed to disclose itself. Another important character is Caroline Drysdale for she confronts, not colonialism as in the case of Archie Corella, but rather masculinity and authority in a patriarchal white society. They suffer from posttraumatic disorders and only memory will help towards a recovery of the subjects. Nana Vida, as Nan in *Home*, is the character that embodies Aboriginal memory: her storytelling is a form of denunciation of the colonial abuses and a way to regain Aboriginal identity. These characters live in a small town, Mundra, which has a life of its own where racial relationships impede a normal development of the stories. The conditions of the town and the weather are mirrors of a fracture between the

people and the place, where the only characters that still have a traditional relationship with the land are the Salte Sisters, who represent the hope for reconciliation; reconciliation, as Mudrooroo says, not only of Indigenous people to the nation of Australia, but the reconciliation of the general population of Australia to the land of Australia.¹

Larissa Behrendt's *Home* is inserted in a long tradition of autobiographical narrative which started with Sally Morgan's *My Place*. Toni Swain's theory on time, place and the *Dreamtime* is used to analyse the relationship between history and storytelling. The goal of the author is the same as the Aboriginal traditional storyteller: to teach and explain things to people. Thanks to the generational narrative, female characters, especially Garibooli, employ *Dreamtime* stories as a mechanism of survival. Home is the place where the rivers meet and is the target of some characters, trying to find their *belonging place* is the solution for an uneasiness caused by the uncertainty of their identity. As in *Swallow the Air*, Aboriginality is a problematic issue which is denied by some characters; such as Thomas and Denny in *Home* and Nan and Gladys in *My Place*; and claimed and affirmed by others. For some characters, family frames Aboriginality but it is not the sufficient solution: some characters need to set off for a journey to find out their origins and gain back their spiritual connection with the land.

Alexis Wright's second novel *Carpentaria* is the last work I will be studying. "Carpentaria", both the place where the story is set and the title of the novel, is a place where the border between dreaming and reality is undistinguishable. The white reader feels alienated by a reality which is clearly not his/her own because the focus is on the side of the Aborigines. The *Dreamtime* is the first and only reading of reality: it is the thread running through the whole story and creates an intricate web that offers a depiction of a complex reality. I have shown several forms of expression of Aboriginal culture, and here the relationship with the land is mediated by songs. For those who are ready to listen, the voice of the ancestral land will awake them and save them, as in the case of one of the main characters, Normal Phantom. Similar to Mundra, Desperance gives us a small

¹ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, p. 92.

depiction of Australia where relationships are always difficult due to the condition of colonized on one side and colonizers on the other. Nevertheless, for both parties the land has a great importance, it frames Aboriginal identity and is the tool of power for whites.

The Importance of Place in the Definition of Aboriginality in

Aboriginal Women's Fiction:

Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*, Gayle Kennedy's *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye*, Larissa Behrendt's *Home*, and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

I. Aboriginal Literature

1.1 Terminology

Before starting my study, I would like to specify some terms in order not to fall into miscomprehensions. Language is a powerful tool to be used correctly and it is important to acknowledge the different connotations a word can carry.

Aboriginal person is a person who is of Aboriginal descent; who identifies as such; and who is accepted by the community as an Aboriginal person.²

Aboriginal people(s) is a collective name given by colonizers to indicate the first peoples of Australia. It does not recognise the differences of culture, language, beliefs among the several communities. Adding the 's' is an attempt to recognise this diversity. The term indicates the peoples living in the main land of Australia and Tasmania; it does not include Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

3

² Australian Government Official Website: <http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/36-kinship-and-identity/legal-definitions-aboriginality> (accessed 25 February 2013); Larissa Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*, Milton: Wiley Publishing Australia, 2012, p.21.

³ Nura Gili UNSW Terminology Guide: <http://www.nuragili.unsw.edu.au/PDF/2012/Nura%20Gili%20Terminology%20Guide.pdf> (Accessed 25 February 2013).

Aborigine(s) and *Aboriginal* are two terms that sometimes are not accepted because of their negative connotations. According to some sources⁴, the term *Indigenous* is more appropriate because it includes Torres Strait Islanders and because it is not a term that Aborigines chose for themselves. In my research I will use *Aboriginal* and *Aborigines* because the term *Indigenous* is too broad a term as it refers in general to people who lived in a territory for a long time, before someone else's arrival.⁵ It is used in no negative connotation and it does refer to Aboriginal peoples just of the mainland, because this study will deal with writers of the Australian mainland and its goal is not to make any kind of generalization.

Non-Aborigine(s) and *White(s)* are two different terms and it is important to distinguish between them. *White(s)* is a racial term⁶ and therefore when used, it will be to stress the racial context. Instead of these two terms, sometimes *Europeans* is used, but it is not correct because it does not include people who were not Europeans but anyway have participated in the dispossession of Aborigines.⁷ In order to avoid this miscomprehension, the term *non-Aborigine(s)* will be used, because it is broader and does not carry any racial connotation. I am aware that not *all* non-Aboriginal people were involved in the massacres of the last two centuries.

The terms *half-caste*, *octoroom*, *light-skinned* and *quadroon* are offensive words introduced with the Aborigines Protection Board records and later widely spread in the Australian community.⁸

These terms refer to a person of "mixed" blood, having one Aboriginal parent, usually the mother,

⁴ Australian Government Official website: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/25122BEAB173151ACA25697E0018FE5B> (accessed 25 February 2013); and Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, Raylee Singh, ed., Melbourne: Hyland Publishing, 1997. p. 216.

⁵ OED online: <http://www.oed.com/> defines *Indigenous* as 'born or produced naturally in a land or region; native or belonging naturally to (the soil, region etc.)'. (Used primarily of aboriginal inhabitants or natural products). (Accessed 9 April 2013).

⁶ OED online: <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 9 April 2013) defines *white*, adj., 'applied to those ethnic types (chiefly Europeans or of European extraction) characterized by light complexion, as distinguished from black, red, yellow, etc.'

⁷ Tikka J. Wilson, *In the Best Interest of the Child?: Stolen Children, Aboriginal Pain, White Shame*, Fyshwick: Paragon Printers, 1997, p. xi.

⁸ Wilson, p. xii.

and the other non-Aboriginal. With *full-blood* is defined a person whose parents are both Aborigines. These are racist terms and will be used in the racial context.

Tribe is a technical word used by anthropologists⁹; it is a controversial word, and in the last few decades it has assumed a negative connotation because the term was invented and used by the oppressors. Therefore, even if the term *community* refers to people that share the same place, this will be the term used, together with the terms *mob*¹⁰ or *nation*. However, I am aware that *tribe* in this sense would be more appropriate because it indicates the sharing of social relationships.

What is meant with *belonging place* is the place where an Aboriginal person has a spiritual connection with, where the self belongs¹¹. Place has nothing to do with ownership. The self does not feel complete when it is not in that place where it does belong. *Place making* is possible through stories, and stories are what reveal the importance of the place for the self. The relation to place changes constantly according to historical and social elements, but its importance is indisputable.

Home can have several meanings, but it usually refers to the place of residence, or to the belonging place. It is frequently accompanied by some kind of attachment and a sense of comfort. For Aboriginal peoples, *home* is the place that has a spiritual connection, because it can be the country of the family, youth or the ancestors.¹²

⁹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/604711/tribe> (accessed 26 February 2013); however, OED underlines that it is the word 'tribespeople' that was invented by anthropologists in 1888.

¹⁰ OED online, <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 9 April 2013) *mob* with the meaning of 'a large crowd or group of people; esp. A group of people certain distinctive characteristics or a common identity or occupation. Also: a clique or gang. In *Austral*. From the late 19th cent.' Therefore not with the depreciative meaning of 'the common people; the populace; the masses'.

¹¹ Wilson, p. xii.

¹² Wilson, p. xii.

1.2 From the *Dreaming* to Contemporary Aboriginal Literature

Aboriginal literature cannot be studied without taking into consideration the history of Aboriginal peoples, in fact the proof of this strong relation lies in the fact that ‘the job of the Aboriginal writer is to give his people a history’.¹³ Before 1788, Aboriginal literature was oral and was based on the *Dreaming*¹⁴. With the British invasion, there were strong and brutal changes in Aboriginal societies: amongst these changes Aboriginal peoples were obliged to speak English and were moved into missions and institutions where they were taught how to write. Aboriginal literature of the first decades of the nineteenth century used the English tools – the English language and the writing system – to try to resist assimilation.¹⁵ The first Aboriginal writer who succeeded in publishing his writings in 1929 was David Unaipon: in his *Native Legends* he shows the struggle between two realities (the Aboriginal and the invader’s).¹⁶

Between the 1930s and the 1960s no relevant Aboriginal literature was published, only some letters or petitions have been found. At any rate, these thirty years were important because Aboriginal peoples started a journey towards the recognition of rights: many organisations were born in order to resist assimilation and represent Aboriginal peoples (among these organisations, the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association, and the Australian Aborigines League).¹⁷ In the 1960s the struggle continued and few achievements were made (the Constitutional Referendum in 1967). On a literary ground, it is often stated that the 1960s marked the beginning of modern Aboriginal literature.¹⁸ The beginning of Aboriginal publication was signed in 1964 with Kath

¹³ Narogin Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe: a Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, Melbourne: Hyland Publishing, 1990, p. 140.

¹⁴ This aspect will be discussed in depth in the following part of the chapter.

¹⁵ Anita Heiss & Peter Minter, eds., *Macquarie PEN: Anthology of Aboriginal Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008, p. 2.

¹⁶ Heiss & Minter, p.3.

¹⁷ Behrendt, pp. 164-6.

¹⁸ Heiss, & Minter; Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page, Aboriginal Literature 1929 – 1988*, Tony Hassall, ed., Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1989.; Mudrooroo, *Writing From The Fringe*; Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*; Colin Johnson, “White Forms, Aboriginal Content”, in Jack Davis, & Bob Hodge, eds., *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers Held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985, pp. 21-35.; Stephen Muecke, Jack Davis, & Adam Shoemaker, “Aboriginal Literature”, in Hergenhan, Laurie, ed., *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988, p.36.

Walker and in 1965 with Colin Johnson.¹⁹ Aboriginal Literature was beginning to play a major role in the expression of Aboriginal issues.²⁰ In Aboriginal writings there was an interrelation of tradition and modernity which reflected the difficult position of Aborigines in society.

In the 1970s, Aboriginal literature flourished with authors such as Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis, Lionel Fogarty, and Monica Clare. Very often, committed writers tried to denounce the abuses on their people and their culture:

Aboriginal literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the whiteman. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood.²¹

This self-determination increased in the 1980s when Aboriginal issues were taken to an international level. Aboriginal activism denounced injustices and brought some interest in the Aboriginal cause. In this sense, a great step forward was made with the Mabo case in 1992 when the concept of *Terra Nullius* declared by British settlers was discarded and the subsequent Native Title Act was passed in 1993.²² Aborigines still remained at the margins of society, but their voice was beginning to be loud and strong.

¹⁹ Colin Johnson was born in 1938 in Narrogin, Western Australia. He claimed his Aboriginal identity and changed his name several times, the last name being Mudrooroo. He is a well-known academic and eclectic author: amongst his writings there is poetry (*The Song Cycle of Jackie and Other Pomes*, 1986; *Dalwurra: The Black Bittern*, 1988, and *Dalnarra*, 1989); drama; semi-autobiographies (*Us Mob*, 1995); historical texts (*Long Live Sandawara*, 1979); literary criticism; film-transcripts; and several novels (*Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, 1983), the "wildcat trilogy" (*Wild Cat Falling*, 1965; *Doin Wildcat*, 1988; *Wildcat Screaming*, 1992), *The Kwinkon* (1993), and the quadrilogy of the *Master of Ghost Dreaming*. Until 1996 there was certainty on his Aboriginality; in that year his sister Betty Polglaze declared that their origins were not Aboriginal. Therefore, from that date onwards he became a controversial figure and the credibility of his work has been questioned. I am aware that he is considered by some to have assumed the Aboriginal identity without being a real Aboriginal person. In addition, he is considered by some an "impostor" and, therefore, not to be included amongst Aboriginal writers and critics. However, investigating his contested Aboriginality is not relevant to the purpose of my work and I will briefly consider his case later. For further information see Nolan, Maggie, "Identity Crises and Orphaned Rewritings", in Oboe, Annalisa, ed., *Mongrel Signatures, Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, pp.107-128.; Shoemaker, Adam, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity", in Oboe, Annalisa, ed., *Mongrel Signatures, Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, pp.1-24.; Shoemaker, Adam, *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993.; Shoemaker, Adam, "Mudrooroo: Australia's Most International Author?", *Aratjara: Aboriginal Culture and Literature in Australia*, Dieter, and Davis, V., Geoffrey, eds., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997. Clark, Maureen, "Mudrooroo: Crafty Impostor or Rebel with a Cause?", *Australian Literary Studies*, 21 (2004), pp. 101-10.; Clark, Maureen, *Mudrooroo: a Likely Story, Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*, University of Wollongong, 2004, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=0&article=1189&context=theses&type=additional> (accessed 3 March 2013); Terry Goldie, "On Not Being Australian: Mudrooroo and Demidenko", *Australian Literary Studies*, 21 (2004).

²⁰ Heiss & Minter, p. 4.

²¹ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 1.

²² Ronald Paul Hill, "Blackfellas and Whitefellas: Aboriginal Land Rights, the Mabo Decision, and the Meaning of Land", *Human Rights Quarterly*, 17 (1995), pp. 303-22.

In literature, from the 1990s onwards, narratives of memoir and testimonial fiction enjoyed great success.²³ It was fundamental to educate people on what had occurred to them and to speak about Aboriginal history to Aborigines as well. This self-introspection was reflected in both prose and poetry where Aboriginal authors tried to find new ways of expression. In the last decades the renewal of Aboriginal culture brought to a rebirth of Aboriginal literature.²⁴ In 2008 finally the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially apologised for the brutalities done to Aboriginal peoples. This will not heal two centuries of wounds, but it will help to hope for reconciliation and to create a stronger and united Australia, where Aboriginal culture can be recognised at its basis.

Aboriginal literature begins with the Aborigines' arrival in the Australian territory, around sixty thousand years ago. Aboriginal literature, before British invasion, was the *Dreaming*²⁵: oral tales based on their culture. If we were to make a division in early Aboriginal literature (with 'early' I mean before written literature), this would be between sacred and public.²⁶ The former was available only to certain selected people of the community, they were the initiates. This literature was therefore specific to a small group of people as it often had a ritual function. The public literature was known by all the community and it was frequently, but not only, used as entertainment or as an educational form. It is therefore incorrect to think of 'Aboriginal oral production as a kind of historical backdrop to contemporary work in Australian literature, whether Aboriginal or not'.²⁷ In fact, the *Dreaming* cannot be left behind because it lays the foundations of

²³ Heiss & Minter, p.6; Anne Brewster, "Indigenous Writing in Australia and New Zealand", in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, Quayson, Ato, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 512.

²⁴ Heiss & Minter, p.6.

²⁵ At the end of the twentieth century, anthropologists translated into English the Aboriginal Aranda (of the central Australia) word *Altjira* with "Dreaming" in order to refer to creational stories, but also dreams – the translation of the word was not wholly correct and it was associated to several different concepts. Later, the word was used as a more general and unifying term to indicate the stories regarding the Aboriginal Ancestral past. For further information see Douglass Price-Williams and Rosslyn Gaines, "The Dreamtime and Dreams of Northern Australian Aboriginal Artists", *Ethos*, 22 (1994), pp. 373-88; David H. Turner, "Dreamtime: Life, Afterlife and the Soul in Australia Aboriginal Religion", *India International Centre Quarterly*, 18 (1991), pp. 4-18.

²⁶ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 33.

²⁷ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 27.

contemporary Aboriginal literature: it might be considered as important as the *Iliad* for Europeans.

28

The ‘time of the Dreaming’,²⁹ or *Dreamtime*, dates back to prehistory³⁰ when Captain Cook had not arrived yet. At the time, Aboriginal knowledge was kept and spread through oral transmission and each community had its own stories and songs; however, within the Australian main land it seems that the Rainbow Serpent Legend³¹ was common to all, or at least most, communities.³² The problem lies in the fact that ‘in Australia, many myths dealing with the origins of the different Aboriginal communities have either been lost, or incorrectly recorded’.³³ This is due to the fact that most oral tradition has vanished for different reasons: the same orality that almost inevitably gets lost in time; some stories were secret, i.e., told only to certain members of the communities; and anthropologists romanticised or mistakenly translated some stories.

The first writing by Aboriginal people goes back to 1837, in the journal *The Flinders Island (Weekly) Chronicle*. The journal reflected the ideas of assimilation of the period; however, as it is the first appearance of Aboriginal writing, it is still of great relevance for two aspects: it was directed to both Aborigines and non-Aborigines; in addition, the article denounced the brutal living conditions on the island.³⁴ The second example is a petition against the 1869 *Aboriginal Protection Board*, written by Aboriginal people in Victoria to protest against the cruel treatment and unfair

²⁸ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 7.

²⁹ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 5.

³⁰ In relation to Australian Aborigines, Prehistory is defined by Mudrooroo as the period of time ‘before the coming of the Europeans’. Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 5.

³¹ The Rainbow Serpent Legend is a unifying myth (used in ceremonies, performances and visual art) and this is evidenced by the finding of rock paintings with this myth across all Australia; however, it is true that the myth has several different variations amongst Aboriginal peoples. It is general believed that the serpent is often associated to creation and destruction and it can be a male or a female figure. The theological figure usually has its shelter in waterholes, but the most common legend says that during the monsoonal season it goes up to the sky. It gets the elemental colours and reproduces itself several times through out the Australian territory: its appearance denotes that something is about to change (be created or destroyed). For further information see Erich Kolig, “The Rainbow Serpent in The Aboriginal Pantheon: a Review Article”, *Oceania*, 51 (1981), pp. 312-6; Charles P. Mountford, “The Rainbow-Serpent: Myths of Australia”, in Ira R. Buchler et. Al., eds., *The Rainbow Serpent*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978, pp. 23-98; Paul S. Taçon, Meredith Wilson & Christopher Chippindale, “Birth of the Rainbow Serpent in Arnhem Land Rock Art and Oral History”, *Archaeology in Oceania*, 31 (1996), pp. 103-24.

³² Behrendt, p. 53.

³³ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 6.

³⁴ Behrendt, p. 148; Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, pp. 18-9.; and Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, pp. 34-5; Heiss & Minter, p. 10.

regulations enacted by non-Aborigines.³⁵ But the first instance of Aboriginal literature was written by David Unaipon in 1929.

In that year he completed *Native Legends*, the first book written by an Aboriginal author to be published. In his writings the influence of Christianity is very relevant both in his style and the way he approaches Aboriginal themes. In fact, Shoemaker stresses Unaipon's 'sermonic prose style'³⁶ which reflects the way Unaipon presents Aboriginal traditional legends: though Unaipon is an Aborigine, 'he does not view himself as being the same as other Aborigines'.³⁷ Somehow, thanks to his Christian upbringing, he manages to keep distance from Aboriginal peoples. According to Shoemaker, Unaipon's stories are directed to a white audience and present Aboriginal peoples as primitive and naïve.³⁸ Unaipon's legends are seen with some scepticism to the point that Shoemaker gets to the conclusion that 'Unaipon did not have a very great knowledge of traditional Aboriginal matters'.³⁹ Nevertheless, the importance and uniqueness of this writer has to be underlined: Unaipon's Christian background and his Aboriginality create a unique and constant tension in his writing.⁴⁰ Moreover, in relation to the political and social period in which he wrote, he is important because he embodies 'the paradox of a man moving away from traditional Aboriginal society while he ostensibly celebrates narrative and mythical elements'.⁴¹

Between the end of the 1920s and the flourishing of Aboriginal literature of the 1960s-70s there are very few writers of note. In the years 1928-9 two influential and very different books were published: Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. The former won the *Bulletin's* literary competition first prize; however, the novel 'had a rather tempestuous reception in Australia in 1928-9',⁴² whereas it had success in Great Britain. It compassionately looks at the relationship between the white owners of a cattle farm and their

³⁵ Heiss & Minter, p. 3.

³⁶ Shoemaker, p. 42.

³⁷ Shoemaker, p. 43.

³⁸ Shoemaker, p. 46.

³⁹ Shoemaker, p. 49.

⁴⁰ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 37.

⁴¹ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 37.

⁴² Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 40.

Aboriginal workers. The latter was generally approved 'in part because his black humour masked the seriousness of his racial critique for many readers'.⁴³ Like his second book, *Poor Fellow, My Country* (1975), it deals with the treatment of Aborigines. Both Prichard's and Herbert's books were ahead of their time because they 'dealt with Aboriginal/white racial and sexual relations themes in an honest and incisive way'.⁴⁴ However, due to this and to the fact that they were principally directed to a small elite of readers, they had a relatively small impact.

In 1938 Daisy Bates's *The Passing of Aborigines* was printed for the first time in Australia and later reprinted both in Australia and Great Britain: this indicates the constant interest in Aboriginal issues by both British and Australian readers. However, this book presents a stereotypical image of Aborigines, a misrepresentation of Aboriginal reality.⁴⁵ Another author who dealt with Aboriginal issues at the time is Ion L. Idriess with his *Lasseter's Late Ride* (1931) and *Flynn of the Inland* (1932): the two books gained some popularity; however, his writing was rich with prejudices. Even though they did not give a true portrait of the Aboriginal situation, the importance of these writers is noteworthy because they presented the Aboriginal issue at a national and sometimes international level.⁴⁶ Critics have wondered why until the 1960s no other successful Aboriginal writer produced an important narrative such as Unaipon's.⁴⁷ Surely living conditions at the time did not allow Aborigines to engage with literature, since they were struggling for survival.

After the First World War, Aborigines were probably the most affected of the Australian population. Their living conditions degenerated, and poverty and diseases were very common. In order to sort out the problem, the Government's policy was to take them into reserves.⁴⁸ It was largely believed that the Aboriginal race was doomed to extinction;⁴⁹ in fact very few were recognised as full-bloods, whereas the half-caste number was increasing. This period was defined as

⁴³ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 41.

⁴⁴ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Shoemaker, p. 50.

⁴⁶ Shoemaker, p. 58.

⁴⁷ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 38.

⁴⁸ Behrendt, p. 108.

⁴⁹ Shoemaker, pp. 18-9.

the “protection era”⁵⁰ because an increasing number of policies to preserve the purity of white and black races were approved,⁵¹ and hypocritical legislations were made to protect black women from white abuse, based more on the preservation of the white race.

The anthropologists of the period were quite influential on these policies and believed that it was necessary to save the “Aboriginal species”⁵²: Aborigines were seen as children and savages who needed the whites’ help to survive. For this reason, for the white belief in supremacy, the Government imposed the forcible removal of half-caste offspring who were moved to institutions and missions⁵³. These policies showed a shift of interest: at the beginning it was focused on the preservation of full-bloods, later the problem of the half-caste took greater place; the idea was that the first group had to be separated from the rest; the latter had to be assimilated into white society. Between the 1920s and 1930s there were some Aboriginal resistance movements; probably the most important one is APA (Aborigines’ Progressive Association) that fought for equal rights. Their role is not to be ignored; however, they were not that influential and remained unheard; in fact the 1920s are the years when most missions were opened.⁵⁴

During the Second World War, it was commonly believed that Australia was under Japanese attack and this risk created a sense of nationalism that had never been felt before⁵⁵. The Second World War was one of the most important catalysts for a change in Aboriginal affairs. Aboriginal peoples joined the army and a sense of egalitarianism was born in some platoons. Officially, the policy forbade Aboriginal men the conscription, but they were useful for their familiarity with the land.⁵⁶ They were exploited and underpaid but they contributed to the war. However, this sense of egalitarianism was only in the army world; once the war was over, very few Aboriginal people had acquired and maintained equal rights. In this sense, the Second World War was important in

⁵⁰ Shoemaker, p. 22.

⁵¹ Behrendt, p. 129.

⁵² Shoemaker, p.27.

⁵³ Wilson; and *Bringing Them Home* report, 1997, http://humanrights.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf (accessed 20 February 2013).

⁵⁴ Behrendt, pp. 164-6; Shoemaker, pp. 23-4.

⁵⁵ David Day, “27 December 1941 Prime Minister Curtin’s New Year Message: Australian Looks to America”, in Martin Crotty and David Roberts, eds., *Turning Points in Australian History*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008, pp. 129-42.

⁵⁶ Behrendt, p. 159; Shoemaker, p. 63.

Aboriginal affairs not for what was achieved, but for a change of outlook that otherwise would not have been possible.

The end of the Second World War did not bring a positive effect on Aboriginal issues: nothing practically had changed – in 1948 the *Nationality and Citizenship Act* gave the citizenship to Aborigines, but did not grant them any right. Until the 1970s the policy adopted was that of the forcible assimilation, where the ultimate goal was to make Aboriginal people live like white people, in the “white way”.⁵⁷ However, the assimilation process was bringing more problems than solving the existing ones; hence the policy was doomed to fail after the 1970s when the Aboriginal issue was becoming embarrassing for Australia at an international level⁵⁸. Assimilation could be considered a failure and, in any case, Aboriginal people who got to be assimilated into the “Australian white system” were not granted equal rights, thus it was a non-assimilation, or just an apparent assimilation⁵⁹. In this period Aboriginal peoples were ‘no longer effectively invisible in Australian society, but they were often treated as if their existence [...] was meaningless’.⁶⁰

During the “Assimilation Era”, no works by Aboriginal writers were published, hence we can take into consideration non-Aboriginal writers who dealt with Aboriginal issues because it is important to see how the matter was dealt with. There were three main attitudes in this period: a ‘poetic/symbolic approach to the Aboriginal theme’,⁶¹ identified mostly in Patrick White’s and Judith Wright’s contribution; a stereotypical representation, often found in anthropologists’ writings and translations; and finally, with Donald Stuart, a dignified presentation, a little closer to reality.

In relation to the first approach, Patrick White’s *Voss* (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) are regarded as the most important writings amongst his literary production dealing with Aboriginal issues⁶². In the former, White deals with the difficult relationship between Aborigines and non-Aborigines when sharing the same place. In the latter, he tries to capture ‘the weight of unsuccessful

⁵⁷ Behrendt, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Behrendt, p. 380.

⁵⁹ Shoemaker, p. 69.

⁶⁰ Shoemaker, p. 79.

⁶¹ Shoemaker, p. 97.

⁶² Shoemaker, p. 89 and p. 95.

assimilation'.⁶³ White deals with the difficult issue of the coexistence and acceptance of the two parties; however, he generalizes the matter: 'he addresses the dilemma of outcast humankind'.⁶⁴ Slightly different is Judith Wright's approach in *The Moving Image* (1946) and *The Generation of Men* (1959). Wright's poetry engages with the sense of guilt: she is aware of the Australian widespread, but hidden, feeling of shame and tries to highlight it by proposing a way to solve it with forgiveness⁶⁵. She is a very committed writer whose work cannot be neglected because she 'introduced a new sensibility to an examination of the Aboriginal theme'.⁶⁶

For what concerns the second point of view, the anthropologists Catherine and Roland Berndt, T.G.H. Strehlow and Douglas Lockwood are taken into account. The first two are also translators of traditional material from Aboriginal language to standard English. Their works (Strehlow's *Aranda Traditions*, 1947, and Berndt's "The Wonguri-Mandjingga Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone", 1948) are considered 'important factors which influenced the perceptions and opinions of those Australians either associated with, or interested in, the Aboriginal people'.⁶⁷ However, Shoemaker stresses that they 'denigrated the popular perception of the culture of growing numbers of fringe-dwelling and urban Aborigines'⁶⁸. Douglas Lockwood's contribution to the field with *I, The Aboriginal* (1961) and *Fair Dinkum* (1963) is, according to some critics⁶⁹, not to be taken into consideration because of the stereotypical way in which he presents Aboriginal people.

Donald Stuart belongs to the last approach. He was personally involved in the Pilbara strike⁷⁰ of 1946 and was in direct contact with Aboriginal people for most of his life. Therefore, most probably this background influenced his vision of things; in fact, he is believed to be the one who 'comes the

⁶³ Shoemaker, p. 96.

⁶⁴ Shoemaker, p. 97.

⁶⁵ Shoemaker, p. 84.

⁶⁶ Shoemaker, p. 84.

⁶⁷ Shoemaker, p. 80.

⁶⁸ Shoemaker, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Shoemaker, p. 93.; Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 149.

⁷⁰ Pilbara is a region of Western Australia. In May 1946 the Pilbara Aborigines protested for the working conditions and the wages: they left the stations and went to the strike camps, where they remained until 1949. It is considered the most important Aboriginal labour strike. For further information see John Wilson, "The Pilbara Aboriginal Social Movement: an Outline of its Background and Significance", in R.M. & C.H. Berndt, eds., *Aborigines of the West: their Past and Present*, Perth: UWA Press, 1979, pp. 151-68.

closest to an appreciation of Aboriginal people as human beings',⁷¹ even if his great interest in Aboriginal traditions made him neglect contemporary Aboriginal issues.

After the 1960s, racial inequities still existed and were very strong in many territories: for example, in New South Wales, Aborigines were separated from non-Aborigines in hospitals for their 'poor health and hygiene'.⁷² Aborigines were disappointed by the 1967 referendum (when more than 90% of Australians voted to count Aborigines in the census and to give power to the Commonwealth to make laws for Aborigines),⁷³ because practically nothing changed. In fact, 'though the 1961-1988 period was one of success in many fields, it was also one of frustrated expectations and hopes'.⁷⁴ In this period there were many campaigns, above all in relation to land rights (for Cummerangunga Reserve, Tyers Reserve, Arnhem Land Reserve): in certain cases the land right was granted, but they could not control mine-work in the land. Even if often nothing appeared to move, in particular due to the Conservative Government, Aboriginal riots were significant because they took Aboriginal issues to an international level. Besides, in 1962 and 1965 in some territories Aboriginal people were granted the right to vote, and at any rate in 1967 there was the removal of two discriminatory references in the Australian Constitution.⁷⁵

In the 1970s the most important event was probably the protest held on 26 January 1972 in front of the Parliament House in Canberra, where Aborigines erected the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. There were many controversies on this remonstrance;⁷⁶ however, the important thing was that they raised their voices, or at least they tried to: 'it presented a symbolic protest rather than something which led directly to an improvement of black living conditions'.⁷⁷ In 1972 the Labour Party, with Gough Whitlam, won the elections and it seemed that their policies were directed at improving the Aboriginal situation. However, like the decade before, the problem was still the lack of uniformity

⁷¹ Shoemaker, p. 93.

⁷² Shoemaker, p. 103.

⁷³ Behrendt, pp. 168-82.

⁷⁴ Shoemaker, p. 104.

⁷⁵ Australian Government Official Website: <http://australia.gov.au/> (accessed 1 March 2013).

⁷⁶ Shoemaker, pp. 111-3; Behrendt, pp. 187-8.

⁷⁷ Shoemaker, p. 113.

in the policies of several territories. Later, in 1983, the Hawke Labour administration tried to change the situation but encountered a lot of resistance, in particular in Western Australia where they rejected the *Western Australian Aboriginal Land Bill* (1985).⁷⁸ Hence, from the 1960s onwards Aborigines organized protests that were not always successful, indeed they rarely were, even more so because protests acquired an 'ideological dimension'.⁷⁹ However, they managed to present Aboriginal issues to the United Nations and they showed the world the Australian policy injustices. Aboriginal authors of the time show the dichotomy typical of a period of change: 'confidence and pessimism, optimism and cynism'.⁸⁰

Thanks to the changes in the Aboriginal socio-political situation of the period, Aboriginal literature flourished, in the sense that several Aboriginal writers managed to have their works published. In 1964 Kath Walker (in 1988 she changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal⁸¹) published her first collection of poetry. She was the first Aboriginal writer to publish after Unaipon and this is even more important because she was a woman. She was politically involved in Aboriginal affairs and this is partly mirrored in her poems, as in her first volume *We Are Going* (1964) or her second *The Dawn Is at Hand* (1966). Because her poetry did not fit the standards of the time, it has been variously criticized; indeed, some critics have stated that she is a pioneer, others that she is not a poet at all.⁸² On this debate, Mudrooroo justifies the critique by saying that 'in Aboriginal poetry, it is the message which is supreme, with any aesthetic appeal being of lesser worth'.⁸³ This is to say that forms of poetry can be put aside in favour only of its meaning: however, even accepting this point, an important critic like Adam Shoemaker does recognise that the author lacks in some parts the ability to handle the verse.⁸⁴ Another debated writer is Lionel Fogarty because of two main reasons: his verse is not related to Western standards, and most importantly,

⁷⁸ Behrendt, p. 197.

⁷⁹ Shoemaker, p. 121.

⁸⁰ Shoemaker, p. 122.

⁸¹ Annalisa Oboe, "introduction", *Mongrel Signatures, Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, Oboe, Annalisa, ed., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003. p. xiii.

⁸² For further information, see Shoemaker, pp. 181-6.

⁸³ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 35.

⁸⁴ Shoemaker, p. 183.

his verse ‘lacks that precision of meaning found in much of the verse of Oodgeroo’.⁸⁵ Fogarty’s use of language is peculiar and difficult to understand for both Aborigines and non-Aborigines: language is distorted and ambiguous and hard to unfold.⁸⁶ However, together with Oodgeroo, he is considered one of the most important Aboriginal writers.

In the field of fiction, Colin Johnson (who later changed his name to Mudrooroo Narogin, then Mudrooroo Nyoongah, and finally just Mudrooroo⁸⁷) published in 1965 *Wild Cat Falling*, which deals with the problematic issue of being Aboriginal in the Australian society. He is also known for his historical novels *Long Live Sandawara* (1979) and *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983). He has been an active writer in several fields dealing with Aboriginal issues, as a critic and as a poet. As noted previously,⁸⁸ the revelation on his non-Aboriginal origins provoked great astonishment and discordant opinions.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, I believe that his work cannot be wholly ignored because it has influenced the literary tradition for nearly thirty years and he is one of the most important critics on Aboriginal literature. For this reason, even if *Wild Cat Falling* may or may not be considered the first publication of Aboriginal fiction, it still has great relevance in Aboriginal literature.

In the early 1970s, two Aboriginal writers published poetry and drama: Jack Davis and Kevin Gilbert. Kevin Gilbert is considered to be one of the most committed writers, an Aboriginal political poet and prose writer:⁹⁰ his main aims were to talk about his people and to give them back their history. He is the author of *Because a Whiteman’ll never Do It* (1973), *People Are Legends* (1978), and *Black From the Edge* (1994). His poetry is quite difficult to understand in particular for non-Aboriginal people mostly because of the use of lingo and Black humour⁹¹. Language is used as the tool to denounce social abuse and to study in-depth what it means to be Aboriginal. Unlike Kevin

⁸⁵ Shoemaker, p. 50.

⁸⁶ Brewster, “Australia: Aboriginal Literature”, p. 513.

⁸⁷ Oboe, p. xii.

⁸⁸ See note 18.

⁸⁹ Adam Shoemaker, “Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity”, in Oboe, Annalisa, ed., *Mongrel Signatures, Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, pp. 1-24.

⁹⁰ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 2. ; Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, pp. 165-77.; Shoemaker, pp. 192-7.

⁹¹ Shoemaker, p. 197.

Gilbert, Jack Davis is considered a writer who is less involved in political affairs.⁹² What stands out more in his poetry, in particular in *The First-Born* (1970) and *Jagardoo* (1978), is the tension between Aboriginality and assimilation. In contrast with Kath Walker's *We Are Going* (1964), Davis hopes for a sort of reconciliation,⁹³ but he does not offer any suggestion or solution, he often finds escape in childhood.⁹⁴ In his later volumes, *John Pat and Other Poems* (1988) and *Black Life Poems* (1992), he shows a renewed interest in Aboriginal political affairs as he tries to depict the injustices that Aborigines have suffered.

In this prolific literary period, Aboriginal theatre developed as well. Two important Aboriginal authors have written for the theatre: Robert J. Merritt and Jack Davis. The former wrote some of the most well-known Aboriginal theatrical productions: *The Cake Man* (1978), *Kullark* (1979) and *The Dreamers* (1982). The three plays have some common traits: they are labelled as realistic and/or naturalistic⁹⁵ plays, and they were directed to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (in relation to this, Mudrooroo defines the authors that address their plays to this mixed audience as 'schizophrenic').⁹⁶ Probably the first Aboriginal play to be composed was Kevin Gilbert's *Cherry Pickers* (1968) that presents the hope for reconciliation. At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, other "realistic" plays were written: the play *Close to the Bone* (1991) deals with the Stolen Generations; *Barunging* (1988) is a political drama; and Gerry Bostock's *Here Comes the Nigger* (1976) deals with racism and sexism in Australia. The notion of realistic naturalism is a typical European label, hence it is important to be very careful when we use this label; in fact, for this same reason "realism" cannot be wholly applied to Aboriginal plays because inevitably they usually include Aboriginal elements, which are often rich with supernatural, mythical and dramatic aspects.⁹⁷

⁹² Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 82.

⁹³ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, p. 163.

⁹⁴ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 81.

⁹⁵ I will deal with the concepts of realism and naturalism as labels applied to Aboriginal literature in the chapter dedicated to Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*.

⁹⁶ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 125.

⁹⁷ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 124.

Realism has influenced Aboriginal novels, plays, poetry, and movies. The result often is a continuous switch between the two realities (the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal one), as in the case of the plays *The Cherry Pickers* (by Keving Gilbert, published in 1989), and *Bran Nue Dae* (by Jimmy Chi, published in 1991); or the movies *beDevil*, *The Last Wave*, *The Fringedwellers*, and *Stromboy*; or Kath Walker's various novels and Monica Clare's *Karobran* (1978).⁹⁸ With postmodernism, Aboriginal literature gained a more introspective insight and 'maban reality'⁹⁹, also definable as magic realism, became more significant. The attempt to reevaluate maban reality was done by using 'storytelling content and structures'.¹⁰⁰ However, very often Aboriginal yarning has been dismissed as children's literature and deprived of its cultural value; this has happened because of its magic realism, its form and because it is written by Aborigines.

For what concerns contemporary literature, the last two decades are relatively poor in criticism on Aboriginal literature, or at least it is difficult to find a complete critical anthology of contemporary Aboriginal authors. For this reason I will base the last part of Aboriginal Literature mostly on *Macquarie PEN: Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*¹⁰¹ and Anne Brewster's essay on Aboriginal Literature.¹⁰² She synthetically goes through Aboriginal literature (and Maori literature as well) from the beginning to the present and outlines the most influential Aboriginal writers.

In 1991 Paul Keating was elected Prime Minister. With his Government there was the recognition of Aboriginal history (with the Redfern Park speech) and a movement towards Aboriginal issues (the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established).¹⁰³ However, apart from some changes in the economical and social structures, there were no real improvements. In 1996 John Howard became the Australian Prime Minister and Keating's efforts were demolished by Howard's policy of protectionism. Howard's Conservative Party opposed with all its strength the

⁹⁸ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, pp. 94-6.

⁹⁹ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁰ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, p. 97.

¹⁰¹ Heiss & Minter.

¹⁰² Brewster, "Indigenous Writing in Australia and New Zealand".

¹⁰³ Behrendt, pp. 206-8.

recognition of the Native Title and Land Rights.¹⁰⁴ Howard had a radically different view of history from Keating's Labour Party: he believed that 'the history of past 'blemishes' the national history [...] and could not be linked to the present generation of Australians'¹⁰⁵ and refused to apologize for the Stolen Generations¹⁰⁶ (even after the publishing in 1997 of the *Bringing Them Home* report).¹⁰⁷

Lately, as Australian economy has improved, also Aboriginal life-conditions have changed and generally got better: Aborigines are 2,5% of Australian population, and most of them (those who have been recognized as such) live in cities or in regional areas and can benefit from what Australian society offers.¹⁰⁸ This is not to say that racism towards Aborigines has disappeared or that poor education, unemployment and disease/poverty problems can be neglected; on the contrary, they still exist and Aboriginal associations and the present Government are still struggling to change the situation.¹⁰⁹ On the political field, in 2008 the Australian Government apologized for two centuries of brutalities, and in 2009 it endorsed the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. However, Aborigines have not been recognized as possessors of their land yet, a treaty has not been signed and racial discrimination is still a problem. The debate on Aboriginal issues is open and much more has to be done in order to have a real multicultural Australia where Aboriginal culture might be considered not only as part of Australian identity, but most importantly as its very foundation.

From a literary point of view, Aboriginal poetry has developed thanks to authors like Graeme Dixon (*Holocaust Island*, 1990), whose 'heavily metrical poetry'¹¹⁰ is rich with a political component; Dennis McDermott (*Dorothy's Skin*, 2003) and Margaret Brusnahan, with her several volumes of poetry, whose metrical structure reflects a quite introspective poetry. Less personal poetry is represented by authors such Alf Taylor, John Muk Muk Burke, Kerry-Reed Gilbert, Herb

¹⁰⁴ Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005, p. 11-35.

¹⁰⁵ Mark McKenna, "Anzac Day: How it did become Australia's National Day?", in M. Lake, H. Reynolds et al., *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*, Sydney: Unsw Press, 2010, pp.124-5.

¹⁰⁶ Behrendt, pp. 225-7 and p.137-8.

¹⁰⁷ *Bringing Them Home* report, 1997, http://humanrights.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf (accessed 16 November 2012 and 20 February 2013)

¹⁰⁸ Behrendt, pp.22-3.

¹⁰⁹ <http://australia.gov.au/people/indigenous-peoples>.

¹¹⁰ Brewster, "Indigenous Writing in Australia and New Zealand", p. 520.

Wharton and Samuel Wogan Watson, just to cite the most important ones. Aboriginal women poets dealt very much with female Aboriginality, like Lisa Bellear (*Dreaming in Urban Areas*, 1996), Romain Moreton (*The Callused Stick of Wanting*, 1996 and *Post Me to the Prime Minister*, 2004), Charmaine Papertalk-Green (*Just Like That*, 2007), and Yvette Holt (*Anonymous Premonition*, 2010).¹¹¹

The other literary genres have changed and improved as well. Starting with the theatre, it is important to stress that in the last decades the 1970s, different forms of naturalism have been studied by Wesley Enoch, Sally Morgan, David Milory, Kelton Pell, and John Harding. For what concerns short stories, they still remain quite common with authors like Bruce Pascoe (*Nightjar*, 2000), Alf Taylor (*Long Time Now*, 2001), Toni Birch (*Shadow Boxing*, 2006), Tara June Winch (*Swallow the Air*, 2006), and Gayle Kennedy (*Me, Antman & Fleabag*, 2007). These works are made of short stories that can be interrelated with one another creating a single story or novel; or they can be stand-alone stories – however, if the “novels” are structured in the latter way, the author usually chooses to keep the main characters throughout the novel in order to obtain a sense of continuity. Another genre that has not been lost in time, but on the contrary has been developed, is life stories. Aboriginal biographies and autobiographies sometimes deal with the writers’ lives, but often they tell the stories of someone else, very often a relative. Oral narration is used to denounce the terrible life conditions and events that have affected many Aboriginal families. Some affirmed authors who wrote life stories in the last decades are Morndi Munro (*Emerrara: A Man of Emerrara*, 1996), Sue Anderson (*My Wgarrindjeri Calling*, 2008), Larissa Behrendt (*Home*, 2004) and Stephen Kinnane (*Shadow Lines*, 2003).¹¹²

Life stories have remained a well known genre, but for many authors it is easier to write fiction because fiction gives them a sort of protection from reality.¹¹³ By writing fiction, they can keep a sort of distance between them and the events they are telling; this has allowed them to feel less

¹¹¹ Brewster, “Indigenous Writing in Australia and New Zealand”, p. 523.

¹¹² Brewster, “Indigenous Writing in Australia and New Zealand”, p. 525.

¹¹³ Brewster, “Indigenous Writing in Australia and New Zealand”, p. 527.

restraint in writing. In fiction, different genres have been explored, in particular the historical novel, the gothic novel, and magic realism. Partly historical are Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997) and Terri June's *Butterfly Song* (2005). Defined as "Aboriginal gothic" is Vivien Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* (2004); Cleven also wrote another famous novel and very different in genre *Bitin' Black* (2001). Mellissa Lucashenko's most famous novels deal with the problem of violence in urban Aboriginal families (*Steam Pigs*, 1997, and *Hard Yards*, 1999). Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) is an epic novel in the genre of magic realism. Philip McLaren wrote some thrillers (*Scream Black Murder*, 1995, and *Lightning Mine*, 1999). Anita Heiss has created a unique genre of popular women fiction with her *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007), *Avoiding Mr Right* (2008), and *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010). Another important writer is Herb Wharton, both a poet and a prose writer, whose most famous novel is *Where Ya' Been, Mate?* (1996).

1.3 Literary Genres and the Gender Issue

Before the European conquest, Aboriginal communities were divided into sections, which included a division between women and men where each group had its own ceremonies and duties.¹¹⁴ Women and men belonged to different groups in these occasions; however, Aboriginal society was not structured according to a patriarchal system: this was brought by the Europeans.¹¹⁵ As a consequence of the colonialist policies, Aborigines' lifestyle changed drastically and dramatically; among other things the social organization changed as well. There was a shift towards the patriarchal system and women's and men's roles changed with great relevance. Women tended to assume the roles of nurses, mothers and teachers; but, in spite of this, they maintained a sort of

¹¹⁴ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, p. 31.; Catherine Berndt, "Digging Sticks and Spears, or, the two-sex Model", in Fay Gale, ed., *Woman's Role in Aboriginal Society*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970, pp. 39-47.

¹¹⁵ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 156.

solidarity due to their condition of suppressed minority.¹¹⁶ Nowadays, their role is still changing and Aboriginal women have become the holders of the family, due to the fact that many men have been imprisoned, become alcoholics, or suffered from health problems. Ultimately, women have remained alone at home to raise children, run the house and carry on tradition.

Not only did their role change, but also their involvement in literature. In fact at the beginning of the twentieth century ‘Aboriginal women have been primarily constructed by non-Indigenous Australian-European women and men, outsiders looking in’,¹¹⁷ who saw Aboriginal women just in terms of their sexuality. In the 1950s, anthropologists presented Aboriginal society as a society where women were subordinated to men in most, or all, decisions; later women anthropologists gave a different and contradictory description where women had a prevailing role. Therefore, it is quite clear that ‘the role of Aboriginal women has been shaped to fit the theoretical and ethnographic frameworks employed by scholars’.¹¹⁸ It is not surprising that the dominant culture uses literature as a political weapon to serve its interests. In the 1980s, historians contributed to the debate by studying the consequences of the Government policies on Aboriginal society and ‘they shifted the role of women from that of subordinate chattels of patriarchally dominated existence to one of obscurity’¹¹⁹. Later non-Aboriginal feminists started to take Aboriginal women’s defence, thus depriving Aboriginal women of their voice. As a consequence, it was almost impossible for Aboriginal women to talk for themselves, they just became a subject of study.¹²⁰ Nowadays, women are writing about their life stories, their places, their identity, finally trying to deconstruct the misrepresentations. The bibliographies of Aboriginal women are very important because they challenge the representations given by the white-dominant society.

¹¹⁶ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 157.

¹¹⁷ Jennifer Sabbioni, “Aboriginal Women’s Narratives: Reconstructing Identities”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 106 (1996), p. 73.

¹¹⁸ Sabbioni, p. 74.

¹¹⁹ Sabbioni, p. 74.

¹²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, [http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can the subaltern speak.pdf](http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf); p. 83. (Accessed 10 April 2013).

The line between gender and genre is very small; as Lidia Curtis¹²¹ underlines, there is only a “d” that differentiates the two words. Both words come from the same Greek root (genus), however, unlike other languages, the meanings are different. In OED the meaning of gender is given firstly in relation to grammar (‘each of the classes [...] of nouns and pronouns’¹²²), and secondly to sex (‘males and females viewed as group’¹²³). OED gives for genre ‘a particular style or category of works of art’. Both nouns refer to a kind of totality, but, as Curtis underlines, they are different: genre seems to refer to a word related to a more ‘systemic totality’¹²⁴; whereas gender to ‘the split of totality’.¹²⁵ In Italian, Spanish and French this differentiation is not possible because there is a single word that refers to both the biological and artistic/literary fields. In English, even if there are two words, the boundaries between them are very uncertain: ‘the boundaries between genres [are] constantly redefined through the endless play of repetition and difference, the boundary masculine/feminine [is] forever open and constantly deferred’.¹²⁶ Hence, it is important not to mix up the two words in our analysis, albeit they are strictly linked.

Even if it is partly incorrect to find a direct correspondence between gender and genre, it would be unfair to ignore it completely. In her study, Lidia Curtis arrives at the conclusion that, due to the fact that story-telling is linked to oral tradition and therefore to a collectivity, whereas the novel is linked to the print and, as opposite to storytelling, to introspection,

there might be an identification of the female with story-telling, the story with a moral, the memory and re-memory of collective history, in line with Native American or African myths and folklore, while the individual psychological narrative is left to the male.¹²⁷

However, this contraposition between ‘male interiority and female collective memory’¹²⁸ might be true for South American or African myths, but not wholly in the case of Aboriginal narrative. In

¹²¹Lidia Curtis, “‘D’ for Difference: Gender, Genre, Writing”, *Female Stories, Female Bodies, Narrative Identity and Representation*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998, pp. 30-53.

¹²² OED online: <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 13 March 2013).

¹²³ OED online: <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 13 March 2013).

¹²⁴ Curtis, p. 31.

¹²⁵ Curtis, p. 31.

¹²⁶ Curtis, p. 31.

¹²⁷ Curtis, p. 37.

¹²⁸ Curtis, p. 37.

fact, labelling autobiography as a “gynocentric genre” might lead us to make a mistake – indeed, until the 1970s, the genre of autobiography was very much a male writing.

It is variably discussed whether Aboriginal women’s writing can be labelled biography or autobiography,¹²⁹ this is because their biographies also deal with more general Aboriginal problems, sometimes only slightly related with their lives. This uncertainty in labelling the genre derives from the idea that ‘the life story is concerned with the past, it details how things were, or were gained and does not challenge a future’.¹³⁰ However, the fact that they deal with the past does not change the genre, from being biographies to political/historical novels. Hence, according to some critics, it is limiting to reduce women’s writing to autobiography because their final interest is social and political; it is not only a tale about their lives and their family’s lives. They use their life stories to tackle Aboriginal concerns and preoccupations. According to others,¹³¹ Aboriginal women writing has been often defined as autobiographical because every women writer tries to understand herself and her reality.

As noted above, from the end of the 1970s onwards women have become pioneers of the genre.¹³² This is evident in the 1980s when Aboriginal women writers were very prolific in autobiographies or biographies. In Ella Simon’s *Through My Eyes* (1978), she explores the problem of being half-caste and pertaining at the same time to two different worlds that refuse to accept half-caste. In Elsie Roughsey Labumore’s *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New* (1984), partly a family story and partly an autobiography, she presents her life story in the mission. Monica Clare’s semi-autobiographical *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (1978) was defined as the ‘first novel, or rather the first autobiographical text, written by an Indigenous women’.¹³³ Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988), Ward’s *Wandering Girl* (1988) and Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1990) are three of the most known women of Aboriginal autobiographical novels. The first

¹²⁹ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, pp. 210-4.; Anne Brewster, *Literary Formations – Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*, Victoria: Melbourne Press, 1995, pp. 1-77.

¹³⁰ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 162.

¹³¹ Sabbioni; Brewster, *Literary Formations*.

¹³² Brewster, *Literary Formations*, p. 41.

¹³³ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, p. 184.

and the second novel present the controversial problem of reconciliation; the last shows harsh realities where community and family are the most important things in life. More recent novels are Patsy Cohen and Margaret Somerville's *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs* (1990), Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992), Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1995), and Larissa Behrendt's *Home* (2004).

II. Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*

2.1. About the Novel and its Author

Of Wiradjuri, Afghan, and English heritage, Tara June Winch was born in 1983 in Wollongong, western Sydney, where she spent her childhood (in a housing commission home in Woonona, north Wollongong). In an interview with Jane Cornwell,¹³⁴ she described her childhood as positive but difficult; her parents divorced when she was nine,¹³⁵ her mother became an alcoholic and, for some time, she was also addicted to drugs.¹³⁶ Tired of her life in Sydney, the sixteen-year-old girl decided to leave the city and, one year later, she was inspired by Robert Frost's poem 'The Road Not Taken' to set out on a journey throughout Australia in order to look for her Aboriginal ties.¹³⁷ Just like her main character May in *Swallow the Air*,¹³⁸ when she returned to Sydney she started working in a petrol station, but after a short while she started travelling again: she went to India where she took an interest in Buddhism, in fact she lived in a Tibetan refuge,¹³⁹ and studied in Scotland in order to become a Buddhist nun; finally returning to Australia after a number of years.¹⁴⁰

Despite her short period of studies, she showed quite a precocious talent for literature; indeed, she started writing her first poems in her early teens. The yet-to-come writer made her debut in the literary world in 2004 when she participated and won the State Library of Queensland fiction competition with what was to become her first short story named 'Dust on Waterglass' of *Swallow the Air*.¹⁴¹ Two years later, together with other eight short stories, 'Dust on Waterglass' won the David Unaipon Award for Indigenous Writers and other five awards;¹⁴² however, the greatest

¹³⁴ Jane Cornwell, "The Face", *Weekend Australia*, 14 June 2008, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Cornwell, p.3.

¹³⁶ Rosemary Neill, "The Face – Tara June Winch", *Weekend Australian*, 6 May 2006, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Cornwell, p.3.; Tara June Winch, "Walking Life Glorious Adventure", *The Age*, 30 June 2007, p. 18.

¹³⁸ Tara June Winch, *Swallow the Air*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006.

¹³⁹ It is noteworthy that the preface of the novel is the description of the artist Song Dong sitting on the banks of the Lhasa River in Tibet.

¹⁴⁰ Cornwell, p.3.; Duncan Abey, "Gratifying Return to Illawara for Writer", *Illawara Mercury*, 20 May 2006, p. 4.

¹⁴¹ Neill, p. 3.; N.A., "Your View", *Weekend Australia*, 27 May 2006, p.2. (answering Kathy Hunt's article).

¹⁴² Deborah Bogle, "Young Writer Wins Award", *The Advertiser*, 30 May 2008, p. 30.; Angus Hohenboken, "Aboriginal Writer's Timely Award", *The Australian*, 30 May 2008, p. 3.; Debra Aldred, "Literary Award Winner is no Accidental Storyteller", *The Courier-Mail*, 30 Sep 2004, p. 3.; Susan Wyndham, "Indigenous Voices and Stories Echo down the Centuries", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 May 2008, p. 15.; Jennifer Moran, "Indigenous Writer Makes Short

success was achieved when, in the same year, *Swallow the Air* was published. The work is a collection composed of the nine short stories presented at the literary contest, together with eleven other short stories. In 2010 she got her Master of Arts degree at the University of Wollongong, but this did not stop her from travelling across Europe, Nigeria, Canada, and the US studying and campaigning for Indigenous Literacy. Her literary commitment was recognised with a great number of awards, and with the assignation of her mentor, the Nigerian Noble Laureate Wole Soyinka.¹⁴³ An eclectic writer, Tara June Winch writes poems, plays, and short stories and she is a freelance contributor to *The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Bulletin*;¹⁴⁴ alongside her literary production, she supports a humanitarian project in Turkey to improve literacy levels among women and children.¹⁴⁵

Swallow the Air is a semi-autobiographical work and deals with May's escape from home in search for her Aboriginal heritage around Australia. Like the author herself, May undertakes her journey in order to understand whether she is allowed to be Aboriginal.¹⁴⁶ The fact that she returns where she started her journey does not make her journey worthless, it is the people she meets, the events, the journey itself, and not the final place that qualifies her journey. In fact, at the end she discovers that there is no need to look for one's own identity in places, as our identity lies within; the point is being able to accept this. In addition, the work also deals with broader Aboriginal issues, such as family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, and fringe communities. These Aboriginal problematic issues are presented with an objective eye in order to go beyond the common stereotypes.¹⁴⁷

List for Coveted Prize", *The Canberra Times*, 11 April 2008, p. 5. ; Alexa Mooses, "Sparkling Journey Starts with a Punch", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 2006, p. 35; Kathy Hunt, "Some Rough Diamonds are better left unpolished", *Weekend Australian*, 13 May 2006, p. 14.

¹⁴³ Peter Wilson, "Mentor as Anything", *The Australian*, 8 December 2009, pp. 15-6.; Erik Jensen, "Nobel Laureate Winches Writer into Limelight", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 May 2008, p.7.; N.A., "African Mentor for Tara June Winch", *Artery*, 7 (2008), p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ William Verity, "Leaving Home – Profile", *Illawara Mercury*, 9 June 2007, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Bree Fuller, "Winch's certain Style", *Illawara Mercury*, 22 Aprile 2009, p. 34.; Angela Thompson, "Writing a New Chapter: Meet the Coledale Author Hoping to Change the World", *Illawara Mercury*, 9 Jan 2010, p. 9.; Lorna Edwards, "Spreading the Word to Women", *The Age*, 6 March 2010, p. 10.

¹⁴⁶ Sunanda Creagh, "Woman of the World", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 2006, p. 30.

¹⁴⁷ Neill, p. 3.

Swallow the Air may be considered both a novel and a collection of short stories; this is due to the fact that the twenty short stories are linked together but, at the same time, they can also be read separately, and can be considered stand-alone stories. I will consider the work as a novel because there is a certain linear progression in the story: the main character is always present in every short story and, even if there are many digressions, there is a sort of continuity in her journey. In fact, the short stories that do not deal with the journey itself are useful for the reader in order to better understand the development of events. Therefore, along with the main flow of narration regarding her journey, there are many flashbacks and short memories; this interrelation allows the author to combine May's family history with ancestral stories and contemporary Aboriginal issues. It is interesting to stress that, according to the type of narration, whether it deals with her journey or her memories, the verb tense changes: contrary to the reader's expectations, the parts regarding the journey are narrated using the past tense; instead the digressions and short memories using the present tense.¹⁴⁸

This swing of tenses is important because it indicates two different aspects: the first aspect is related to the character and the second to the message of the story. In fact, on the one hand this fragmented narrative might reveal May's emotional fragmentation,¹⁴⁹ her non-developed consciousness; on the other hand, tenses serve as a marker in order not to forget things: past things can always become present and must not be forgotten. It is not by chance that when May discovers her mother's suicide she thinks of the word 'remember'¹⁵⁰ her mother had written and she thinks 'I knew it was all right not to forget'.¹⁵¹ In this sense, this interplay of tenses is the main means to show the present importance of the past. Winch's attention in this swing of tenses is also reflected in a strong poetic prose, whose lyricism is constant, but does not overwhelm the narration.

¹⁴⁸ Juliette Hughes, "The Eyes Have it", *The Age*, 3 June 2006, p. 21.

¹⁴⁹ Madeleine Byrne, "An Interview with Tara June Winch", *Antipodes*, 22 (2007), p. 131.

¹⁵⁰ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 9.

¹⁵¹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 9.

2.1.1 The Metaphor of Air

As Tara June Winch says in an interview with Madeleine Byrne,¹⁵² the title of the novel comes from her personal way of facing the death of loved ones: when a person is no longer with you, a small part of you disappears with her/him as well; hence, the only way of coping with yourself is to reconstruct those structures you have lost.¹⁵³ This comment is important to understand the development of the novel; indeed, May and her brother Billy lose a part of themselves when their mother dies:

when Billy and me lost our mother, we lost ourselves. We stopped swimming in the ocean, scared that we'd forget to breathe. Forget to come up for mouthfuls of air.¹⁵⁴

It is interesting that the symbol of air, often linked with blood as well, is present in the novel before or after important events. The metaphor is recurrent in the novel, especially in the first part, but it is used in several ways, and, therefore, can be interpreted differently; it becomes a lens for the reader to give a sense to what is happening. It is also a warning for the reader that now realizes that he/she has to focus on a certain aspect of what is happening to May, throughout May's journey and in May's relationship with her kin.

In the opening pages of the novel, Billy and May go out fishing and she feels sympathy for a dead fish she finds on the verge of the rocks. The stingray changes appearance like a chameleon as soon as she gets closer: it becomes a 'silvery mould'¹⁵⁵, then a 'plastic raincoat sleeping on the stone',¹⁵⁶ and finally the 'caricature of a ghost'¹⁵⁷. Its mutations remind us of a passing presence, or rather a non-presence, that has no real consistence and meaning: it has left no traces on earth. She wonders whether the fish had died because of asphyxiation or it had just landed on the rocks after its death. She decides to cut its skin on the underbelly: the ray starts bleeding and it assumes another form, of a 'fat man in a tight suit after a greedy meal'.¹⁵⁸ The animal gains substance for an instant

¹⁵² Madeleine Byrne, "An Interview with Tara June Winch", *Antipodes*, 22 (2007), pp. 130-1.

¹⁵³ Byrne, p. 131.

¹⁵⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 195.

¹⁵⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p.5.

¹⁵⁶ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p.5.

¹⁵⁷ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p.5.

¹⁵⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p.6.

before becoming an ‘angel fallen’,¹⁵⁹ a good metaphor for the brevity of life. In the act of bleeding, May believes that she has freed him, that its pain is now completely gone.

The description of the animal is important because, from the beginning, the reader is presented with the metaphor, which can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, the fish, alone on the rocks, away from the rest of sea-nature, becomes the projection of May herself; in fact at one moment she identifies with the animal: ‘I could feel the stingray’s fight in its last moments of life’.¹⁶⁰ May’s journey is about to begin and the asphyxiation of the animal is a symbol of what May is going to endure throughout the rest of the story – solitude, violence, pain and poverty. The bleeding of the stingray becomes the metaphor of her liberation: the freedom of mind she acquires at the end of the journey. On the other hand, the animal might resemble her mother’s suicide: indeed, when the siblings arrive home they discover their mother’s death, and the first thing May remembers is the stingray. With her bleeding, May’s mother frees herself from the pain she was suffering – in fact, the image of her slit wrists comes just after May cutting the skin of the fish. The bleeding animal helps May to understand her mother’s death and to give a sense of meaning to her disappearance.¹⁶¹ It is her sudden suicide that leaves May without any structures to hold on to.

Another use of the metaphor is seen in the sixth story when May recalls what had affected her brother when he was about to be born: ‘his heart was bleeding before the world had even got to him, before he could even swallow air’.¹⁶² The absence of air does not only reflect the lack of good health, but also, and most importantly, it is a bad omen for him: his suffering does not end with his birth, indeed his childhood is marked with violence, drugs and death. In fact, some time later, before his departure from Auntie’s home, ‘Billy’s mouth opened wide and sucked in air from the pit

¹⁵⁹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p.6.

¹⁶⁰ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p6.

¹⁶¹ N.A, “Promising Debut Shows a Writer to Watch”, *The Canberra Times*, 20 May 2006, p. 13.; Sandra McLean, “Reality is the Fiction”, *The Courier – Mail*, 2 Oct 2004, p. 6.

¹⁶² Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 51.

of the stomach, [and] his eyes dilated'.¹⁶³ The metaphor of asphyxia discloses the instability of things in Billy's life: his family life continuously changes and the bad moments – his father's departure, which occurs almost at the same time as his birth, and the beating of his Aunty and his consequent escape – are reflected in his body's need of air.

In the same short story, the metaphor recurs again, but this time in relation to May. May is telling the way she is feeling when her Aunty and Aunty's boyfriend are quarrelling angrily:

I'd lie awake through the whole thing, my breathing so loud that I was sure that if they'd stop bashing into each other for a second, that through the walls they'd be able to hear the air passing fast and heavy in my throat.¹⁶⁴

Both for May and for her brother, the absence of air means that something is missing in their lives: it shows the lack of a non-violent family situation and the lack of normal relationships. Symbolically, she does not have real affections when she does not have a regular breathing. Probably, the most evident example of this use of the metaphor is when she describes the non-meeting with her father: indeed, when she sees him, after describing his hands, she details the way he smokes.¹⁶⁵ This is to indicate that their relationship has no consistence, exactly like the smoke of his cigarette: after remembering what he has done to her and her mother, May is now ready to forget him and will not see him again ('[a]nd now, I could let him go. Because only when I remembered, could I finally forget'¹⁶⁶).

Thus, it is clear that the metaphor can be used to explain the kind of relationship May has with some of her family members; in fact, it is also used to depict the relationship with her brother, but this time its meaning is different. In the relationship with her father, she describes him *only* with the metaphor: this indicates that both her father and the relationship with him are absent in her life; symbolically, she cannot see him, *only* him, because *he* is the reason for her suffering. Instead, in contrast with the vignette of the non-encounter with her father, the metaphor is later used to depict

¹⁶³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 57-8.

¹⁶⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 83 and p. 84.

¹⁶⁶ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 89.

both May and Billy. The siblings are described like ghost figures,¹⁶⁷ as shadows, but this does not mean that their relationship is absent; this signifies that the siblings have lost consistence because they have lost their sense of individuality as Aborigines. Therefore, when they restore their identity, their relationship returns to normal, just like their aspect; as May notices, Billy at the end of the story is no longer a ghost figure: ‘he’s back, all eyes and face. I can tell he’s clean, my brother smiles’.¹⁶⁸

The last use of the metaphor represents something different: May's need for air resembles her need to escape. This is exemplified in the short story ‘To Run’¹⁶⁹, when May is ‘feeling like a seagull, taking the air into my wings, tucking under the busted red leg that wouldn’t matter in flight.’¹⁷⁰ The air represents her necessity to go away, her source of liberation and not the cause, or rather consequence, of her suffering. Again, at the Block,¹⁷¹ some time before making the decision of undertaking her second journey, May thinks about the ancient spirit Windradyne who ‘bled for all of us mob’,¹⁷² and ‘the stars scattered free and became sea birds, their wings brushing through the sky, long necks pointed upward, carving lines and unzipping the wet universe’.¹⁷³ She has gained the spirit’s strength to change her situation and to go out and look for her family. Now she no longer has any physical need for air because she feels free to follow her dreams. She has realized what the best thing to do is; this is why the metaphor of air will no longer appear significantly in the story.

2.2 Back Home

May’s journey that finally leads her back home is about self-discovery and finding a place of belonging. We could divide the entire journey into two parts: the first being the Block, the Block which becomes the liminal place; and the second journey is to her mob and back home. In the

¹⁶⁷ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 59, p. 71 and p. 74.

¹⁶⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 196.

¹⁶⁹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 61-74.

¹⁷⁰ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 64.

¹⁷¹ The Block is the place where May goes after the Territory. It is a group of houses in Redfern, Sydney.

¹⁷² Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 128.

¹⁷³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 129.

whole journey she is able to define herself in relation to her surroundings, in particular in the words of Proshansky & al.¹⁷⁴, she will be shaping her ‘place-identity’.¹⁷⁵ ‘Place-identity’ is a substructure of the self-identity and it continuously changes during the lifecycle.¹⁷⁶ Their theory is based on the idea that ‘the places and spaces a child grows up in, those that he or she comes to know, prefer, and seek out or avoid also contribute significantly to self-identity’.¹⁷⁷ That is, May will be able to shape her identity in relation to how and to what extent certain places affect her.

In the ‘place-identity theory’, the ‘anxiety and defence function’¹⁷⁸ is the aspect that is more relevant to the purpose of my study: this function derives from a particular relation between a certain place and self-identity. This relation can be corrupted by some elements with the consequence of a phobic reaction. Indeed, there might be problems in the relation, mainly due to three factors: there might be an unpleasant association between the place and experiences related to the place; the place can be inadequate, so it does not satisfy the needs of the identity (in tastes/preference or in requirements); or it depends on the self-identity (often the relationships the self-identity has in relation to the surrounding people of the place).¹⁷⁹ These three possible problematic relations may ‘signal threat or danger in physical settings or they may represent response tendencies that defend or protect the person against these dangers.’¹⁸⁰ May’s response to places reflect her sense of inadequacy to those places, and her consequent need to escape is due to the ‘anxiety and defence function’.¹⁸¹

In the opening part of the novel, May is at her mother’s house in Woonona, near Wollongong. The reader briefly sees her there because she and her brother Billy are about to go to the sea-side: she is going to lose her place-belongingness very soon because her mother’s house will be replaced with her Aunt’s house. The attachment with the houses is almost non-existent; in fact,

¹⁷⁴ Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabia, and Robert Kaminoff, ‘Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self’, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 3 (1983), pp. 57-83.

¹⁷⁵ Proshansky et al., p. 57.

¹⁷⁶ Proshansky et al., p. 57-8.

¹⁷⁷ Proshansky et al., p. 74.

¹⁷⁸ Proshansky et al., p. 73.

¹⁷⁹ Proshansky et al., p. 73.

¹⁸⁰ Proshansky et al., p. 73.

¹⁸¹ Proshansky et al., p. 73.

there is not a single description of them. In this phase, May's place-identity is about to display a phobic reaction for all the three factors that were explained previously: the environment has no meaning for her, hence it is inadequate; the place reminds her of the bad moment when she discovered her mother's death; finally, the difficult relationships in the house make things worse. Ultimately, Billy goes away from the place and it is not by chance that Billy curses the house for his unhappiness: 'fuck this place, fuck you all! Fuck this shithole of a house, fuck this town, and fuck this life.'¹⁸² His sense of inadequacy is identified with the place, the house, and the town. His need to escape is the need to look for a better and different place, a place where he can find himself again.

Like Billy, May feels uncomfortable in her Aunty's house, therefore her reaction is to go away as well. She does not really have a destination and this is evident because the first place she goes to is chosen only because she remembers being offered a place to stay. This place is 'a drug house of anxious nobodies',¹⁸³ and there she is just one of the anonymous faces. In this squat she spends most of her time dreaming of her family, her mother, her father, and her cousins. After a nightmare, she packs her stuff and goes to the highway 'waiting to go wherever'.¹⁸⁴ The squat is no place for her, and she immediately understands it from the setting 'the house wheezed, jammed between the new motorway and the train line, alongside the lapping sidewalk that rose and fell like undulating limbs'.¹⁸⁵ The sudden change of place from her Aunty's house to the squat is driven by the need of finding a sort of place; however her place-identity is still threatened because she has no relationships in the place; and she does not like the place either.

The 'defence function' brings her to run away again: she manages to get a lift from Pete who tells her about his family and takes her up to the Territory. She wants to find her father in Darwin: he sent them a postcard from there, where he was supposed to be working at mango picking. Before getting to Darwin, Pete decides to stop at the Palm Creek Rodeo. Amongst the people watching the

¹⁸² Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 58.

¹⁸³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 65.

¹⁸⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 74.

¹⁸⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 64.

rodeo, May recognises her father and remembers all the brutalities her mother suffered because he used to beat her. She decides she does not want to recognise him and tries to find a way back to Sydney.

In this process of acknowledgement, and during the whole journey, memories are essential for the shaping of her place-identity. When she first sees him she thinks:

Some things stay with you, even if you manage to prise them out of your history, they somehow come marching back with a slung shotgun to blow away anything you've managed to build. To destroy your world, the world that's not real but you wish it was.¹⁸⁶

She had tried to forget her past, her father's abuse, and her mother's madness but when she sees him everything comes back like a boomerang and she cannot be the same, something inside her has changed. She cannot escape from pain, but she will realize it only later, she is not ready yet. Therefore, the Territory is not the right place for her either: she could have found some comfort by finding her father there, hence a family tie; however, she does not want to recognize him; bad memories are involved; and ultimately there is no sort of bond with the place. Again, because the three conditions listed previously are not satisfied, the only solution she sees at this stage is to run away. This phobic reaction is her first choice to solve problems, but she will learn that there is another one: if you cannot change place, you should try to compromise with people, being ready to change yourself as well.

In order to find her place, May has to understand where she does *not* belong as well, and in this acknowledgment, the old woman Joyce will help her. May understands that the only way to fill the gap due to the inadequacy of the place is to build up another family. Having understood this, she gets to the Block and tries to find some people with whom she can share some kindness and tenderness. She is able to create emotional bonds only after she has truncated the relationship with her Aunt, her brother, and above all her father. The place is still squalid and hopeless, she feels like an animal in its cage: 'the houses were tall and narrow and as we swept down past a row of

¹⁸⁶ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p.85.

them I noticed they made a kind of square, like the walls of a box'.¹⁸⁷ Similarly to her past condition, nothing has changed even if she has changed place: the suburb is still miserable and she is still unhappy.

Joyce finds May at Belmore Park and takes the fourteen-year-old girl to her place at the Block. Joyce is a fundamental figure for May, she becomes a kind of stepmother and makes her understand the importance of place and family, in fact the first thing she tells her is 'you got family in the city too girl, gunna show ya where ya don't belong dumb black bitch, you don't look like an Abo'¹⁸⁸ (some pages before, the man who abused May said almost exactly the same words).¹⁸⁹ The elder understands that the girl has to find her place and at the same time that she needs some kind of affection: 'we're all family here, all blacks, here, from different places, but we're all one mob, this place here...'.¹⁹⁰ In this sentence, three concepts are interrelated: Aboriginality, place, and family. These three elements are the ones that May is looking for and, at first, she believes she has found them in the Block: 'they were my family, and I loved them.'¹⁹¹ However, she will only realise further on that this was a mistake.

May chooses Joyce as her maternal figure for two main reasons: she needs family ties, and Joyce reminds her of her mother, and also because both elder women have the power of yarning. The relationship between May's self-identity and places are mediated through storytelling. The two women teach May thanks and through storytelling: they would tell her stories about their mob or their past. In addition, similarly to her real family condition, in this new family alcohol and violence are present as well. In fact, when Joyce drinks too much, she is harsh on her. On one occasion, she suggests the girl to go away and find out her Wiradjuri mob:

May, you got people you gotta find, things you gotta learn. You *will* learn them ere, but I don't want you to. [...] You gotta go, May, you got sumthin to find, fire in the belly that ya gotta know.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 98.

¹⁸⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 97.

¹⁸⁹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 36.

¹⁹⁰ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 99.

¹⁹¹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 100.

¹⁹² Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 104.

Joyce knows what is best for May, that place is not the right one for her and even if May has grown affectionate to some people, she needs to find her true family. However, May is not ready yet; there is more she has to face in order to be able to understand the real meaning of Joyce's words.

During the time she spends at the Block, another important character May meets is Charlie. Their relationship is important because, thanks to him, May has a sort of understanding of where her place of belonging is. In fact, even though the two never speak about their respective heritages, she finds understanding in those unspoken words. May feels close to him mainly because they share the same feeling: they both live in a place that is not for them and they belong somewhere else. However, Charlie knows where his home is and May understands this: '[h]e'd never tell you about Africa, and I never asked. It was his secret – his past, that someday, revisited, would become his home again.'¹⁹³ Probably, in this thought May unconsciously sets her hopes as well. In a way, it is Charlie himself who represents her dreams because in her search for a family he becomes like a father to her:

Charlie could have been my father, or wished he was secretly, looking up for his approval, hoping he'd lean over against my forehead with his and tell me softly, as if I'd known all along, that I was his child.¹⁹⁴

May tries to fill the gap in her life created by her father's absence with Charlie, and sees in him what she would have liked to have, that paternal figure that she has chosen not to accept because it is too painful. When he is taken by the police, things get complicated for May and, as a consequence, deprived of his support, she gets in trouble and has to leave the Block.

Still at the Block, May meets Johnny Smith, another important character for her journey back home. In May's heart and mind, Johnny takes Billy's place and becomes very much a brother to her: 'I tell him that he reminds me of my brother. And he says he is my brother, always',¹⁹⁵ and in return he calls her Wantok, 'his black girl ally'.¹⁹⁶ Johnny helps May to understand the importance of place and family, it is from the experience at the Block that she realizes what the goal

¹⁹³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 111.

¹⁹⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 111-2.

¹⁹⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 123.

¹⁹⁶ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 123.

of her journey is. Joyce tells her where she does not belong, Charlie makes her understand the importance of going back to one's home; and finally Johnny teaches her the importance of following her dreams and finding her family.

Therefore, in this 'Block phase' May understands two things: she needs real family ties (with "real" I mean not created by her) and she needs to find her belonging-place. As in the past, her place-identity at the Block is threatened again, but this time she is more conscious of what she wants and needs. The self-identity has already endured some hard trials and the consequence is that her place-identity is shaping. In fact, one of the phases that her place-identity has to go through is to place itself in the right role: in order not to escape again she needs to find a place where her relationships with the other people are positive; where the place can be pleasant for her; and finally the association with the place and the experiences related to the place can be good (storytelling and memories in this last aspect are very important).

In this sense, she has to acquire those competences that Proshansky & al. define as the 'environmental understanding', the 'environmental competence', and the 'environmental control'.¹⁹⁷ The first is the ability to read the setting and understand the situations; the second is the ability to use the setting and model her behaviour in relation to it; and the last is the ability to control her behaviour and the behaviour of the people around her. However, at this stage, May has not acquired these competences, so she abandons the Block, gets a lift from a man, Gary, and goes to Lake Cowal in order to begin her second journey.

When she gets at the lake she remembers her mum's stories that 'would always come back to this place, to the lake, where all Wiradjuri would stop to drink. Footprints of your ancestors, she'd say, one day I'll take you there'.¹⁹⁸ May indeed starts to take the same route as her ancestors, she will be walking the same path. Nevertheless, before doing this, she meets an elder woman, similar in part both to her mother and to Joyce. She is another female figure that manages to understand and help her during her journey. As an elder woman, Issy or Galing, her duty is to teach

¹⁹⁷ Proshansky et al., p. 72.

¹⁹⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 141.

and protect her land and her people. Their mothers are from the same land and she can help May to find the right way: 'follow the Lachlan, tomorrow, follow Bila snake to Euabalong'.¹⁹⁹

Issy is able to give May some support, now May is ready to travel alone and go to her mob's place: 'One foot in front of another and so on. [...] and with the crying inside me, that I could not make out, of words or voice, I began to walk'.²⁰⁰ Her second journey begins and while she walks she imagines how the meeting with her mob would be. She is looking for a family, but this time *her* family. She dreams of finding her mother with her mob, symbolically finding her mother means getting her Aboriginality back: 'I imagined my mum would be there too, they'd all be there, around a fire, cooking goanna. I imagined them whispering the stories my mum had whispered years ago'.²⁰¹ Aboriginality would be gained back with her mother's return and with storytelling; as noted before, storytelling has always been constant during her whole life but she needs to be told by some family member. She needs to understand what has happened to them, she needs to add a piece of puzzle to fill the gap.

She gains some kind of understanding when she gets to the mission, the place is still unpleasant for her:

[a] small church flakes off its old salmon skin, revealing the ashen wood beneath. The windows have no shutters, some doorways have no doors, and every house is exactly the same, like someone's idea of fancy concentration camps.²⁰²

The first condition to complete her place-identity is unachievable; she obviously dislikes the place which is quite similar to both the squat and the Block. The second condition of the theory, the one that deals with the relationship between herself and the people over there, is unfulfilled as well and this is evident when she speaks with Uncle Graham. He tells her about the terrible lifestyle of the Aborigines there, May is not completely surprised because she saw most the things Uncle is talking about. Uncle Graham's monologue is very important because it prepares her for the following place, in fact what he says is a kind of anticipation of what she will be hearing at the Gibsons'.

¹⁹⁹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 148.

²⁰⁰ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 159.

²⁰¹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 161.

²⁰² Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 167.

When she gets at the Gibsons', her mother's mob, she immediately realizes that things are not the way she had imagined them. Starting from the house that is described with no emotion, there is neither a sense of attachment, nor a sense of comfort: she understands that that place will not be her belonging place. Once inside, she tries to explain why she is there 'just wanted to know about my family, you know, the Gibsons, where they come from and stuff.'²⁰³ Knowing May's story and what she has been through, this seems a very legitimate thing for the reader; however, for the Gibsons, things appear to be very different, they are neither interested in knowing her, nor in telling her about them, their family or their past. In the end, they do it and what May hears is not what she had expected and, disillusioned, she thinks 'I wanted to be free of them – I wanted pride instead'.²⁰⁴ The harsh reality is difficult to accept; nevertheless, at the same time, even if what she has discovered is not what she wanted, this journey and this meeting have changed her and she finally knows what she wants.

May's self-discovery is coming to an end in the story because she comprehends where she has to go next and what she has to consider being the most important things in life; it is easier to run away than going back home:

I could run away again, I could run away from the pain my family holds. I could take the yarndi, the paint, the poppies, and all the grog in the world but I couldn't run from the pain and I couldn't run from my family either.²⁰⁵

Now May is able to face the difficulties of her life, and family story. She understands that running has no sense because you carry the pain with you wherever you go. The phobic reaction has disappeared because during the journeys she has gained those competences she needed. She has become stronger and she decides to go back home to her Aunty's. This step is as important as the rest of the journey, and probably it is the most difficult one because she needs to accept that things have happened and she cannot change them, but she can buy a new tablecloth, she can change the future, make home a better place. She comes to an even deeper understanding when she becomes

²⁰³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 180.

²⁰⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 181.

²⁰⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 195.

aware of her Aboriginality at the end when she understands that the past is as relevant as the present, for this reason it must be remembered and preserved: ‘if we stay, if they stop digging up Aunty’s backyard, stop digging up a mother’s memory, stop digging up our people, maybe then, we’ll all stop crying’.²⁰⁶ She has restored her ‘environmental past’²⁰⁷, improved her three competences and for the moment supplied to the three conditions: her place-identity can gain some peace, at least for a while.

2.2.1 Aboriginality

Swallow the Air interrelates the issue of finding a belonging place with the question of Aboriginality, which becomes a problem for many characters. Some of them, like Uncle Percy, Johnny, Billy, and May herself, struggle with their Aboriginality; instead others have a strong sense of Aboriginal identity, like May’s mother, Joyce, and Issy. Thanks to these people, May tries to understand her Aboriginality: people’s stories and the relationship she manages to create with them help her to grow up and collocate herself in the world. Aboriginality seems to be presented as a thing you can lose; however, this is just apparent because in remembering, in not forgetting the past, there is a form of claiming one’s identity. A person cannot stop being someone because they are told not to, surely there are moments in life when there were uncertainties and Aborigines were not allowed to show their Aboriginality; however, this cannot stop them from being Aborigines because it is a part of themselves, of their identity.

The main character is one example of this: May’s sense of Aboriginality was certain before her mother’s death. It is evident that Aboriginality to her deals with a sense of belonging and family ties. Her mother represented everything about her past: places, stories, and ancestors. Once her mother dies, this sense of being part of something disappears and May begins her journey:

²⁰⁶ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 198.

²⁰⁷ Proshansky et al., p. 59. ‘Environmental past’ defined as ‘a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person’s biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs.’ p. 59.

I didn't see the colour that everyone else saw, some saw different shades – black, and brown, white. I saw me, May Gibson with one eye a little bigger than the other. I felt Aboriginal because my Mum had made me proud to be, told me I got magic and courage from Gundyarri, the spirit man. It was then I felt Aboriginal, I felt like I belonged, but when Mum left, I stopped *being* Aboriginal. I stopped feeling like I belonged. Anywhere.²⁰⁸

It seems that being Aboriginal implicates having the same characteristics as her ancestors. Her ancestors, her mother and herself are three generations with different stories but of one Aboriginality. This is not to say that things do not evolve, the very fact that May “loses” her Aboriginality for a while is an example of change. In this quest, the Gibsons are important because, having lost their Aboriginality, they try to convince May that she will never find what she is looking for; however even if they do not realize it, they give her the key to her Aboriginality: she realizes that her Aboriginality can only reside in herself.

In fact, the Gibsons explain to her that things are different from what she heard from her mother: ‘the thing is, we weren't allowed to be what you're looking for, and we weren't told what was right, we weren't taught by anyone’.²⁰⁹ As Tara June Winch explains in an interview,²¹⁰ this is one of the most important moments because what Percy means with his words is that ‘they weren't told that they had a history, had an identity that had any worth at all. They weren't told they were allowed to remember that they'd belonged’.²¹¹ Percy's reaction is not ironic, he simply expresses his grief for having been deprived of his Aboriginality, but at the same time his words are a cry of remembrance, as if to say that he has not forgotten what has happened to him and his family. Percy stresses the connection between place, mob and Aboriginality:

there is a big missing hole between this place and the place you're looking for. That place, that people, that something you're looking for. It's gone. It was taken away. We weren't told, love; *we weren't allowed to be Aboriginal*.²¹²

Reading through these words, it seems that the gap between the past place and the place May sees, explains the loss of Aboriginality in May's family. During the passage from one place to another,

²⁰⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 97.

²⁰⁹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 181.

²¹⁰ Madeleine Byrne, “An Interview with Tara June Winch”, *Antipodes*, 22 (2007), p. 131.

²¹¹ Byrne, p. 131.

²¹² Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 181-2. Italics are the author's..

events have changed not only the place but in particular the people, nothing is the same anymore. That sense of Aboriginality is lost, exactly like the place.

One of the most important characters, especially in the first part of the novel, is her brother Billy. Billy is not only her play mate, he is most importantly the one with whom May shares the brutalities of her family world. The catastrophe is on the day of his eighteenth birthday, when Billy quarrels with Aunty's boyfriend who hits him. Billy feels deprived of his masculinity and Aboriginality at the same time: he cannot defend his Aunty or himself, also because he lacks conviction in himself. There are no solid certainties in his life anymore and this is another thing that links him to his sister: his temporary loss of Aboriginality has the same roots, therefore his quest for Aboriginality is very similar to May's.

Johnny is one of the characters who help May to understand the struggle of being Aboriginal. He was born in Sydney but his mob was from Waiben and he knew that that was the place he belonged to. The most important thing that the two characters share is a sense of non-belonging anywhere. Both dream of going back to their mob's place one day, they feel that there they will be complete: 'we promise each other to find them, the faces [of the family members], to go to our homelands for our people, for ourselves'.²¹³ After the experience in jail, May realizes that she needs to go out and find her family. Before leaving she decides to stop at Johnny's to see if he is going with her: but his attitude is completely different from before, he feels that he should go but he feels stuck in that place. He is more rational now because he thinks that those desires are just dreams with which he will die. Johnny does not want to claim his Aboriginality, he leaves things to chance by not going out and discovering things himself. He knows that the Block is not the right place for him, but he also knows that he does not need to go out to find his mob because he has already understood that his Aboriginality is not there, but rather within himself.

²¹³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 123.

Later on, May meets Issy; the woman belongs to that land and she explains the importance of that land for her people, in contraposition to non-Aboriginals that want to dig the place to find gold.

As May states:

Issy says they [non-Aborigines] don't understand that just because you can't see something, don't mean it's not there. [...] She's says that our people are born from quartz crystal, hard water. We are powerful people, strong people. Water people, people of the rivers and the lakes. They look at the land and say there is nothing here.²¹⁴

The two ways of considering the place are completely different: Aborigines feel a spiritual connection with the land which implicates the necessity to preserve it; whereas non-Aborigines see the land just as a place to be exploited as a money source. Issy has not lost her sense of Aboriginality and she claims it in relation to the land of her ancestors: the land is important for Aborigines in relation to their history and identity; and her Aboriginality, like her link to the land, is strong as the quartz. Issy's strength, reflected in her words, is important because it helps May to understand the relationship of the two aspects.

Another interesting thing is what Issy draws in the dust: two circles with inward circles, connected by a line. She does not explain what these symbols mean, but she does say that 'everything is sacred, inside the circle and outside the circle; she says that we should look after both areas the same. They are magic, she adds'.²¹⁵ Art is fundamental for Aborigines because it is a means of connection between people, ancestors, and the Land. Often designs in the sand, so non-permanent drawings, were used during ceremonies: rites were obligations towards the land and the ancestors.²¹⁶ Art was an integral part to maintaining a spiritual connection in contemporary Aboriginal dotted art, often the paintings are maps of the traditional land. One of the most common designs is that of concentric circles linked by lines, very similar to the one drawn by Issy; they usually stand for waterholes or campsites.²¹⁷ May will understand the meaning of Issy's words and circles only after she finds her family.

²¹⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 146.

²¹⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 147.

²¹⁶ Larissa Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia For Dummies*, Milton: Wiley Publishing Australia, 2012, p. 257.

²¹⁷ Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia For Dummies*, p. 259.

Issy is the grandmother May has never met. Her suggestions and warnings are those of an elder, but a caring elder, she does not only do her duties of protecting the land and teaching the younger.

May learns from her, but at the same time recognises herself in her:

under all the giggling we meet somewhere between my blazing stomach and the stars, and she looks into me with a [*sic*] gravity. I think of it as a shared stubbornness or some nature of knowing. It leaks from her, that once she too was lost.²¹⁸

Issy can help her so much because in the past she had lost her way as well, probably she had to travel a similar journey to find herself. Issy has already completed her journey and found her Aboriginality, which is why she is sure of what she is telling her and can say ‘bargan is boomerang [...] you’ll be back’.²¹⁹ Issy knows that there is much more that May has to endure, but she also knows that she will find her Aboriginality, in the same way she has found hers.

2.3 Misery and Violence

As anticipated in the opening of the chapter, *Swallow the Air* has to be taken into consideration for other issues: violence and misery are interrelated within May’s journey; they affect either her, or one of her family members or friends. *Swallow the Air* presents a very harsh reality that is parallel with “normal” reality: the underneath reality of violence, death, drugs, and alcohol is very much a constant in May’s life along with everyday reality. However, even if these brutalities leave a mark on the main character, they are not told as shocking facts, they are just glimpses narrated with objectivity and pitilessness. In almost every place, May finds someone who is poor, or drug addicted, or alcoholic, or abused: this reality is expected to be astonishing for a fourteen-year-old girl, however she passes it on as something that somehow should be accepted as it is because part of her reality, of her world.

Since the beginning of the story we are presented a crude situation: May’s mother has a severe breakdown and commits suicide. May dismisses her mother’s death in less than two lines saying ‘I thought about Mum’s pain being free from her wrists, leaving her body, or what was left.

²¹⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 158.

²¹⁹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 159.

Her soft hands overturned and exhausted'.²²⁰ This is the ultimate moment of an already difficult family situation: May's family is a single-parent one because her father abandoned them when she was little, leaving not minor consequences behind. May and her brother end up living with their mother and later with their Aunty. The men of her family are absent and some of them have left a negative aura behind them: Billy will leave her soon; her father and her brother's father as well. Apart from her mother's death, there is another suicide in May's story, in fact May remembers that her brother's father killed himself one year after having abandoned them. Unlike what Larissa Behrendt notices in her article,²²¹ colour skin does not really count: both Aborigines and non-Aborigines use violence,²²² in fact her father's arm was pale, and her brother's father was 'the right skin for Mum'²²³, i.e., Aboriginal. Both the figures that could have been father to herself, no matter their ethnic group, disappointed and abandoned them.

Sexual violence and brutal bashings are another constant in the story, often supported by the use, or rather abuse, of alcohol. In 'My Bleeding Palm'²²⁴, May describes the squalor and misery of the suburb and its inhabitants. The Sydney suburb was near the beach and the mines, the name of the street was Paradise Parade that ironically could be said that it was anything but paradise: the Parade, built over the 'Paradise Abattoir, bore two long rows of housing commission flats, unregistered cars, busted prams and echoes of broken dreams, all crammed into our special section of Woonona Beach'.²²⁵ There is irony in May's words that present the people as all identical, living in same built-up building groups, where there is no hope and no happiness. It is in this dingy suburb that she was born and she will find that it is where she does belong; in the meantime, the place and the people around her will just bring her pain and sorrow. Her Aunty and her Aunty's boyfriend are

²²⁰ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 9.

²²¹ Larissa Behrendt, "Consent in a (Neo)Colonia Society: Aboriginal Women as sexual and Legal 'Other'", *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15 (2000), pp. 353-67.

²²² This will be further explained in pp. 23.

²²³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 51.

²²⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 29-38.

²²⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 33.

always drunk and her brother starts using drugs. In this same short story, she explains that once, at the beach where she used to go when she was younger, she was sexually abused.²²⁶

Contrary to what Margaret Henderson notices in her study,²²⁷ it does not really mean whether the place is home or the street or a certain suburb, there seems to be no safe place for her because violence happens everywhere. Bellambi Beach, where she was assaulted, and her home are supposed to be places where she can find some kind of comfort and protection; however this is not the case. In fact, in the house, drinking was so usual that the house itself became a bottle: ‘the bottle was what the house turned into, not a home any more than she had meant for it to be. Just a place of grog and fists’.²²⁸ Home is not a private place anymore, it becomes a place of violence and abuse. Her Aunty is beaten by the person who is supposed to love her and she does not complain: ‘I asked Auntie why we didn’t just go, but Aunty said he’d never remember the fights, that he’d have blackouts – and that he couldn’t help it. Poor Aunty’.²²⁹ Her reaction is quite common amongst the abused victims who often do not denounce their assaulters because they feel they have deserved it, they think it is the way their lovers show they care about them.²³⁰ May sees that the situation at home is terrible, but violence and misery seem to follow her everywhere and at any stage of her life.

Like Aunty, May’s mother accepted the bashings from her man, Mays’ father: ‘I remember now, my mother was a beaten person. She wouldn’t scream at his fist, she wasn’t the type to fight his torments. She bottled all the years too’.²³¹ Her mother resigns all forms of resistance and indeed worsens her situation with alcohol. Due to her condition, she cannot protect her children anymore and the family unit is ‘separated by the violence’.²³² Violence has no limit and no colour, it hits everyone indiscriminately: May’s father is a “whitefella”, whereas Billy’s father and Aunty’s man are Aborigines. May is affected both directly and indirectly by violence because she was abused and

²²⁶ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 36-7.

²²⁷ Margaret Henderson, “Subdivisions of Suburbia: The Politics of Place in Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs* and Amanda Lohrey’s *Camille’s Bread*”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 18 (1998), pp. 72-86.

²²⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 53.

²²⁹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 53.

²³⁰ Melissa Lucashenko and Obette Best, “Women Bashing: an Urban Aboriginal Perspective”, *Social Alternatives*, 14 (1995), pp. 19-22.

²³¹ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 88.

²³² Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 87.

her mother, overcome by despair, became an alcoholic and left both her and her brother without parents. Her Aunty is not a better mother to them, she cannot even help them, on the contrary on Billy's eighteenth birthday, their Aunty gives him a silver flask as a present and at the end of the night, Billy is tipsy and attacks Craig who hits him back to the floor.

In the Block, the place where she tries to build up a new family unit, things are very much the same: the place is miserable; Joyce, like her real mother, drinks; there is no father-figure in the house; Johnny, like Billy, is on drugs. Until now, May has had three houses – her mother's, her Aunty's and Joyce's; however, in each of them abuse is a constant. The ironic aspect is that police *is* present, but it is presented negatively. The first time May sees the police is in front of her Aunty's house on the day of her mother's death; the second time is when the police takes Charlie away; on the third occasion she is taken away by the police; and finally she reads in the newspaper that Johnny died while chased by the police. Needless to say, the authority that could have brought normality in her life is depicted just as an aggravating agent that does not help her at all. This does not surprise the reader, because it often occurs in Aboriginal literature that the authorities do not render justice, rather they just increase the violence of the already harsh reality. In May's story, she does not show hate or disgust towards them, but still it is evident that she does not get any help from them.

During her journey there are other examples of addiction and misery, as if she were persecuted by her past and could not free herself from it. On the way to the Territory, the driver Pete, husband with a yet-to-come child, sniffs cocaine in order to keep himself awake. Her second journey to the Dead Land²³³ is very much similar both to Paradise Parade and the Block:

Crops were more important than people, than rape. [...] People spill in and out of their houses, trying to find some kind of un-itchy medium, trying to prise off the boundaries.²³⁴

There are very strong images here: money has more relevance than violence, religion and people have no importance to the point that violence seems omnipresent there, as in concentration camps.

²³³ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 167.

²³⁴ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 167.

This forgotten place, as its forgotten people, is probably even more degraded and obscene than the previous ones; yet, there are always two constants: Aboriginal people as its inhabitants and misery and/or violence.

Here, May finds Uncle Graham who explains to her the relationship between people and misery. He is one of the characters that have less space in the story, however what he says is so powerful and true that it cannot be ignored. In his speech he manages to compress two centuries of brutalities by explaining what had happened to Aboriginal peoples:

when the bad spirit happens to family, it stays in the family, when we born we got all our past people's pain too. It doesn't just go away like they think it does. [...] that's why so much drinkin, drinkin, drinkin. That's why so much anger [...] Well then these people never get to talk [...] and they get locked in prisons [...] no one to talk about it, no one ever want to talk about it. And they die, kill em selves.²³⁵

The condition is terrible, the pain is unbearable and the government does not do anything to change the situation. Graham clearly says that the reasons they are in such conditions are colonialism and its consequences. In his alcoholic delirium he presents the current Aboriginal situation with objectivity and crudeness, and he is an alcoholic, like the people he is talking about, who accept his condition as it is, similarly to May's mother or Aunty. In addition, all people keep things to themselves, May is just one of them who neither tells anyone about her father's postcard, nor about the sexual abuse. Incommunicability is what drives relationships; this is linked to the volatility, in the sense of inconsistency, of people and relations, underlined with the often-recurrent metaphor of air, which has been discussed previously.

Family ties are important in the story, but there is no love or protection in the relationships. May's feelings continuously get hurt by the people who are supposed to love her; and this is also because violence, alcohol and drugs often mediate the relationships. The only happy moments May remembers in her family are in the short story 'Cocoon'²³⁶ where she sits around the fire with her brother and her mother; however, even here, her mother is tipsy. Similarly, another happy occasion is when they celebrate because Billy gets a job and she gets the year-eight art prize, but her Aunty

²³⁵ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 170-1.

²³⁶ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 149-54.

celebrates with grog and gets drunk all the time. Other happy moments she remembers are when she goes to the beach with her brother, she is happy but somehow she is alone because they rarely talk. The last short story, 'Home'²³⁷, is her last relatively happy moment: at home she finds her brother finally clean from drugs, but her Aunty is still drinking.²³⁸ There seems to be no chance for her to live a life free from misery.

²³⁷ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, pp. 191-8.

²³⁸ Winch, *Swallow the Air*, p. 196.

III. Gayle Kennedy's *Me, Antman & Fleabag*

3.1 Aboriginal English and Family Ties

*Me, Antman & Fleabag*²³⁹ is a work composed of twenty-two short stories; they are very much independent from one another and do not follow a chronological order. Most of the stories deal with an event or a particular fact regarding the family of either Antman or Antman's woman. The short stories have different lengths, starting from one page to twelve pages and the characters are ever-changing. The only constant figures in each story are the protagonists: the "I" who speaks, who is not named, Antman, and the dog Fleabag. Even though the stories are narrated by Antman's girlfriend, who is the "I" figure, there are very few sections dealing with her thoughts as most of the narration regards someone else's story. Most are about Aboriginal people and very few of them regard non-Aboriginal people: both parties are the targets of a certain degree of mockery, in the sense that sometimes they are depicted with irony. In this way, the stories challenge the representation of Aboriginal peoples as people stuck to a stereotype. This is also possible thanks to the use of black humour that helps the narration to be more direct and critical. The other aspect that helps is the language of the narration, which is Aboriginal English with a predominant use of the lingo structure and some lingo words.²⁴⁰

The choice in the use of the language is an important aspect in Aboriginal literature. In the process of assimilation, Aboriginal languages probably were one of the most affected features of Aboriginal culture. In spite of the incontestable importance of lingos (before assimilation there were

²³⁹ Gayle Kennedy, *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007.

²⁴⁰ Aboriginal English is the variety of English used by Aborigines, hence what it is labelled "english", with small "e" in Helen Tiffin, "Re-Placing Language: Textual Strategies in Post-colonial Writing", in Terence Hawkes, ed., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 38-77. Lingo is a collective label given to the actual Aboriginal languages, now estimated to be about 145, and the most spoken ones are Arrernte, Djambarrpuyungu, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri. For further information see Katherine E. Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Schools of English, The University of New South Wales, 2007; Katherine E. Russo, *Practices of Proximity: the Appropriation of English in Australian Indigenous Literature*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010; National Indigenous Languages Report Survey 2005, (Accessed 19 April 2013) <http://arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/nils-report-2005.pdf>.

more than 200 language families)²⁴¹, Aboriginal languages are on the edge of disappearance. Most Aborigines were at least bilingual because there was not a unitary language within the country: ‘in the Indigenous Australian context, languages have always existed in constitutional dialogic relations based on geographical and social context’²⁴². Aboriginal peoples say that their languages are “sleeping”, therefore they just need to be awakened again; in fact, many associations are trying nowadays to restore their use. Almost all Aborigines use standard English or Aboriginal English as the main languages for everyday communication; nonetheless, there is still a percentage that knows the lingo. The possibility to use either standard English or Aboriginal English and lingo, gives people, and in this case literate people, a very powerful tool: the three languages belong to two different cultures, Aboriginal English and lingo are proper of the Aboriginal world (Aboriginal English can be considered an appropriation of standard English), instead standard English is the language of the colonizer.

Aboriginal writers cannot remain passive to the choice whether to use their lingo (if he/ she knows it) or not in their writings. The decision is political²⁴³; in fact, the ‘mastery of language affords remarkable power’.²⁴⁴ From a European point of view, the use of standard English reflects the fact that assimilation has succeeded; instead, the use of lingo shows a sort of fossilisation, because lingos are associated to the past, prior to “modernity”. From the Aboriginal perspective, the use of standard English can be a choice made due to the need to reach a broader audience (both Aborigines and non-Aborigines) or to please the publishing houses. The use of Aboriginal language is a resolution not to be underestimated: lingo words are very powerful because they give Aborigines a strong sense of belonging, they represent their identity, they show an attempt to resist assimilation, and they continuously remind non-Aboriginal readers that they are strangers to that reality. Lingo words put the non-Aboriginal reader in quite a difficult position: ‘the substance of the utterance may be closed to the non-Indigenous reader as she/he must return to the English words for

²⁴¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, “Australian Aboriginal Oral Tradition”, *Oral Tradition*, 1 (1986), p. 231.

²⁴² Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, pp. 39-40.

²⁴³ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p.148.

²⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 1986, p. 18.

her/his own interpretation.²⁴⁵ The European reader, thanks to lingo words, becomes aware of his/her position.

This occurs because language reflects a certain set of mind and carries culture:

to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.²⁴⁶

Using Aboriginal English or lingo is a way of setting distances between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Therefore, the particular use and choice of language represents the distinctiveness of a specific reality, the reality presented by the author or of the author (in the case of autobiographies). It is not a coincidence that standard English was used as a political weapon in the colonial process: '[t]he investment of the English language with a status of authority and superiority was strategic to the analytical, epistemological and cultural discrimination of Indigenous languages'.²⁴⁷ Some Aboriginal writers, as Tara June Winch, Vivienne Cleven, Sally Morgan, Larissa Behrendt, do use standard English and this appropriation of the language can also suggest that 'the fragmentary and inconsistent nature of ideology leaves the possibility of resistance open'.²⁴⁸ Once the language is acquired, it maintains a certain difference from the "standard" language that was taught: this appropriation, called Aboriginal English, 'disrupts the colonial representation of language as "monologic", which is functional to the assimilation of difference, and enables language to maintain difference.'²⁴⁹

The Aboriginal writer, if bilingual, can choose which language to use; in fact, 'writing enables Indigenous Australian writers to activate their distinct voices.'²⁵⁰ In the case of code-switching this is also indicative because, depending on the lects chosen, authors can indicate different things.²⁵¹ In fact, 'local experience is fundamental for Indigenous Australian writing because it resonates with the plurality of the vast continuum of Indigenous English varieties and

²⁴⁵ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, p. 50.

²⁴⁶ Fanon, pp.17-8.

²⁴⁷ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, pp. 36-7.

²⁴⁸ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, p. 47.

²⁴⁹ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, p. 45-6.

²⁵⁰ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, p. 47.

²⁵¹ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, p. 57.

Indigenous languages'.²⁵² This switch is evident in *Swallow the Air* where Aboriginal English is used only in dialogues and indirect speech, or in *Home* where lingo words are usually inserted in inverted commas or followed by an asterisk.

In *Me, Antman & Fleabag* the situation is more complex because, even if not many lingo words are inserted in the text without being highlighted (for example: Wulung²⁵³, meaning money; yahndi,²⁵⁴ meaning marijuana), there are rare cases where the words are explained (jillawa,²⁵⁵ meaning toilet; boongalungs,²⁵⁶ meaning balls). In addition, the text is almost completely written in Aboriginal English, apart from some characters who speak standard English. In the text, language is a form of resistance and this is clearly shown in some dialogues. Kennedy's polyphonic narrative is possible because she uses code switching. The switching from Aboriginal English to standard English signals a distance between two subjects, and consequently between two realities. This is to say that language choice indicates how some subjects position themselves in relation to others: language is about interaction, but speaking depends on the position of the speaker towards the listener; in order to understand each other and be on the same level the code must be the same.²⁵⁷ Therefore, the particular choice of language indicates a form of inclusion or exclusion from one's reality.²⁵⁸

Language is very important in *Me, Antman & Fleabag* because its peculiar use denotes different aspects in the text. It is quite frequent for non-Aboriginal people in the short stories to have a slightly different kind of English (most of the times, but not always, standard English): this is exemplified in the short story 'The Golden Wedding Anniversary'.²⁵⁹ In this short story Aunty Bess and Uncle Vic explain how they met, and in their narration there is an evident difference in the use of verbs. Aunty Bess uses a marked Aboriginal English where the verbs do not often agree with

²⁵² Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, p. 48.

²⁵³ Kennedy, p. 83.

²⁵⁴ Kennedy, p. 117.

²⁵⁵ Kennedy, p. 83.

²⁵⁶ Kennedy, p. 83.

²⁵⁷ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone*, p. 81.

²⁵⁸ Russo, *Practices of Proximity: the Appropriation of English in Australian Indigenous Literature*, p. 19.

²⁵⁹ Kennedy, pp. 23-35.

the subjects; especially with plural subjects she uses the first person: ‘they was gunna have to look me before they done it’.²⁶⁰ Instead, Uncle Vic tends to use “correct” agreement: ‘they jumped out and I knew what they were gunna do’.²⁶¹ Uncle Vic uses Aboriginal English in the rest of the sentence structure, probably because he has lived with the Aboriginal Aunty over fifty years, but his non-Aboriginal heritage is still evident in this use of the verbs. Aboriginal English is a sign of belonging and becomes a defining characteristic of identity. When Della, Aunty’s daughter, speaks she uses correct standard English (‘[t]here was Merv talking at the party about what a wonderful couple you are. How great Mum is. He’s nothing but a fucking hypocrite’), and she is reprimanded by her mother because in this speech she uses coarse language (‘[d]arlin, I didn’t bring you up to use language like that’).²⁶² It is clear that Della is being reproached because of the insults she has hurled, but at the same time it seems that she is also reproached because she has abandoned Aboriginal English, the language of her youth and culture, in favour of standard English, the language of the aggressor. In fact, Della is not certain why she is being reproached for and needs to specify it by saying ‘[w]hat do you mean language like that? [...] those men are pigs!’²⁶³. In this sentence she seems to justify herself for the use of coarse language, but not for her choice of language, showing that she does not feel guilty for either of them.

Language, as said before, carries culture and the attempt of changing the language is a way of accommodating to one culture instead of another. Standard English is preferred to Aboriginal English, this is also why Aunty Bess gets angry and this is explained clearly in Aunty Pearly’s speech:

She’s always going on at us the way we talk. She hates us sayin ‘blackfullas’. Reckons it’s ‘blackfellows’. And anyway, she reckons we shouldn’t call ourselves that. ‘We’re Aborigines’, she says. She’s always correcting us for sayin ‘nothin’ and ‘somethin’ and ‘goin’. She says, ‘It’s ‘nothing’, ‘something’, ‘going’.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Kennedy, p. 29

²⁶¹ Kennedy, p. 30.

²⁶² Kennedy, p. 32.

²⁶³ Kennedy, p. 32

²⁶⁴ Kennedy, p. 39.

Aunty Pearly is well aware of the importance of language, however, her concept of correctness in the use of language is partly contradictory. She wants them to use standard English, but at the same time she recognises that they are Aborigines: this is a contradiction of terms because standard English indicates a shift towards a non-Aboriginal world, more than a way of claiming one's Aboriginality. Moreover, she advises them not to use "blackfullas" but rather "Aborigines" because the latter seems more appropriate to her. Nevertheless, to be precise both words would be incorrect because the former carries a racial connotation and the latter has been applied to Aboriginal people, it is not a word that they have chosen for themselves. She cannot understand the stubbornness of her niece in using Aboriginal English so she makes her repeat the words correctly, but what she is really asking her to do is to abandon her Aboriginality in her use of language; as Frantz Fanon suggests 'a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied that language'.²⁶⁵ Aunty's correctness in speech becomes symbolically deadly, as the main character says 'Dad reckons Aunty talked the poor old fulla to death'.²⁶⁶ It is clear that she really did not so, but in this sentence one could read that not talking in one's own language means to sign the death of one's identity.

Aboriginal English is used as a means of affirmation of one's identity. This is evident in many cases in the text, especially when the main character tells her story in 'Me, Antman and Fleabag Hook up'.²⁶⁷ She understands that language is part of being Aboriginal, therefore in order to have her identity back she needs to learn the language: 'we lived for the next coupla a years with my mob. We listened to the stories of our people, learnt our language. I discovered my blackness'.²⁶⁸ Similarly, Aunty Tibby, who has not been to her country for years, misses the Aboriginal language as if the language itself represented her country: 'And I miss the lingo. It's good hearin ya talk, girl, and lookin at that face. It's almost as good as bein home'.²⁶⁹ Therefore,

²⁶⁵ Fanon, p. 18.

²⁶⁶ Kennedy, p. 41.

²⁶⁷ Kennedy, p. 92-102.

²⁶⁸ Kennedy, p. 100.

²⁶⁹ Kennedy, p. 111.

using the same kind of linguistic code puts the two subjects on the same level, thus enabling them to easily understand each other. In fact, language can be a unifying agent, not only a means, as in the case of Aunty Pearly, of differentiation. This is the case of the Slav Boris, Antman's best friend, who is taught Aboriginal English: 'everyone else taught him how to speak like an Aussie. Trouble is, it was Aussie blackfullas style'.²⁷⁰ The Aboriginal English is the *trait d'union* of people and at the same time it becomes a way to differentiate Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal people: 'they especially love teaching him the lingo. Ant loves it when they git back ta town and there's Boris confusin everyone with these strange clack words'.²⁷¹ Therefore, language makes people uncomfortable because it bears identity.

In *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, Aboriginal English and the importance of the family can be considered forms of resistance to white culture. Forms of resistance were mostly noted in bibliographies²⁷²: women writers' life stories have been defined as 'matrifocal'²⁷³ because they mainly focus on family stories. This genre seems to be very adequate because it answers their necessities: 'Aboriginal women's autobiography reconstructs the 'historical contents' of subjugated knowledges, and those 'historical contents' are gendered'.²⁷⁴ This means that thanks to autobiography and biography, they are able to use some 'tactics of resistance'²⁷⁵ – as the family unit and storytelling – to assimilation. This idea of the family as a form of resistance can be easily applied to this work as well. The strong use of Aboriginal language used both as the language of narration and the language in the dialogues puts the reader in the position of the outsider. This increases in the cases where lingo words are used. The second form of resistance is the family: even if there are no real scenes of domestic life, family plays a very important role because it is omnipresent in the life of the main characters. In fact, the three characters are continuously

²⁷⁰ Kennedy, p.82.

²⁷¹ Kennedy, p.83.

²⁷² Brewster, Anne, *Literary Formations – Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*, Victoria: Melbourne Press, 1995, pp. 39-76.; Debbie Rodan, "Testimony, Narrative and a 'Lived Life'", in *Identity and Justice: Conflicts, Contradictions and Contingencies*, Brussels: Presses Peter Lang Publishing, 2004, pp.105-26.; Francesca Bartlett, "Aboriginal Resistance Literature: Life Stories, Governmentality and Collectivity", *UTS Review*, 4 (1999), pp. 80-111.

²⁷³ Brewster, *Literary Formations*, p. 42 quoting Marcia Langton.

²⁷⁴ Brewster, *Literary Formations*, p. 48.

²⁷⁵ Brewster, *Literary Formations*, p. 40.

travelling around Australia to visit family members; their lives are fulfilled with the meetings and yarns they have with their relatives. In almost every short story, either the main character tells a story of a family member or a family member tells a story: all these stories help to maintain Aboriginality as a key concept in their life.

In order to understand the importance of family in *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, we should take a step backward. Before the British settlement, Aboriginal social organization was very complex and so was the family system: society was based on a kinship system where relations were fundamental for its organisation. In today's Aboriginal society, these relations are still very important for some people and have to be respected. The Aboriginal community might use the matrilineal or patrilineal system, or both of them; these moieties were often divided in eight sections, each section was given a 'kinship name or skin name'²⁷⁶ and a totem.²⁷⁷ The kinship name and the totem identified the person as a member belonging to a specific group and regulated the relations between the sections and the community.²⁷⁸ The relationships amongst the sections were extended from a section to another when a member of the group changed section, in this way 'each individual stands, in respect to every other individual, in a definite kin-relationship'.²⁷⁹ The titles of Aunty and Uncle do not always indicate a family relationship, but are often ways of paying respect. In addition, calling someone brother/sister/uncle/aunt/cousin can refer not to the direct blood related family member as is the case in western society, but to a member of a specific section in relation to the person's position in the community.

²⁷⁶ Larissa Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*, Milton: Wiley Publishing Australia, 2012, p.40.

²⁷⁷ The totems were the symbols of the spiritual connection between the Aboriginal peoples and their land. Totems could be individual or collective and they were plants or animals that were given a specific power. The person had to respect, take care and know everything about his/her totem, and ceremonies were held for the totem. Totems were important because they reminded people that all animals are their sisters, brothers, and cousins: in this way certain animals or certain plants that were difficult to find or important for their nutritional values could be preserved. With this kind of organisation, Aboriginal peoples could manage to use the resources that the land offered them, but without finishing them (for instance, usually native animals were protected species). For further information see Sue C. Wesson, *Murni Dhungang Jirrar: Living in the Illawarra*, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Hurstville (NSW): Department of Environment and Conservation, 2005.

²⁷⁸ For further information see L. R. Hiatt, *Arguments About Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 38-56.

²⁷⁹ A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines*, Sydney: Printatone, 1966, p. 33.

In *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, we could say that family ties are presented as they traditionally were. Both Antman and his woman feel the need to travel from one place to another looking for family members. It is not always clear whose relatives they are, but it is evident that the nickname of ‘Aunty’ is used in the traditional way: the main character otherwise would almost have ten Aunties, which is possible but difficult to believe, and in addition she calls Old Tibby Aunty Tibby, and we do know they are not related. In *Swallow the Air*, May looks for her Aboriginality in her family country, discovering that the country is her *belonging place*; in *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, the main character looks for her Aboriginality in places as well, but this time her *belonging place* is represented in her family ties. The places she goes through are important because she has relatives there, but those places do not represent her *belonging place*; she manages to find a piece of her Aboriginality in her family and in their stories.

In most of the short stories, Antman, Antman’s woman and Fleabag go to relatives’ houses, but the places are not described at all, this is mainly due to the fact that the characters meet together outside the house. Often, the house garden or the fields next to the house are places of meeting and comfort: ‘next day we have the big camp oven do. All us blackfullas round chewin on good tucker, havin a beer, listenin to Slim Dusty and telling lies’.²⁸⁰ The family is home, it is a place of unity and community where people share ideas and knowledge, it gives peace and reassurance; this is stressed several times in the text as Uncle Ronnie notices:

[he] [r]eckons ya aint home till ya had a decent feed a slow cooked mutton and beer, nice and chilled in an esky and a few hours of listenin to ya own mob telling tall tales and singin along to Slim Dusty.²⁸¹

Being Aboriginal means being part of a community that cares about you, with whom you can learn and have a good time as well. In the description of family scenes, there is always someone who becomes a sort of storyteller, in this way storytelling becomes the means to carry on one’s identity and tradition.

²⁸⁰ Kennedy, p. 12.

²⁸¹ Kennedy, p. 4.

In relation to storytelling, the performance held in the last short story ‘Bringing the Old Bones Home’²⁸² cannot be ignored. Traditionally, the performance, also called *corroboree*, used to be made of three parts: the singing performance; a dance performance; and a visual representation (such as paintings on the sand).²⁸³ The *corroboree* could involve either a part of the community or all the community, depending on which type of performance it was – either sacred or secular. In ‘Bringing the Old Bones Home’, a man finds the bones of an Aboriginal man, and the Aboriginal community decides to perform a *corroboree* in order to bring peace to the dead man. The mortuary ceremony was held because:

those poor old ones’ spirit would be out there floatin on the wind cos they died so violently. They must be bugged and need to rest in their own place by now. So I got together the mob and we collected the bones, and cleansed them in a smokin ceremony and wrapped them proper and reburied em and we had another smokin ceremony.²⁸⁴

In this case, the family becomes the community who is able to give back the identity to the dead man, because in burying the man they restore his dignity as Aboriginal. The person is unknown to them; however, the fact that the dead man is one of them is reason enough to hold a meeting and a ceremony for him. The Aboriginal community becomes a defence mechanism that gives protection to its members. In this sense, the family-community is a form both of resistance to the outside world and of shelter to preserve Aboriginality.

If family ties are suspended for some time, the person has a feeling of loss and loneliness that needs to be restored. This occurs in two cases in ‘Me, Antman & Fleabag Hook up’ and ‘Aunty Tibby’.²⁸⁵ In the first story, the main character tells the story of her childhood saying that, because of her illness, she had to leave her family very often to go to hospital. Whenever she returns home she feels like a stranger and cannot recognise her relatives: ‘I hardly knew the family, let alone my culture. All those years I drifted from one world to another, part of me missing.’²⁸⁶ Because she has spent a lot of time amongst non-Aboriginal people and far from her mob, she feels split into two

²⁸² Kennedy, pp. 119-24.

²⁸³ Margaret Clunies Ross, “Australian Aboriginal Oral Tradition”, *Oral Tradition*, 1 (1986), p. 232.

²⁸⁴ Kennedy, p. 122.

²⁸⁵ Kennedy, pp. 92-102 and pp. 106-13.

²⁸⁶ Kennedy, p. 97.

parts, where the Aboriginal side of herself is missing. She can re-gain her Aboriginality only when she returns to her family, and Antman understands this: 'I gotta take you home, girl. Back to your people, your country. It won't be easy but you'll never find peace until you stop runnin'.²⁸⁷ Hence, exactly like the bones of the dead man, Antman's girlfriend has to go back to her family in order to feel complete.

In 'Aunty Tibby',²⁸⁸ Old Tibby is an elderly woman who is in hospital and discovers that Antman and Antman's woman are in town. The woman and the couple discover they are from the same Wongaibon country, so even if not related they belong to the same community. Aunty Tibby, as Antman's woman calls her, wants to meet someone from her mob before dying because she has never been back to her country and misses it: 'I miss the red dirt. Specially the smell when the rain or water fell on it.'²⁸⁹ Antman's girlfriend becomes the link between the land and Old Tibby, for the elder seeing Antman's woman means having a part of her Aboriginality back. Antman's partner understands this because she has been through the same feeling of loss and decides to do two things to bring peace to the woman: she takes their mob to the hospital and pours red dirt on the coffin when the woman dies. Similarly, in 'Bringing the Old Bones Home',²⁹⁰ a flock of cockatoos fly to the sky after the *corroboree*. Here nature donates its last gift for Old Tibby by bringing the rain so 'we all hoped it would seep through the greyish-yellow clay and reach the red dirt so Aunty could smell it on her journey home.'²⁹¹

3.2 Aboriginal Humour

In *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, humour plays an important role in the understanding of the stories. In Aboriginal literature a characteristic that has been frequently traced is the use of humour and irony: they

²⁸⁷ Kennedy, p. 100.

²⁸⁸ Kennedy, pp. 106-13.

²⁸⁹ Kennedy, p. 111.

²⁹⁰ Kennedy, pp. 119-24.

²⁹¹ Kennedy, p. 113.

are often used in Aboriginal novels to lessen the reality of the narrative, to bring into question the fact that the novel is supposed to be mirroring reality, but that to use a white form as the mirror is to invite failure. Irony and humour are used to drop the reader out of the story and into the mind of the novelist.²⁹²

In fact, the use of humour seems to be distinctive of Aboriginal writing: it is used to ‘combat depression and to promote cohesion of the Black Australian group’²⁹³ and it is a way to face a cruel reality. It is therefore a way for Aborigines to speak with a strained smile of the harshness of life and of all the things they have had to endure: humour tempers the stories. Thanks to humour, Aboriginal writers make their literature more tolerable both for a white and black audience; indeed the use of humour can be seen ‘as a figurative lifeline in the midst of sorrow and oppression’²⁹⁴. As I have said earlier,²⁹⁵ most Aboriginal writing is close to Aboriginal issues, due to the fact that Aboriginal literature is self-reflective: ‘there is little doubt that Aboriginal experience dictates, to a significant extent, the form and content of Aboriginal creativity’.²⁹⁶ Very often, the depicted rough realities show the relations and conflicts between non-Aborigines and Aborigines, the result is that the narrative might become difficult to stand for both of them: for the former because they might feel uncomfortable with the reading (not only for the content but also due to the mixed use of lingo/Aboriginal English and standard English) for a sense of guilt; for the latter because they might feel very strong emotions.

Gayle Kennedy’s humour is cunning and at the same time enjoyable, her main goal is to go beyond stereotypes of both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. It is for this reason that both parties are presented with irony. Humour is a means used to challenge stereotypes, in particular because ‘in speaking of any identity, it is important to acknowledge the complexity and variety of social meanings being ascribed as well as the constant transformations possible through time’.²⁹⁷ Thanks to humour, Kennedy manages to show the different facets of Aboriginality, claiming the

²⁹² Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 173.

²⁹³ Shoemaker, p. 232.

²⁹⁴ Shoemaker, p. 277.

²⁹⁵ See Chapter I.

²⁹⁶ Shoemaker, p. 276.

²⁹⁷ Mark Brough et al., “Social Capital Meets Identity – Aboriginality in an Urban Setting”, *Journal of Sociology*, 42 (2006), p. 398.

impossibility to state a unique and unchanged identity. It is evident that the past shapes the present, but this does not mean that the past *is* the present and that everything stays the same. Aboriginal people are always driven to claim and explain their identity because their identity is always questioned when it does not reflect its expected representation. Aboriginal peoples need to justify their identity because this is what is required by the non-Aborigines, the majority, who need to give a definition of what is considered “other”.

In the first short story ‘How ta drink in the Park’,²⁹⁸ Antman’s cousin, Damien, explains to Antman and the woman the right way to drink in the park in order not to be annoyed by the police. The trick is making a big show of nothing: preparing a sort of picnic, washing the dog and going to the right park. The hypocrisy of the non-Aboriginal people is clearly shown in Damien’s words ‘[s]ays whitefellas aint the enemy. Says they love drinkin and partyin outside too. He says they got it worked out so coppers don’t bother em’.²⁹⁹ He explains how non-Aboriginal people fool their social system; therefore Aboriginal peoples should play with the same rules. The humour here is used to indicate that everything is a matter of hypocrisy, things can be accepted if presented in a more formal way: parkies (the term is used to refer to people drinking in the parks, usually applied to Aboriginal people) are not accepted with a carton; however they would be if they pretended to have a picnic. In this short story, humour is used as a means to ridicule the formalities of the non-Aboriginal social system, which is tricked by both Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

Both in the first and in the second short story, Kennedy challenges the stereotype that only Aborigines are drunkards. In the second short story, ‘When Ronnie Met Myrtle’,³⁰⁰ Old Mother Howard is a skinned, drunkard white woman with six children, who sells her children’s pet, the sheep Myrtle, for a packet of tobacco and two cartons. In this story, as much as in others, roles are reversed: the stereotype wants Aborigines to be helped by whites in order to be able to “survive”, however this is not the case. Howard’s six sons are in such bad conditions that they need to be

²⁹⁸ Kennedy, pp. 1-3.

²⁹⁹ Kennedy, p.1-2.

³⁰⁰ Kennedy, pp. 4-12.

helped by the Aborigines of the place: ‘the Howards are whitefullas and are not related to our mob, but all the blackfullas look out for the kids cos they feel sorry for the little buggers’.³⁰¹ This reversal of roles is shown in the third short story as well, ‘The Grub’,³⁰² where a “whitefulla” needs help and gets it from Aborigines. The man’s nickname ironically is the “grub” and he is as dark as an Aborigine, however this is because he does not shower and not because he is one of them: ‘he’s that colour cos he don’t wash. He aint had a tub in years’.³⁰³ The Grub represents the stereotype of an Aboriginal person: dirty, with no origins or family, and in need of help/work. However, the stereotype is demolished because a white man is presented with these characteristics. Similarly, the whitefulla Hollywood is ridiculed in the story ‘The Hundred Dollar Bill’³⁰⁴: he is a selfish, stubborn, grasping man who is tricked by the narrator’s Aboriginal Dad.

Humour is not used only in relation to non-Aborigines, in the case of ‘The Funeral Goer’³⁰⁵ an Aboriginal woman is the object of irony. Cousin Moodle loves going to funerals of people she does not know and makes a big show, like crying and shouting when the coffin is lowered in the grave saying ‘Lord, Gawd Almighty, please take me with him.’³⁰⁶ In saying this, she lets herself go as if fainting and she hopes someone will catch her in time; however, once this does not happen and she falls into the grave. Another example of irony used with Aboriginal people is in ‘Ma and Da’s Big Trip’³⁰⁷ where the mother continuously complains about the quality of food; or in ‘Shoppin with Aunty Pearlie’³⁰⁸ when finally Mrs G. laughs. Humour and irony are used for Aboriginal people as a means to re-enable their role in society: they are just very much as other people, they can be rich, poor, crazy, happy, sad, violent; they do not necessarily have to be dirty, violent

³⁰¹ Kennedy, p. 8.

³⁰² Kennedy, pp. 13-6.

³⁰³ Kennedy, p. 14.

³⁰⁴ Kennedy, pp. 71-6.

³⁰⁵ Kennedy, pp. 20-22.

³⁰⁶ Kennedy, p. 21.

³⁰⁷ Kennedy, pp. 35-7.

³⁰⁸ Kennedy, pp. 38-45.

drunkards. On the contrary, in ‘The Golden Wedding Anniversary’³⁰⁹, those who were violent and tried to abuse Aboriginal women were “whitefullas”.

Hence, humour is used to show that Aboriginality is not a fixed characteristic, on the contrary, it evolves as much as the rest of society. This is the case of Aunty Pearlie and Cousin Kev Moolbong³¹⁰: the former is a well-known, respected, wealthy Aboriginal woman and the latter an Aboriginal gay man. These two characters show that changing is possible and is present in Aboriginal society; a more traditional way of living is still present, as in the case of Old Billy Swindle³¹¹ who prefers staying in contact with nature by living in a caravan and growing his vegetables. Tradition and innovation can coexist in Aboriginal society, hence there is no reason to keep stereotypes living, even more so because most of the time these are untrue and pretentious. This is shown in the short story ‘Whitefulla Dreamin’³¹²: the title of the story indeed is ironic, because the *Dreaming* is something traditional to the Aborigines and not to the non-Aborigines. Moreover, in this short story it is shown that this Aboriginal tradition is treated as folklore merchandise which is only useful for making money. This is a “cultural prostitution” that non-Aboriginal people make and ironically they make it in what is *not* of their culture, but indeed of somebody else’s: they take Aboriginal culture as their own and think they are doing no wrong in selling it.

‘Whitefulla Dreamin’ is an important short story that should be analysed more in depth. In this story, Antman, Fleabag and the narrator decide to go up north to a *Dreaming* festival. However, they do not find what they expected: there are no Aboriginal people and the people in the festival misinterpret the event by mixing Aboriginality with other elements: Marxism, communism, and Rastafarianism. As Antman notices, in the *Dreaming* festival paradoxically there are no Aborigines, instead there are stalls of any kind of objects decorated in some sort of Aboriginal way. Amongst

³⁰⁹ Kennedy, pp. 23-34.

³¹⁰ The two family titles are reported in capital letters as in the short story ‘The Show Comes to Town’ (pp. 49-55) and ‘Shopping with Aunty Pearly’ (pp. 38-45).

³¹¹ Character of the short story ‘The Water Skiers’, pp. 46-8.

³¹² Kennedy, pp. 65-70.

them, there is a stall of didgeridoos painted with Koori designs (Koori is the adjective referred to Aboriginal people of New South Wales). It is no coincidence that the didgeridoo is chosen here because it is an ‘aural and visual marker of Aboriginality, and arguably a tool of remembering and forgetting and thus part of how a particular society configures and conceptualises social memory’.³¹³ The didgeridoo itself becomes the symbol of the debate on the authenticity of Aboriginality that follows in the text. In fact, the man selling didgeridoos explains he is allowed to paint them because he lived with ‘real Yolngu people’³¹⁴ in the Territory. He thinks that because he had lived with these people for some time he is “more Aboriginal” than Antman and his girlfriend:

He told us it would be nice for us to know about our black side. He said he pitied us fullas who weren’t full blood and what a shame it was that he probably knew more about Aboriginal people than we did. [...] He reckoned because he’d been adopted into the tribe he had what we didn’t.³¹⁵

Aboriginality, as a minor identity, as presented by this man, who is part of the ruling majority, is something that can easily be exploited: it is sold, acquired, exactly like the yidakis³¹⁶ he sells. The man is stuck to the primitive stereotype of the Aboriginal person who in order to be “real” has to live in the desert, probably naked and eat what Mother Earth gives: he challenges their “authenticity” with his presumption. In the same festival, a reggae man has a similar view of things: the guy asks them to talk about their culture. Irony and humour are necessary here to show the ignorance of this people, and Antman answers ‘Mate, ya gittin a bit personal, aint ya? Besides, me doctor aint got the results back from the lab yet.’³¹⁷ Identity cannot be something that can be told and it is absurd to have to explain it; similarly being “half-caste” does not mean not being Aboriginal, as the seller thinks.

Another example of the use of humour as a means to challenge stereotypes is in the short story ‘Mothballs’.³¹⁸ The main character of the story is Aunty Sugar, her name indicates the

³¹³ Karl Neuenfeldt, “The Ongoing Debate about Women Playing Didjeridu: how a Musical Icon can Become and Instrument of Remembering and Forgetting”, *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1 (2006), p. 36.

³¹⁴ Kennedy, p. 68.

³¹⁵ Kennedy, p.68.

³¹⁶ Yidakis is a synonym of didgeridoos.

³¹⁷ Kennedy, p. 70.

³¹⁸ Kennedy, pp. 77-81

contrary of what she is because she has a sour temper due to the fact that she enjoys shaming people. During a wedding, she points out the stupidity and ignorance of people with her sharp and sarcastic comments. An old white woman speaks with her after lunch and tells her that, at the beginning, her family was worried because their girl was getting married with an Aboriginal man, but then they were reassured because “[m]y gosh”, she said, ‘if you closed your eyes you would think you were talking to a white man when you’re talking to Dane’³¹⁹(Dane is Aunty Sugar’s nephew). The woman is obviously racist and she is so ignorant that she does not even realize she is making a racist comment towards Aborigines, while speaking with Aborigines themselves, instead of complimenting them as she had intended to. Shortly after, the same woman shows her surprise when she discovers that Aunty Sugar is only sixty-five because, she says ‘I didn’t think you Aboriginal people lived that long. I mean with all the violence and the alcohol and the drugs and whatnot’.³²⁰ The woman seems to be living in another reality, without realizing that Aborigines live in the same society as she does, where violence and drugs are present as well. Aunty Sugar’s answer is a wonderful ironic criticism to the woman’s stupidity, and at the same time to all people who think the same way she does: ‘I only sniff unleaded petrol’.³²¹

Humour and irony are used to treat important issues, such as racism, as showed in the ‘Mothballs’, in ‘The Golden Wedding Anniversary’ and in ‘Grandfather’s Medals’.³²² In the first story, Aunty Bess and Uncle Vic tell the story of their first meeting. It was not a pleasant one because Aunty Bess was about to be raped by Uncle Vic’s friends and Uncle Vic stood up for her and saved her. In the second story, Nanna June explains how her husband had a breakdown after having taken part in the Second World War. The man thought that after having fought for the State he and his family would have enjoyed the same rights as non-Aboriginal people. These two racist events, the attempt rape and the racist laws, influenced the family’s life. In the first case, even if the event was dramatic, it becomes a positive thing because Bess and Vic meet and fall in love; in the

³¹⁹ Kennedy, p. 80.

³²⁰ Kennedy, p. 81.

³²¹ Kennedy, p. 81.

³²² Kennedy, pp. 71-6.; pp. 23-43; pp. 57-64.

second case; however, it remains a negative event because June and her husband were very unhappy and nothing was the same anymore. Whether it ended well or not, the racism in these events is still strong but is filtered with cunning humour in order to make it more bearable.

Thus, it is clear that Kennedy's use of humour is much more than a tool shaped with the sole goal of raising laughter. In addition, the acuteness of the irony and humour is not only used as a filter to present reality: it challenges stereotypes, denounces difficult realities, ridicules ignorance and hypocrisy. This self-reflection of Aboriginal literature is a double-edge sword because on the one hand it allows the writer to deal with Aboriginal issues, in this way giving social value to the text; on the other hand the risk is to get a conventionalised literature. However, unlike other Aboriginal authors who represent the Aboriginal life condition with pity and anger, Kennedy uses humour as a way to deal with these conventions: it is not because Aborigines have suffered colonization that they cannot be ridiculed in the same way as non-Aborigines. Dealing with Aboriginal issues means to see the good and the bad sides of the matters, and the author is quite objective in this. Indeed, her main goal is to attempt 'to balance their [Aboriginal] self-perception and society's perception of them'³²³ and she obtains this balance thanks to humour.

³²³ Shoemaker, p. 277.

IV. Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye*

4.1 Trauma and the Gothic Novel

Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye*³²⁴ has been labelled as gothic fiction,³²⁵ and I will show that though 'such labelling [...] can be a trendy way of ignoring the truths told within the story'³²⁶, the choice of the literary genre is anything but incidental. Aboriginal gothic is used by Cleven as a means to subvert western canons of literature: at first sight, the horrors of the story 'come in the all-too familiar guise of conventional European Gothic tales'³²⁷; but at a closer reading 'their twists and turns transgress the rigid limits of European ancestors and transform them in order to mirror the Gothic reality of colonialism and patriarchy'.³²⁸ Biographies and autobiographies are the most commonly adopted genres by Aboriginal women to talk about their realities and to contest them; however, as I have shown in the previous chapter, this is only partly true – *Me, Antman & Fleabag* is a work of short stories that deals with Aboriginal issues and confronts white society. In the same way, *Her Sister's Eye*, a gothic novel, can be a tool to face important Aboriginal issues such as racism, displacement, and violence. This is possible because the characteristics of the gothic novel are bent toward this goal.

Vivienne Cleven's choice of adopting the gothic genre can be seen as a well-conscious decision for two main interrelated reasons. First of all, because the genre is filled with mystery and uncanny events/stories/features, it awakes the hidden parts of consciousness; and secondly because it unfolds traumatic Aboriginal experiences. For what concerns the first reason, it is important to

³²⁴Vivienne Cleven, *Her Sister's Eye*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002.

³²⁵Sonja Kurtzer, 'Vivienne Cleven, *Her Sister's Eye*', "Reviews", *Australian Feminist Studies*, 18 (2003), pp. 324-6.; Katrin Althaus, *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film*, Germany: Bonn University Press, 2010, pp. 116-32.; Bianca Del Villano, 'Ghostly Alterities: Spectrality and Contemporary Literatures in English', *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies: Book Reviews*, 2007, <http://irishgothicjournal.homestead.com/bookreview11.html#top> (Accessed 30 April 2013); Christine Choo, 'Review: *Her Sister's Eye* by Vivienne Cleven', *Network Review of Books*, 2004, http://www.api-network.com/main/index.php?apply=reviews&webpage=api_reviews&flexedit=&flex_password=&menu_label=&menuID=homely&menubox=&Review=4729 (accessed 29 April 2013).

³²⁶Kurtzer, p. 326.

³²⁷Althaus, p. 122.

³²⁸Althaus, p. 122.

stress that after Freud's essay on the Uncanny,³²⁹ gothic fiction has commonly been associated with the psycho-analytical concept of "repressed".³³⁰ Freud describes the uncanny as something 'related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror',³³¹ but also as something that is both familiar and unfamiliar; this is possible because, according to him, 'the familiar can become uncanny and frightening'³³² when something familiar becomes secretly repressed. Therefore, it is clear that the uncanny is related to a feeling provoked by 'something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression'.³³³

Due to this characteristic of being both familiar and non-familiar, the uncanny can be the metaphor of the "other", the other being the colonial subject: 'the other – with small 'o' – designates the other who resembles the self' and 'who is perceived as separate from the self but appears to have the unity'.³³⁴ In my discourse, the self represents the colonial power, otherwise labelled as Other – with capital 'o'; thus, the other is only a part of the Other that the Other does not want to recognise. As a consequence, the Other alienates the other from itself: the other, representing the part of the Other that the Other does not know, arouses fear in the Other and therefore it becomes the "repressed" part of the self. The Other and the other are just the two sides of the same coin, being one the *double*³³⁵ of the other, but the "other" 'viene proiettato fuori dall'Io come un che di estraneo' because

³²⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Il Perturbante", *Sigmund Freud Opere*, translated by Silvan Daniele, ed. by C. L. Musatti, ed., Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 9, 1989, pp.79-118. The German word used by Freud is 'Unheimlich', and there is not a direct translation into other languages, as Freud says 'we get an impression that many languages are without a word for this particular shade of what is frightening'. Therefore, even the term Uncanny is not an exact equivalent of the German word. (p. 826) Where possible I will use the English translation of the essay (Sigmund Freud, 'From The "Uncanny"', *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Peter Simon et al., eds., New York: W. W. Norton, 2010, pp. 824-41) because the English translation is not complete.

³³⁰ Oed online <http://www.oed.com/> (Accessed 30 April 2013) gives the meaning of "repressed" in the psychoanalytical point of view as 'of a thought or desire: kept suppressed and unconscious in a person's mind (of a person, attitude, etc.) characterized by the repression of thoughts or desires, especially sexual ones'.

³³¹ Freud, p. 825.

³³² Freud, p. 825.

³³³ Freud, p. 833.

³³⁴ Bill Ashcroft & al., *Post-Colonial Studies: the Key Concepts*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 204.

³³⁵ For further information see Otto Rank, *The Double: a Psychoanalytical Study*, translated by Harry Tucker, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971.

il carattere perturbante del sosia può trarre origine soltanto dal fatto che il sosia stesso è una formazione appartenente a tempi psichici remoti e ormai superati, nei quali tale formazione aveva comunque un significato più amichevole.³³⁶

In this sense, the gothic novel is the perfect genre to be used by the Other to express the fears embodied in the uncanny other, and vice versa: the gothic is chosen to disclose the “repressed” part of the self and Cleven adopts the genre to give voice to the other, hence the colonized subject.

In fact, especially in the past, gothic fiction was used to talk about the “other”, to make it emerge and to deal with the many feelings related to it. The genre was ‘from its earliest history in England and Europe, fundamentally linked to colonial settings, characters and realities as frequent embodiment of the forbidding and frightening.’³³⁷ Thus, gothic fiction was used to talk about and explore certain fears and to bring those fears home: the colonial character, far from the mother colony, becomes the object of narration because, by narrating about it, writers bring it back to the mother colony and make it less scary; in this way, gothic fiction becomes a form of control. It is not a coincidence that

some of the least understood cultural elements of colonial societies since the 1820s are appropriated into the Gothic, where they are used to reconfigure the standard tropes of the genre, either by the colonizer to be used in the ideological struggle against the colonial subject him/herself, or by the colonial in order to address the horrors of his/her own condition.³³⁸

Vivienne Cleven is in this context the “other” who uses the gothic genre to recount the horrors of colonialism and its consequences, in particular racism and displacement. The gothic, or rather her parody of the genre, is used to reveal the brutalities of the “Other” and the suffering of the “other”: the collective guilt, memories of violence and dispossession, and the struggle for mastery.³³⁹ In modelling the gothic genre, Cleven does not fall in the trap of believing that ‘there are fixed [western] categories of literature to which [he or] she must conform’³⁴⁰, as other Aboriginal writers think, because she manages to shape the gothic to her purposes. In fact, she discloses the

³³⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Il Perturbante”, p. 97.

³³⁷ Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, ‘Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean’, Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 229-57.

³³⁸ Paravisini-Gebert, pp. 232-3.

³³⁹ Paravisini-Gebert.

³⁴⁰ Shoemaker, p. 170.

unspeakable through the gothic that becomes a liberation instrument, as it denounces what Australia is not ready to acknowledge.³⁴¹

As noticed before, there is a strong interrelation between gothic and psychoanalysis, and this can be useful in my study, especially in relation to two important characters of the novel: Archie Corella and Caroline Drysdale/Hughes. Before analysing their stories in depth I would like to focus on a specific aspect of psychoanalysis which is useful to understand these characters and the novel itself: trauma. Cleven's choice to use the gothic genre is due to the fact that in this way she can express the Aboriginal trauma of colonialism and its consequences. In post-Freudian studies, with psychoanalytic thinkers such as Jean Laplanche,³⁴² the topic of trauma has been analysed and, contrary to Freudian belief, there has been a detachment of trauma from a symptom related to childhood and sexuality.³⁴³ The word *trauma* comes from the Greek *traûma* and it was originally used to indicate a wound in the skin;³⁴⁴ later, in the twentieth century, Freud used the word to indicate metaphorically that when a traumatic event strikes, the mind can be wounded. In order to cause traumatic neurosis, this traumatic event has to be of a certain intensity and occurs unexpectedly. If these two variables are involved, the mind does not react in the way it normally would because the event has had a catastrophic impact on the subject; therefore the subject can show symptoms such as amnesia, dissociative symptoms, stress, melancholy, suicide tendency, madness, i.e., posttraumatic stress disorders.

In *Her Sister's Eye*, Archie Corella and Caroline Drysdale are the characters that suffer from posttraumatic stress disorders; usually, the more severe the trauma is, the worse the symptoms are,

³⁴¹ See Chapter I.

³⁴² A French psychoanalyst (1924-2012), well known not only for his theories, very much influenced by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, but also for his translation into French of Freud's work. His most famous works are *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, and *Freud and the Sexual*, and *Essays on Otherness*. I am referring to his last cited work. (*Essays on Otherness*, translated by John Fletcher, London: Routledge, 1999.).

³⁴³ David Punter, Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Gothic: Violence, Trauma and the Ethical', Fred Botting, ed., *Essays and Studies 2001: The Gothic*, Oxford: The English Association, 2001, pp. 7-23.

³⁴⁴ OED online, <http://www.oed.com/>, (accessed 27 April 2013). OED defines trauma as 'a wound, or external bodily injury in general; also the condition caused by this; traumatism'; and on a psychoanalytical point of view as 'a psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotions shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed; an internal injury, esp. to the brain, which may result in a behavioural disorder of organic origins. Also, the state or the condition so caused'.

and this is precisely what happens here. The two characters differ in two main aspects: the former is Aboriginal, the latter is white; therefore, they are used to disclose different things in the text. However, they are similar in the fact that they both suffered from post-traumatic disorder:

[a]lienated and tormented by the cruelty of those who, by circumstance rather than strength, had held power over their lives, Archie and Caroline have to reach back into memory to find a way to survive it.³⁴⁵

Even if the traumas are different and have different consequences on them, they are both haunted by their past. They need to take the traumatic events and make them memories; however, since the memories are too painful they become unconsciously repressed by their minds. The gothic is the means to express this hidden/repressed part of themselves.

In the conventions of the western gothic canon, Archie might embody both the ‘Gothic wanderer’³⁴⁶ and the ‘damned creature’³⁴⁷ because he is a traveller with no past and no future, who wanders around with no goal and no peace, and seems tormented by something inside him: his uneasiness is reflected in his restlessness, he is looking for something that he does not know and keeps travelling until something will reveal to him that he has found it. Caroline is almost Archie’s alter-ego: she is the ‘Gothic heroine’³⁴⁸ trapped in her own house by the Gothic villain (at the beginning her husband and later her son); the woman is still living in the memories of her past and cannot wholly recover from the violence she has suffered. Both stories follow recognizable Gothic patterns, however they are exemplificative because they ultimately deform ‘those very conventions and through indigenalizing their underlying dichotomies expose how patriarchy determines colonial structures and how Gothic fiction eventually pales besides the very real horrors of Aboriginal history’.³⁴⁹ Indeed, these two characters and their stories are exemplificative of a more general critique on colonialism and patriarchy, which are here interrelated.

³⁴⁵Janine Little, “Incantations of Grief and Memory. Vivienne Cleven, *Her Sister’s Eye*”, *Hecate’s Australian Women’s Book Review*, 14 (2002), p. 23.

³⁴⁶Althaus, p. 123.

³⁴⁷Althaus, p. 123.

³⁴⁸Althaus, p. 122.

³⁴⁹Althaus, pp. 122-3.

Archie Corella is a quiet man who arrives at Mundra, the town where the story is set, apparently only in order to find a job; however, the reason why he is continuously travelling goes well beyond this:

that was one thing he couldn't do – fix his own nameless fears. They were always there, lurking like a rabid dog, snarling in the back of his thoughts, ready to pounce when the going got tough. But some day he would find what he was searching for and when that happened he would be at peace, would stop the wandering.³⁵⁰

Therefore, Archie is a mysterious character both for the people around him and for himself; this is due to the fact that his instability and fears come from the repression of those emotions caused by a traumatic event. The only unconscious memory he has of the event is symbolically reflected on his face: the scar that was provoked during the traumatic accident. His reaction to trauma is the removal of the trauma itself with the consequent amnesia and dissociation symptoms. However, even if he cannot recall the traumatic event, when the scar 'takes on a life of its own'³⁵¹, it always reminds him that he has suffered a traumatic event.

However, even if he tries to, he cannot remember anything about the event, and this is evident when he says: 'the truth was something he could not tell her [Caroline] because he didn't even know it himself. There was no memory'.³⁵² His memories are buried in his unconsciousness and sometimes they come to mind like little glimpses that he cannot fully interpret: this happens when Archie hears/feels/sees/does something that associates the event/sound/smell to the traumatic one. The present event arises in him the disturbing feelings that he had felt during the traumatic event;³⁵³ he starts to realize this when he hears that

up at the end of the road a deafening bang echoes down the street: a car backfiring. At once, something tells him that he's seen this before, *as though it's happening again*, and he knows that can't be right. [...] there's something of this place that kindles his memory.³⁵⁴

This flashback is very important because it signals a first step towards the recovery of memory; in fact, if he manages to restore those memories, the amnesia will disappear. It is evident that there is

³⁵⁰Cleven, p. 12.

³⁵¹Cleven, p. 157.

³⁵²Cleven, p. 15.

³⁵³Caroline Garland, "Pensare il Trauma", Garland, Caroline, ed., *Comprendere il Trauma: un Approccio Psicoanalitico*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori, pp. 9-32.

³⁵⁴Cleven, pp. 87-8. Italics are the author's.

confusion between the past and the present and it is this confusion that makes things difficult for him to understand. He tries metaphorically to nullify the distance between past and present by digging holes in his garden, digging in his memory, trying to remember.³⁵⁵

Related to amnesia, apart from flashbacks, there are other elements that indicate his posttraumatic disorder, such as his faints,³⁵⁶ the voices he hears, and the visions he has.³⁵⁷ However, probably the most evident symptom of his trauma is his dissociation: he believes he is Archie Corella, in truth Archie was his best friend who had died when he was young; instead, he is Raymond Gee whose sister Belle was shot by a white man, Caroline's father-in-law, and died in his arms. This latter event is his traumatic event: he felt so guilty because he could not help her that he removed that scene from his mind. The dissociative experiences are usually linked to sexual abuse,³⁵⁸ nevertheless Archie presents all the symptoms of this dissociation: 'amnesia (keeping experiences that are psychologically overwhelming out of awareness), depersonalization (distortions in the perception of the self), and derealisation (distortions in perceptions of the environment)'.³⁵⁹ These symptoms are the pathological outcome of the trauma; they reveal both that the trauma has not been properly metabolised and at the same time they reveal the trauma itself (also due to external coincidences): 'his mind would try to tell him, try to explain certain things. Dreams tried to make him relive the incident on the riverbank but he couldn't see those things'.³⁶⁰ When he realizes that the trauma itself is provoked and created by his mind, he gets his identity back.

³⁵⁵Choo, online edition.

³⁵⁶Cleven, p. 41. and p. 161.

³⁵⁷Cleven, pp. 87-8; p. 102.; pp. 169-70; pp. 212-4. It is interesting to notice that Freud in the essay on the Uncanny shows that in conditions such as epilepsy the person is unrestrained by rationality and shows the repressed part of him/herself.

³⁵⁸Eve B. Carlson et Al., "Relationships Between Traumatic Experiences and Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress, Dissociation, and Amnesia", J. Douglas Bremner & Charles R. Marmar, eds., *Trauma, Memory & Dissociation*, Washington: American Psychiatric Press, 1998, pp. 205-228.

³⁵⁹Carlson, p. 207.

³⁶⁰Cleven, p. 215.

Archie/Raymond's story becomes the symbol of what Aboriginal people have had to endure in time: racism, dispossession, loss, violence, and abuse. This trauma is disclosed thanks to the gothic elements that surround the character:

this image of the wanderer returning to his origins, a place of suffering rather than of a diabolic pact, considerably distinguishes Archie/Raymond from the classic Gothic wanderer and instead transforms this stock character of the Gothic cast into an incarnation of Aboriginal trauma.³⁶¹

As anticipated earlier, the gothic becomes the liberation source: Vivienne Cleven uses western literary canons in order to subvert the genre in a denunciation of colonialism; thus, she fights with the same weapons as the colonizer. Gothic fiction is used to depict the colonial subject into 'the obscene cannibalistic personification of evil',³⁶² and in *Her Sister's Eye* she both challenges this depiction and at the same time contests this hegemonic discourse.³⁶³ In fact, Cleven shows the consequences of colonial brutalities on Archie: his life will never be the same for as long as he forgets the traumatic event, and anyway, even if he might be able to recover, he will never be the same again.

In relation to Aboriginal trauma, there is another aspect to take into consideration, Nana Vida's story-telling. Nana Vida is one of the elders of Mundra and, after a certain initial resistance, she decides to tell the story of the town and its people: '[p]eople need to know their story, otherwise there's this terrible feeling of being lost'.³⁶⁴ Similarly to what Archie/Raymond thinks about the importance of the past in defining one's identity ('[h]istory is the backbone of all life [...] and if ya don't have a history, ya don't have life.'),³⁶⁵ Nana Vida believes that storytelling is the means to render Aboriginal people justice. Thus, the trauma of the Aborigines of Mundra 'needs to be transformed into memory and passed on by telling the stories of suffering the *Aboriginal* way in

³⁶¹Althaus, p. 126.

³⁶²Hogle, p. 231.

³⁶³Kurtzer, p. 326.

³⁶⁴Cleven, p. 140.

³⁶⁵Cleven, p. 87.

order to be overcome'.³⁶⁶ The mysteries regarding Mundra's story are disclosed because racism and violence have to be denounced in order to be remembered and not to be repeated again:

[w]hat I told you, pass on girl [Doris]. Keep this alive, tell em all. Funny thing, is history. If you remember what others went through to get ya here then all is not lost. Some died for you, others fought for you. Always remember where you're from. There's hope. Always hope.³⁶⁷

Memories, or rather non-memories, are what used to haunt Archie/Raymond: to find one's past, no matter how much suffering this can bring, means to find peace and to start living again, or at least one must try. Remembering the past is essential for Aborigines in order to shape a better future where people can hope for a better and more just life. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that 'indigenous peoples, look for solutions in the past rather than in the future, then seek to recapture it symbolically in words'.³⁶⁸ This is what Cleven and her characters are doing: they try to face the past in order to solve the problems of the present, and the disclosure of the past is possible thanks to storytelling.

Nan Vida's account and Archie/Raymond's story question colonialism, whereas Caroline's character challenges patriarchy.³⁶⁹ At first sight, Caroline is presented as the typical Gothic victim; however, she is a strong woman that with her madness ridicules both masculinity and authority. She is marginalised by society because she belongs to one of the few families in Mundra that in the past accepted Aboriginal people; she was abused and beaten by her husband and entrapped by both him and her son. Nonetheless, at the end, she is the victorious one – she kills her husband and probably her son as well (even if the latter murder remains unsolved because there are suspicious that she might not be the killer right till the very end). Therefore,

[w]hile Caroline Drysdale is seen as the classic monstrous double of virtuous Polly Goodman, chair of the Red Rose Committee, from a male perspective, Vivienne Cleven defies such easy ascriptions and distorts them in order to comment not only on the patriarchal tradition of the Gothic but also on the double colonization of Aboriginal women.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁶Althaus, p. 126. Italics are the author's.

³⁶⁷Cleven, p. 229.

³⁶⁸Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 169.

³⁶⁹Althaus, p. 130.

³⁷⁰Althaus, p. 129.

Caroline is able to transform her traumas into action: she does show the symptoms due to trauma with her “apparent” madness and childish behaviour; however, being also “protected” by her madness, she legitimizes herself. She claims the rights of a woman who wants to be respected by her husband, son, and the rest of the town. People prefer to believe she is crazy rather than considering the town authority, her husband Reginald, a murderer and an impostor. Thus, she unconsciously uses her madness to challenge authority, and the gothic victim becomes the gothic avenger.

4.2 Mundra and the Whitefellow

Her Sister's Eye is set in a small town called Mundra, a place that is a living character in the story; it does have a role and I would say a main role, as Archie notices, ‘the place he had come to was a place with its own shying.’³⁷¹ Most probably, the story could not have been the same if Mundra did not have such an important role. Thus, the town is personalized in the sense that its “conditions” and “behaviour” have consequences on the other characters. The hostile weather, as a prolongation of the town, sets the town and its inhabitants in difficult conditions; for instance, when Corella arrives in Mundra the dry weather is almost suffocating:

Red dust edged the blistering bitumen streets. Air steamed and spiralled from concrete footpaths, as though you could put your hands into the haze and feel the weight of the heat. [...] Lined up like a regiment of dusty soldiers, old men sat on wooden benches in front of the shops, their weatherworn faces battered down and a dull shape of vile pink, as though they were ready to lay down and die from heat exhaustion.³⁷²

The heat of the town is so unbearable that neither animals nor men can stand it. The dryness of the land resemble the aridity of the relationships of the inhabitants of the town that Archie will encounter later, who are as hopeless as the land is; in fact, the land is so dry that plants cannot grow on it.³⁷³ The inhabitants rarely talk to one another, and if they do it, they only gossip about

³⁷¹Cleven, p. 22.

³⁷²Cleven, pp. 2-3.

³⁷³Cleven, p. 38, 107, 129, 143, 231.

somebody: ‘[t]hat’s the trouble with this town, too many people talking out of turn.[...] Mundra being such a small town, and small towns being what they are, people love to talk’.³⁷⁴

A recurrent element throughout the story related to dryness are roses; Caroline is obsessed with the fact that her garden has no roses:

everything that was once alive and green died long time ago. Nothing will grow in the yard now. The dirt have some sort of sickness. It’s though when Reginald Drysdale died he took something away. *Took part of life with him into death.*³⁷⁵

In this case, the aridity of the land is linked to the death of a person, to his murder. Therefore, it seems that there has to be a reconciliation of the people to the land in order for it to be fertile again: ‘[p]lants won’t grow if there’s no life in the ground.’[...] ‘I believe you’re right there, Murilla. But only people can give it life.’³⁷⁶ It is no coincidence that at the end of the story, when all mysteries have been disclosed, there is hope both for people to live peacefully and for roses to grow. In addition, in relation to Caroline’s garden, it seems that the emblem of its dryness is Drysdale himself, not only for his authoritarian character, but also for the linguistic root of his surname – “dry”. The land, with its aridity, seems to speak to people telling them that things have to be sorted out once and for all. The voice of the land is embodied in the river speaking to Sofie Salte³⁷⁷, it seems that the communication between people is so difficult that it needs to be mediated by nature.

The land needs to be reconciled to its people, the Aboriginal people who have been dispossessed from it, as Nana Vida explains:

[t]here would have been about six or seven of us fellahs in the town at the time. Not in town, but living on the edges, you see. The way things were back then was that blacks weren’t welcome in town, white fellahs didn’t want that...³⁷⁸

This racism towards Aborigines causes a sense of displacement, a gap in Aborigines’ lives that needs to be filled with the re-appropriation of their land (‘when people start feeling lost, they start searching for something to fill the emptiness.’³⁷⁹). Aborigines were living in the area of Mundra

³⁷⁴Cleven, p. 11.

³⁷⁵Cleven, p. 38. Italics are the author’s.

³⁷⁶Cleven, p. 231.

³⁷⁷I will deal with this aspect in the next section of the chapter.

³⁷⁸Cleven, p. 74.

³⁷⁹Cleven, p. 73.

before whitefellahs' arrival and were sent to the edges of the town. Displacement and loss are strictly connected to racism, to whitefellahs' behaviour towards Aborigines. For instance, one of the white men, Cleaver, bought the land near the river without considering the importance of that place for them; however, as if the land was rebelling against this unfair act, after some months, he was killed by a snake. The men of the town threatened those Aborigines who tried to go to town, amongst them Lillian Gee was probably the most affected one, who had her daughter killed by one of them. Nevertheless, they were punished as well, because one of them was killed. Both the land and Aborigines oppose this unjust appropriation; however, the gap has been created and at this stage, when marginality is the normality, Aborigines are left only with their spiritual attachment to the land. This does not mean that we, as readers, have to look at their relationship with the land from a romantic point of view; however, it is undeniable that being deprived of one's land causes a sense of loss because Aborigines 'consider themselves as belonging to the land'.³⁸⁰

In this perspective, Doris' need to understand her origins and the story of the town is legitimate because she has lost her *belonging place*, as she explains to Nana Vida:

I know this is gonna sound silly, but I feel lost here. Like I don't belong.' She's always felt as if she doesn't belong, even though Mundra has been home to her since she was a child. There's an emptiness she can't explain and somewhere in the recesses of her mind she's always known it's to do with the town's history.³⁸¹

Therefore, her home town does not coincide with her *belonging place*, she is looking for answers, exactly in the same way as Archie Corella. The difference between the two is that, even though both have lost their *belonging place*, Archie looks for answers in his wanderlust, instead Doris wants to be told the truth – storytelling becomes her salvation. The displacement suffered by the Aborigines of Mundra is an *exemplum* of what Aborigines in Australia have had to go through, starting from racism, violence, poverty, and misery. The micro-cosmos of the little town shows the need of reconciliation that is exactly what Australia needs.

³⁸⁰Damien Short, "Reconciliation, Assimilation, and the Indigenous Peoples of Australia", *International Political Science Review*, 24 (2003), pp. 492.

³⁸¹Cleven, p. 72.

On the surface, the relationships, or rather the non-relationships, are normal, however people are ruled by their instincts: anger, hypocrisy, envy, and fear mediate everything. At the beginning, the white men have the power of the town, they threaten Aborigines since they have first come to town, forbid them to go to the doctor, and apply the Aboriginal Protection Board to regulate their marriages. Later, when one of them, Edward Drysdale, kills Lillian Gee's daughter and soon is killed, the threats end, but just for a short while because the power is taken along by the Red Rose Committee (it is ironic that no roses can grow in town but the name of the committee is Red Rose). These women, whose leader is Polly Goodman (who has an affair with Caroline's husband), expect to be ethically just and to be always right, and show off philanthropic benevolence, though they are the most racist people in town:

[i]t's our organisation that works for this town, that knows who's who and what's what. There's only three – wait...make *four* undesirables in Mundra: Caroline Drysdale, the Salte woman and that halfwit gardener with his minefield yard. The sooner we get rid of them, the better! [...] See people like that aren't like us. No, and it shouldn't come as any surprise to you. They're outsiders. That's what happens when black...³⁸²

The patriarchal authority of the whitefellahs has been transferred to their women, together with their stupidity. Polly is angry at Caroline for being the one who was chosen to get married to mayor Drysdale, thus gaining a very respectable position. Her envy drives her to support Caroline's husband in saying that Caroline is mad and to prohibit Caroline from taking part in the Committee; she contributes to Caroline's destruction. Polly and most of the women in the Committee hate the Salte sisters and Archie Corella only because they are Aborigines. Nevertheless, in the end racism destroys the lives of both its victims and its tormentors.

Going back to the harshness of the weather of the town, it is important to note that it portrays the violence of what occurs in the place. The place and the weather are hostile to people as much as people are hostile to one another. Indeed, during the story many evil events occur: a boy disappears; girls' dresses are found in Donald Drysdale's shed, a discovery which implies that he has raped them; Caroline's birds, that were like children to her, are poisoned; Caroline is beaten by

³⁸²Cleven, pp. 200-1. The last two sentences refer to the Salte sisters and Archie Corella. Italics are the author's.

her husband; Reginald dies/is killed; Donald is killed; Murilla is beaten; Paddy Middy, an Aboriginal boy, dies; and Raymond's sister is killed.³⁸³ Both Aborigines and non-Aborigines are struck by violence, the former because of the "legitimate" superior authority of whitefellahs who could occupy and rule on Aborigines' land because it was declared *Terra Nullius*; whitefellahs instead are destroyed by their own means that become dangerous for them. In fact, we could argue that *Her Sister's Eye* deals with the 'impact of racial violence in the lives of those who are oppressed by racism'.³⁸⁴ In fact, very few Aborigines are left in town; Corella immediately understands that this is the main problem of the town is that 'there weren't any blackfellahs on the streets [...]. One thing he did know was that a town without any black fellahs was dangerous.'³⁸⁵ In the same way the weather has no balance, in the sense that the heat of the summer or the cold of the winter are not bearable as they normally would be ('this weather will be the death of this town'³⁸⁶), there is no equality within the people of the town. In this sense, the Red Rose Committee, the representative of the colonial power, contributes to create division in town; the ruling of the place becomes the means of oppression: 'the question of the representation of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority.'³⁸⁷

The relationship between whitefellahs and Aborigines is almost schizophrenic and Clevon tries to depict the dynamics of this problematic issue.³⁸⁸ Caroline Drysdale and the people around her are a good example: Archie and Caroline can be considered 'as the two poles of Australia's violent history of race, sex, and class oppression.'³⁸⁹ As shown in the previous section, they try to recover from different traumas because they are the victims of patriarchal white society. Similarly, Murilla and Sofie are marginalized in their fringe condition of Aboriginal women with no family. Sofie Salte stands out from the stereotypical characters, this is not only for her mental instability,

³⁸³Clevon, pp. 43, 102, 94, 108, 88, 190, 136, 141, 155.

³⁸⁴Kurtzer, p. 324.

³⁸⁵Clevon, pp. 3-4.

³⁸⁶Clevon, p. 3

³⁸⁷Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 89.

³⁸⁸Kurtzer, p. 324.

³⁸⁹Little, p. 23.

but mostly because she appears to be one of the few characters who does not do anything with a personal interest. She becomes the scapegoat of the town, but at the same time she might be considered the heroine who tries to restore order and justice (she wants to be revenged on Polly Goodman because she makes Caroline suffer; she takes away a boy, Kenny Austin, probably to save him from Donald; she kills Donald because he raped her). The siblings seem to be the only Aborigines who still have maintained a traditional relation with nature, and Sofie's talks with the Stewart River, even if they are exasperated to madness, stress the closeness of Aborigines with their land.

4.2.1 The River

The Stewart River dominates the landscape and it is the place of many tragedies: 'the river evokes a landscape which seems to subsume or perhaps even heighten the catastrophic nature of the events which take place.'³⁹⁰ In fact, every character in the story is afraid of the river, everyone except for Sofie who has a peculiar ability and can swim with her fish friends against the tide.³⁹¹ Apparently, this skill comes from her father who was 'the best swimmer in the district' and had 'some sorta special power'.³⁹² However, unlike Sofie, her sister Murilla hates the river and does not want to listen to its voice

[s]he hears a strange noise and thinks old man river is calling her name. Each time she stops, cocks her head to the direction and listens. It sounds like tinny voices echoing out of the darkness. [...] The noise explodes. Panicked, she stumbles to the other side of the road [and] [...] her breathing returns to normal.³⁹³

Murilla's rationality prevents her from hearing the river calling her, she has lost her spontaneous connection with nature and needs to run away in order to feel safe. As if it was Salte's totem, the river protects the two sisters, but Murilla has lost the traditional attachment to the land, which now seems possible only in a person who is mentally ill, her sister Sofie.

³⁹⁰Kurtzer, p. 324.

³⁹¹Cleven, p. 54.

³⁹²Cleven, p. 79.

³⁹³Cleven, pp. 30-1. The quote is about what Murilla Salte hears.

The 'river seems to be home to a number of spirits which haunt the town and make their presence known to the unassuming nature-child Sofie.'³⁹⁴ Sofie becomes so attached to the river that she identifies herself with it and becomes unable to understand that the voices she hears do not come from the river, but rather form her mind:

*Sofie ask many things to the river. What to do Only one thing to do What that is Cut his water off How to Bring him this way When Next time he be getting that sad girl.*³⁹⁵

This is an example of a conversation between the two, where the voice of the river is written in italics. The river tells Sofie what to do, to kill Donald on this occasion, and later to pee on Polly's bed flower and set her house on fire.³⁹⁶ In fact, her conversations with the river 'engage the historical power imbalance between the white small-town establishment and the black 'fringe dwellers' in a dimension where altogether different alternatives are possible.'³⁹⁷ The river itself becomes the locus of power: Aborigines were pushed over there to live, but at the same time whitefellahs cannot stay away from it and want to control it (Clever buys the land next to it, and Drysdale and his men go there quite often to threaten Aborigines).

Nevertheless, the river, as a character in the story, does not want to be controlled and it punishes anyone who tries to do it

[t]he river when in flood used to back up and the water would channel out through the dump road. We were flooded many times. And it were only a matter of time before sickness set in. Edna Thursday were the first one to go: pneumonia got her.³⁹⁸

In this occasion, the river "kills" an Aboriginal person and others die; and, similarly, in the river non-Aborigines drowned or are killed as well, it is a dangerous place for both parties. The river is a benevolent mother only to the Salte family: a juxtaposition between the whitefellah's patriarchal power and the mother river can be seen in this. Indeed, even if Murilla should be Sofie's eye (in fact the title of the novel alludes to this), the river looks on her, in fact, as she says to Archie 'I'm a fish,

³⁹⁴Kurtzer, p. 324.

³⁹⁵Cleven, p. 57. Italics are author's.

³⁹⁶Cleven, pp. 124-5.

³⁹⁷Little, p. 22.

³⁹⁸Cleven, p. 144.

Arch. Fish swim in water.’³⁹⁹ Being the daughter of the river, Sofie Salte is the character of the novel who is able to restore the Aborigines’ original attachment to their land.

³⁹⁹Cleven, p. 54.

V. Larissa Behrendt's *Home*

5.1 History and Storytelling

Orality seems to play a major role in Aboriginal literature, especially in those genres relating to life stories, such as biographies and autobiographies. In fact, though they are not always openly disclosed, elements of orality are present in many Aboriginal works:

Indigenous literature has been and often still is an oral discourse with different devices, such as absence of closure, narrative dominance, epic style, collective authorship and recitation, generic fluidity, repetition, non-verbal and semi-verbal markers and other devices.⁴⁰⁰

Orality was certainly important, or rather fundamental, during the period that precedes the English invasion. This trait of Aboriginal culture characterized their way of living because it shaped Aboriginal society: with orality laws were dictated, traditions were carried on, language developed, education was given. The *Dreamtime* might almost be completely lost, but this specific characteristic of Aboriginal culture is still present in contemporary literature.⁴⁰¹ For instance, orality is recalled in Aboriginal verses in particular in its sounds: Aboriginal poetry can be considered more 'oral poetry, which has a greater impact when read aloud as a result of its increasing emphasis upon phonetic sounds and the spoken dialect'⁴⁰².

According to several critics,⁴⁰³ orality is highly interrelated to life stories, to such an extent that it is legitimate to wonder whether 'there was such a form in Aboriginal oral tradition or it is a completely introduced form'⁴⁰⁴. Life stories seem to be a very common genre in Aboriginal literature; however, as previously shown, the genre is regarded by some critics as gendered.⁴⁰⁵ Larissa Behrendt's *Home*⁴⁰⁶ is a semi-autobiographical novel where orality is essential for the

⁴⁰⁰ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, p.57.

⁴⁰¹ For further information, see Chapter I.

⁴⁰² Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page*, pp. 212-3.

⁴⁰³ Brewster, *Literary Formations – Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*; Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page*; Mudrooroo, *Milli Milli Wangka*.

⁴⁰⁴ Muecke, Davis, & Shoemaker, "Aboriginal Literature", p. 39.

⁴⁰⁵ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*; Brewster, *Literary Formations – Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*.

⁴⁰⁶ Larissa Behrendt, *Home*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004.

development of the story. The text, as a performance, underlines the importance of Aboriginal culture through storytelling. Storytelling is a dialogical act which, if the receiver is willing to listen and learn, helps in the teaching of morality, tradition, feelings, obligations, responsibilities. In a Jakobsonian reading, in *Home* there are three main *senders* who are all women related to one another; for this reason we could arguably talk about *generational narrative*: Candice, Elizabeth/Garibooli,⁴⁰⁷ and Patricia. Candice is Garibooli's niece and if we are willing to find correspondences, she is Larissa Behrendt, and Patricia is Garibooli's daughter (Candice/Larissa's aunt). Garibooli is the woman who has the closer attachment to the Aboriginal tradition of storytelling; in parallel with her, Larissa Behrendt seems to use her novel as if it were a long Aboriginal traditional story.

Home can be considered a political and historical novel; in addition, as anticipated, the stress in biography is very strong once a person has read Larissa Behrendt's account of her life.⁴⁰⁸ She uses her semi-autobiographical text as a sort of autoethnography⁴⁰⁹, i.e., as a way to destroy the misrepresentation of Aborigines. She becomes so precise in her narration that sometimes the flow of discourse is at times interrupted because of her explanations.⁴¹⁰ The text, in fact, seems to have been written for a reader who is completely, or almost completely, ignorant of Aborigines, Aboriginality, and Australian history. She clearly explains the purpose of her novel:

[a]t the time I thought that if stories like my grandmother's and father's could be told about how those policies impact people's lives, it would make people understand who we were, what our history was. Even if it didn't mean granting the rights that we as Aboriginal people feel entitled to, they might at least understand why we feel such rights are important, why it is we talk about land, why it is we talk about culture, and why it is we talk about self-determination and the ability to be involved in decisions that will affect our lives. I believed that the more people knew about the stories, the more people would at least understand why Aboriginal people have the experiences and the political aspirations that we have.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁷ Garibooli is Elizabeth's Aboriginal name, whereas Elizabeth is the name that white men gave her at the Reserve. For this reason I choose to use Garibooli in the rest of the chapter.

⁴⁰⁸ Larissa Behrendt, "Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 108 (2009), pp. 71-85.

⁴⁰⁹ Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine: Challenging Colonialist Discourse through Autoethnography", *World Literature Written in English*, 38 (2000), pp. 110-31.

⁴¹⁰ Behrendt, *Home*, some examples in the texts are p. 14, p. 23, p. 43, p. 108, p.127, p.131, p. 172, p. 219, p. 222, p.232, p.279, pp. 297-300, p.304.

⁴¹¹ Behrendt, "Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed", p. 72.

It is for this reason that her form of writing is nearly pedagogical and sometimes pedantic. Like storytelling in the text, her writing is bent towards the goal of making people know and understand things. However, at times, the feeling of the reader is that she is writing to show off her general knowledge rather than trying to create justice for the Aboriginal cause. In fact, she does not only speak about the Aboriginal Protection Board, Land rights, Anzac, the Stolen Generations, and other Aboriginal issues; she talks about English literature, German philosophers, French writers, communist thinkers, and Italian art in a way that suggests that her intention is to demonstrate that Aborigines can be just as literate as non-Aborigines.

In several parts of the novel, she challenges the concept of history as a Western invention, written by the winners and for the winners; as Brigida Nailon says, '[h]istory depends on the eyes of the beholder'.⁴¹² The character that comes to this conclusion is Candice's father, Bob, who 'returned to the telling of Australian history, concluding that might did not always equal right, but it did equal victory and the privilege of writing the winner's version of history.'⁴¹³ This is nothing new in the eyes of a reader who knows something about Aboriginal issues and Australian history; because 'the major traditions of interpretation of history in and about Australia were devised originally to help define Englishness and to validate and serve the British Empire.'⁴¹⁴ In addition, Aborigines had a different concept of time: time was not linear, maybe it could have been cyclical or circular, and some critics believe not even that, but rather it was composed by *rhythmed events* and *abiding events*.⁴¹⁵ Larissa Behrendt gives a long and interesting yet redundant explanation of what history is and what the word means;⁴¹⁶ she criticizes it through Candice and Bob's words, and she uses history, the western canon, with the goal of subverting the Australian vision of history. *Home* uses two forms of writing: the flow of the narration telling the story and the *Dreamtime*

⁴¹² Brigida Nailon, "The Power of Place", *The Australasia Catholic Record*, 83 (2006), p. 320.

⁴¹³ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 233.

⁴¹⁴ Nailon, p. 321. I will deal with this aspect in the next section of this chapter.

⁴¹⁵ Toni Swain, *A Place for Strangers: towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.17.

⁴¹⁶ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 316.

stories that are interrelated with the story. Behrendt wants to challenge Western time and history with the timelessness of Aboriginal tradition, the *Dreamtime*.

The first time the reader encounters a *Dreamtime* story is at the camp, where an elderly man, Kooradgie, tells the story of the biggibilla/echidna man;⁴¹⁷ later on, when Garibooli is removed from the camp and taken to the Howards' where she works as a cleaner, she looks at the night sky and tells stories either to herself, to Grigor (her future husband), or to Thomas (her first son). Storytelling becomes her way of remembering home:

Elizabeth took comfort from the story of rescue. Looking at the familiar patterns and recalling these stories made her feel as though she was lying only a few feet from her home, as if she could look across and see the fire and the shadows of her family through the trees at the end of the Howard's yard.⁴¹⁸

Storytelling becomes her means to express her grief: she cannot talk to anyone about her family (apart from her friend Xiao-Ying⁴¹⁹), therefore she takes the memories of her life at the camp and makes them live through storytelling. *Dreamtime* stories accompany her throughout the story, they help her in her development both as a woman and as an Aborigine; in this sense we could say that her sense of womanhood and Aboriginality are framed through storytelling. She manages to regenerate her past through storytelling and, in this way, she makes her past present.

Storytelling becomes a mechanism for survival that Aborigines use: talking about ancestral stories means talking about Aboriginality; hence, in spite of the whites' attempt to take over their culture (in fact, the novel is unfolded in almost one century and the characters live during the Protection Board and the Assimilation Era), by telling *Dreamtime* stories they can maintain their culture alive. For this reason it is important for them to pass on the stories to the elected people; as Marilyn stresses, 'I tell my kids they should get an education. Help us keep our stories. Not give them to anyone else. Especially not people who don't put anything into our community'.⁴²⁰ This educational function, which is the same as that I have traced in Behrendt's writing, is usually

⁴¹⁷ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 31.

⁴¹⁸ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 59.

⁴¹⁹ The choice of nationality of Garibooli's only friend, Chinese, is very interesting. After the gold rushes, Chinese people were treated almost like Aborigines and still nowadays they are those who are more affected by racism and strict policies (together with Aborigines).

⁴²⁰ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 286. Marilyn is Bob's aunt.

displayed by women in Aboriginal society. Before colonization, the woman was the nucleus of the family, her role was to take care of her children; instead, the husband used to bring home the food (even if women were gatherers and sometimes fishers, men had the main task of hunting)⁴²¹. In addition, even if '[t]he religion and Dreaming of men was often assumed to be the source of all spiritual life in the community'⁴²², women were the real custodians of tradition.⁴²³

This interrelation of the roles of women who were responsible both for culture and family is exemplified in two *Dreamtime* stories, the "Mutay/possum story" and the "Naradarn story".⁴²⁴ In telling the stories, Garibooli is well-aware of the division between men's business and women's business (as if she were still living at the camp, before her removal when '[t]he male ceremonies were forbidden to her, as hers to the men. She had been warned by the older women of the harshness of the penalties for breaching the rules'⁴²⁵): '[s]he told him stories, ones she could remember and was not forbidden to tell a man'.⁴²⁶ Her roles of mother and spouse were already established when she was young and had to take care of her little brother Euroke ('Booli should have been married after her own ceremony. There was a Kamillaroi man picked out for her' and 'Garibooli doted on Euroke. She would follow behind him when he went to fish or set traps, letting

⁴²¹ Catherine H. Berndt, "Digging Sticks and Spears, or, the Two-sex Model", *Woman's Role in Aboriginal Society*, Fay Gale ed., Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970, pp. 39-47.; Betty Hiatt, "Woman the Gatherer", *Woman's Role in Aboriginal Society*, Fay Gale ed., Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970, pp. 2-8. I am aware that this vision of a complementary setting of Aboriginal traditional society is still a debated matter and therefore it is not supported by other anthropologists, such as Isobel White, H.J. Nieboer, and other often male anthropologists who, because of their gender, could not take part in women's business and considered women inferior and subordinate to men in the organization of society. For further information see L. R. Hiatt, "The Woman Question", *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 36-56. However, in my text the gender division is shown by Garibooli who pointed out that women were allied in the rising of children and men went out for food: 'she had overheard her aunt say that the daughter was just like the mother and ever since then when she was told to come down from the trees she would sing back, "No, Mother, I want to be just like you." She spoke proudly about her father whose ability to provide food through the toughest of droughts meant that he was greatly respected and that the family was held in the highest esteem.' p. 98.

⁴²² Jane M. Jacobs, "'Women Talking up Big': Aboriginal Women as Cultural custodians, a South Australian Example", *Women Rites and Sites: Aboriginal Women Cultural Knowledge*, Peggy Brock, ed., Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1989, p. 76.

⁴²³ Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 1938.

⁴²⁴ Behrendt, *Home*, pp. 100-1; pp. 120-22.

⁴²⁵ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 34.

⁴²⁶ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 99.

him lead the way before her watchful eyes.⁴²⁷); therefore, when she becomes a wife and a mother she maintains Aboriginal principles through storytelling.

In the first story, that I will conventionally call “Mutay story”, told to her future-husband Grigor, Garibooli narrates how the parents of three possum children leave their children at home with no water in order to go out hunting and for this reason they are punished. In Garibooli’s explanation of the story she says:

[y]ou see, we are taught to watch children. And I need to remember that when I wonder why my family has not come for me yet. They are almost likely just trying to find a way to reach me.⁴²⁸

Garibooli is aware that the role of educators has been taken away from her parents who can no longer keep a watchful eye on her. However, she also knows that the bond with her ancestral country and her family is stronger than the government policies, for this reason she wants to keep tradition living. While the events in *Home* are set in a specific period of time, this *Dreamtime* story, exactly like the rest, is set in a never-ending period and acquires a sort of superior truth. The pain and anger of the abandoned possum children in the story are the same as all the Aboriginal children removed from their families.

The second story, the “Naradarn story”, is about Naradarn who kills his two wives and, because he does not want to tell the women’s family where he left them, the mother of the women manages to find them and

[t]hat night, a corroborree was held. The women sat in a half-circle and chanted, hitting two boomerangs together to keep time; others beat possum rugs. Fires were lit, and one burned especially high. Heading the procession of male dancers was Naradarn. The men danced around. The beating grew stronger. The chanting grew louder. The fires were piled higher. The dancers nudged Naradarn towards the brightest burning fire. The mother of the dead girls shrieked loud. Naradarn turned to look at her but was confronted with a wall of men. They seized him and threw him into the fire where he perished in the flames.⁴²⁹

Garibooli tells this story to her son Thomas but she mistakenly calls him like her brother Euroke, explaining that the meaning of the story is that ‘your mother will always know where you are and if

⁴²⁷ Behrendt, *Home*, pp. 34-5.

⁴²⁸ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 101.

⁴²⁹ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 122. Italics are the author’s.

something is wrong'.⁴³⁰ In this passage the division of roles in the *corroborree*⁴³¹ is interesting, where women just dance and sing, whereas the men are those who take revenge on him on behalf of the mother. Garibooli, now being a mother, uses this story not to express her grief, as in the previous one, but as a means to claim her authority as carer and educator. It is interesting that both stories are about loss and revenge, family is the driving force for survival and morality is central in storytelling. In fact, as Behrendt states '[t]hese cultural stories actually explain our worldview, value systems, and rights and responsibilities, and they explain our connection to land';⁴³² for this reason storytelling is essential because it allows the writer to 'reappropriate his[/her] past from colonialist historical narrative'.⁴³³

5.2 The Place where the Rivers Meet

As Larissa Behrendt says, *Home* is first of all a novel 'about "homecoming" and "home"'.⁴³⁴ The title of the semi-autobiography exemplifies the major theme of the novel very well. Many characters, also non-Aboriginal ones, try in several ways to find their home and *belonging place*. I chose this title for this section of the chapter because Garibooli is the most illustrative character whose relationship with home, the place where the rivers meet, is fundamental for her life. The concept of home and *belonging place* is very much linked to the idea of timelessness and history that I have anticipated in the previous section; and in the author's words this bond seems to be very strong:

[t]he "traditional," the colonial, and the present are a fluid history connecting place and kin in our culture. Home is a special, specific place. Home is everywhere. Home is the long "lost" past. Home is like a perpetual present.⁴³⁵

Garibooli is the character who embodies the problem of *belonging place*: she is removed from the camp she was living in with her mob and taken into a family to work there because it is believed to

⁴³⁰ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 122.

⁴³¹ For the meaning of *corroborree* see chapter III.

⁴³² Behrendt, "Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed", p. 74.

⁴³³ Emmanuel S. Nelson, "Literature against History: An Approach to Australian Aboriginal Writing", *World Literature Today*, 64, 1990, p. 30.

⁴³⁴ Behrendt, "Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed", p. 74.

⁴³⁵ Behrendt, "Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed", p. 78.

be necessary to her interests. Even if she does not try to go back home, she always thinks of her family, in particular her brother Euroke, and her ancestral place. She does not manage to go back where the rivers meet and dies with this regret which will be what brings other characters, her children and niece, to go out and look for home.

However, before starting my analysis of her relationship with place, I would like to recall the notion of time and history that I have mentioned above because it is relevant to the concept of place. Toni Swain's study of place is very interesting in this sense: he believes it is incorrect to talk about time as a cultural construct, in Aboriginal culture; instead, he believes that Aboriginal life was based on *rhythmed events* ('[t]hese are concrete events, patterns of the condition of the world. They are acutely observed, rhythmic and predictable') and *abiding events* (eternal events, linked to the *Dreaming*, and 'residing in a place'). He reaches the conclusion that these two kinds of events are not linked through time, but rather 'co-joined literally through place';⁴³⁶ therefore, the *Dreaming* is located in space rather than time. The *Dreaming*, the Aboriginal Abiding Law, is not based on an ancestral creator, but rather on another concept, i.e. 'all that is land-derived – people, knowledge, culture objects – is related along lines of place.'⁴³⁷ The life of an Aboriginal person, in this context, becomes an extension of the land itself and 'place-identity [...] was the initial Aboriginal word-organising principle'⁴³⁸; and as a consequence, death is 'a return of place-being to place' and 'a statement of the spiritual continuation of the Ancestral place'.⁴³⁹ Between the land and the person there is a spiritual relationship that cannot be broken with displacement; however, the relationship is threatened with the separation of the two parties.

Therefore, the role of time has less relevance compared to the importance of place; for this reason it does not matter whether Garibooli is away from home from one day or all her life, instead the dispossession from her place becomes a problem for her Aboriginality. Her legacy with her home is mainly mediated by two things: the sky and her brother Euroke. However, the spiritual

⁴³⁶ Swain, p. 19; p. 22. p. 23.

⁴³⁷ Swain, p. 34.

⁴³⁸ Swain, p. 40.

⁴³⁹ Swain, p. 45; p. 46.

connection to the land is related to the nature of the place as well; while she is still home she says ‘[f]rom the tree I can see across the land. I look at the world from my tree. A sky goddess. I always come back to this place.’⁴⁴⁰ It is not a coincidence that when she is removed from the place she expresses her grief almost through the land ‘[t]he sound of her pain filled the country. It filled the soil. It filled the trees. It filled the grasses and the empty river bed.’⁴⁴¹ As Swain says, she becomes ‘an extension of the country’⁴⁴², or rather the country becomes an extension of herself; and, as Swain notices, in the moment of her death her body and soul need to go back to her ancestral country.⁴⁴³ Nevertheless, because she cannot stay in the ancestral country, once she is moved to live in another place, the sky becomes her link to her *belonging place*:

Elizabeth would sit on the back porch in the dark of the late evening and look at the stars. Other night she would walk out into the endless back garden and lie on the cool grass, her body pressed against the earth, the blanket of sky above her. The stars were scattered in the same patterns as they were where she came from so, she reasoned to herself, she could not be that far away from her family and the camp.⁴⁴⁴

It is no coincidence that, on this occasion, after staring at the sky she remembers the “story of the seven sisters” because remembering home means going back to the ancestral tales that belong to and represent her Aboriginality. Every time she misses home she looks at the sky, as if her ancestral place could come back to her.

The other important aspect in her relationship with home is her family, and in particular her brother Euroke:

[a]nd lying in the grass, looking up at the Mea-Mei, Elizabeth could almost imagine she was twelve again, Euroke by her side, the smell of the campfire, of roasting bundar. It was the closest she had felt to being home again.⁴⁴⁵

In Garibooli’s life, family frames her Aboriginality, for this reason when she marries Grigor she tries to fill the gap of her lost family and *belonging place* by trying to have a large family herself. However, this is an illusion because even if she has six children with Grigor she still feels unsatisfied and empty. Thus, she tries to feel her connection to her ancestral place through nature

⁴⁴⁰ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 35. Italics are the author’s.

⁴⁴¹ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 43.

⁴⁴² Swain, p. 35.

⁴⁴³ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 94.

⁴⁴⁴ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 57.

⁴⁴⁵ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 102. “Bundar” means kangaroo and “Mea-Mei” is the Southern Cross.

‘[w]atching the wind blow tall grass seemed to transport her to another place [...] the grass hitting her legs brought back the memory and feel of the tall grass of Dungalear Station’.⁴⁴⁶ Patricia, her first daughter who is very similar to her in temper, adopts her same strategy to fill her sense of inadequacy and incompleteness due to her distance from home: firstly she tries to bring the family back together, and once she realizes that this is not possible, she starts a family to give meaning to her life, as she remembers ‘Mother told me once that nothing matters more than family’⁴⁴⁷. Similarly, Patricia’s younger sister Daisy, also driven by envy, at the end of the story, changes her mind and wants a family; hence, Daisy seduces Patricia’s husband, Pasquale, provoking Patricia’s death. Patricia dies because she no longer has a reason to live and, as with her mother’s death, her family is also torn apart. Their need for a family is due to a lack in the story of their origins (they do not know they are Aborigines, but they feel it), and to the fact that they have never really had a family (Garibooli dies shortly after Daisy’s birth and Grigor, who is no longer able to take care of his children, gives them to the institution).⁴⁴⁸

In spite of their attempts to be happy and have a family, the three women do not succeed in silencing their need of a home and in finding their *belonging place*. The men of the family, Garibooli’s sons, give different answers to their search for identity and belonging: building a family is not the solution for these Aboriginal men. They approach the problem in two different ways: Bob and Neil⁴⁴⁹ set off on a journey; instead, Thomas and Denny prefer the denial of their Aboriginality. In this section of the chapter I will only deal with the first two characters because I will analyse the other two in the next section. The first character, Bob, is likely to be Larissa Behrendt’s father, in fact their story is almost the same, as Behrendt says:

[m]y father struggled with his Aboriginality until he was able to place himself in the Aboriginal world. He struggled because, like many Aboriginal people, he was taught while

⁴⁴⁶ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 123.

⁴⁴⁷ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 166.

⁴⁴⁸ The younger children, Bob, Daisy, and Denny, are removed from their home and their father Grigor does not do anything to stop their removal, indeed he says he cannot keep them with him.

⁴⁴⁹ Garibooli is abused at the Howards’ house several times by Mr Howard who fathered her first son Euroke/Neill. The child is taken away from her at his birth and she will never see him.

he was growing up that being Aboriginal meant being inferior and that he had to work hard to be accepted.⁴⁵⁰

Bob struggles through the story to fit into society, but his feeling of being an outsider endures until he decides to look for his ancestral place. His first reaction to the sense of non-belonging is the same as that of the women; in fact, he tries to form a family: the first time 'Bob looked into Carole Dyball's face he knew that there was something about her that made him feel that if she were with him, he would find a home.' The special feature that makes him feel this way about Carole is that she resembles Garibooli ('Bob Bretch's good fortune was to marry a woman very much like his mother'⁴⁵¹); however, when he loses Patricia everything changes.

He has a breakdown and a heart operation. Something changes inside him and he decides to go back to the institution where he was taken with his siblings after his mother's death; he thinks a lot about his brother Danny and decides to find him and call him: Danny still feels anger towards him and the only thing Danny asks him for is money. Bob decides he cannot take it anymore, so he packs his stuff and sets off for a journey of self-discovery, leaving his wife and children with no income and father/husband. Later, he calls Daisy in search for answers, he wants to know something more about his mother's past and his origins. For this reason he looks for his father without finding him and asks for the birth and death certificate of his mother. The problem is that no one has ever told him that he is Aborigine, but in the deepest part of himself he could sense it, it is in his unconscious self that he can express it, through his dreams:

*[t]he old man stood on the other side of the fire, beckoning to him with his hand. Through the heat haze, he could see the man's dark features and the white paint in thick lines on his body. His hand was held out to Bob. Bob did not feel afraid. He wanted to cross the fire. The man spoke to him. "No matter which way you turn, there is something that you are not facing."*⁴⁵²

Bob's nightmare brings to the surface his greatest fear, that of being Aboriginal: the man in the dream is dark but painted in white as if he were masking his blackness; exactly like Bob has been trying to do all his life, trying to refuse to acknowledge his Aboriginality by imitating non-

⁴⁵⁰ Behrendt, "Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed", p. 72.

⁴⁵¹ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 230; p. 231.

⁴⁵² Behrendt, *Home*, p. 270. Italics are the author's.

Aborigines and trying to be accepted by them (this sort of camouflage resembles what Bhabha calls *mimicry*⁴⁵³). However, the fact that in his nightmare he does not feel afraid is a symptom of a process of acceptance; and the “ghost’s” words sound like a warning: you cannot escape from your identity, so face it.

This restlessness needs to be put at ease so he looks for answers in the library where he finds confirmation of his Aboriginal origins when he finds a historian: the man tells him about the stolen generations and Bob realizes that maybe his mother is one of them. Bob manages to find Garibooli’s certificate of removal and in this way he discovers the existence of his mother’s brother, Euroke/Sonny: ‘[t]he certificate also listed one brother, Sonny Boney. Lines on paper, like a map, all pointing home’.⁴⁵⁴ This is a sign towards reconciliation with his identity and his *belonging place*. When he gets home, at Euroke’s place, he finds out that his uncle passed away only three months before. However, Bob does not give up and speaks with his son, with his wife and with Granny asking them things about his mother. Only at this point, he realizes he has found home: ‘[t]he news of Sonny’s death had been a disappointment, but he was elated to have found a connection, to find part of what he was looking for’.⁴⁵⁵ Once he has discovered his Aboriginality, he has found his place in the world and he is ready to go home, to Caroline’s. Bob is the only character in the story who looks for his Aboriginality and accepts it, understanding that there is no need to hide anymore; on the contrary, he should to be proud of it and make his children understand the same. Having found their home, his children will not need to go out and look for one (unlike what had happened to him and his brother).

A similar behaviour but with a different outcome is that of Neil O’Reilly. Neil, who Garibooli instead had called Euroke like her brother, is taken away from Garibooli’s arms at his birth and is adopted by an Irish family and brought up believing he is a dark Celt. I believe that the choice of this nationality is not at all casual, in fact, Behrendt presents Irish stories, told by Neill’s

⁴⁵³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

⁴⁵⁴ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 279.

⁴⁵⁵ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 281.

step-father, as if they were talking about Aborigines: “[t]he English [...] believed that everything Irish was inferior. So they tried to destroy it. They tried to destroy this culture [...] because, they said, it lacked richness.”⁴⁵⁶ These stories are about injustice, dispossession, displacement, and contribute, exactly in the same way as Aboriginal storytelling does, to shape Neill’s ‘sense of place and a sense of a self’.⁴⁵⁷ When Neill’s step-parents tell him that he was adopted and he was not Irish but rather Italian he ‘was unable to draw himself back together, to feel unbroken. From this divided place, he drifted. A sense of restlessness infected him.’ Exactly like the brother he does not know, Bob, he sets off ‘to find a connection to his new identity, feeling he would know if he saw it.’⁴⁵⁸ However, once he has travelled to Italy he senses that there is something wrong, that Italy is not his *belonging place*. Instead, the epiphany occurs one day at the park when

[a]s he strode through the tree-filled park, his eyes locked with one of the men [the Aborigines in their drunken clusters] [...]. As Neil walked past him, the black man, drunk on the grass, seemed to know him, to know his mystery, as though Neil could have been one of them.⁴⁵⁹

This revelation is so shocking that he feels ashamed and, unlike Bob, decides to negate the possibility of his Aboriginal identity and goes back to claim his “first” identity (which, if possible, is the closest to Aboriginality), and his Irish heritage is restored.

I have so far analysed what happened when the bond between place and the Aboriginal person is loosened: women look for their home in their family, whereas men tend to be more “active” and look for their home elsewhere, by travelling. Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice that there is a non-Aboriginal character in the story who looks for his home almost in the same way as Aborigines do; in fact,

[w]hile the impact of being dispossessed from traditional land and being removed from family makes for distinctive stories about home and homecoming for Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people in Australia also struggle to find the story of home.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁶ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 143.

⁴⁵⁷ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 140.

⁴⁵⁸ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 146.

⁴⁵⁹ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 149.

⁴⁶⁰ Behrendt, “Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed”, p. 76.

The character is the German Grigor Bretch: inspired by communist and socialist ideas, he leaves his comfortable hometown of Cologne to go to Australia. He is feeling like an outsider at home and he feels marginalized in Australia as well; at the beginning he feels that one day he will need to go back home; however, later he looks for his home in Garibooli. Exactly like the Aboriginal women in the story, Grigor sees the family as a protective shelter but, exactly like them, he does not feel satisfied in the end and ruins everything. Family might be a good palliative for the restlessness that the characters feel; however, it does not solve the problem: if you want to find home you have to go out and look for it. Garibooli did not go back where the rivers meet, but Candice did and she understands it 'for all the things that change in a different context, there is always a part of me that remains untouchable. I needed to come here to realise it'.⁴⁶¹ For her, and for her father Bob, finding her place, her home, means finding herself.

5.3 The Denial of Aboriginal Identity: A Comparison with Sally Morgan's *My Place*

I decided to choose Sally Morgan's *My Place*⁴⁶² and compare it with Behrendt's *Home* for several reasons. First, the text is a landmark in the history of Aboriginal literature and it has been one of the most successful Aboriginal works, both in Australia and on an international level.⁴⁶³ Sally Morgan can be considered the pioneer of Aboriginal life stories of women writers; and over time, after her, many other women writers have used this literary genre as a form of denunciation of the brutalities and consequences of the Stolen Generations, exactly as she does. Amongst these authors, Larissa Behrendt, I believe, really seems to have in mind Sally Morgan when writing *Home*: the two texts do share many important characteristics, and this is the main reason I chose it.

⁴⁶¹ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 312.

⁴⁶² Sally Morgan, *My Place*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987.

⁴⁶³ It has sold over 25.000 copies; instead, on average, a well-sold Aboriginal book, like Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, does not sell more than 2.000 or 3.000 copies.

Starting from the genre, exactly like *Home*, *My Place* is written as an autobiographical narrative, also identified as testimony⁴⁶⁴ or autoethnography,⁴⁶⁵ which is related to generational storytelling; the only difference is that in *My Place* the characters tell their stories themselves (even if recorded by the main character). Furthermore, the main themes are similar, if not the same and, as a consequence, the story as well. The issue of Aboriginality and the quest for home are very relevant concerns for both authors. In addition, both writers do not seem to write for their communities, their goal is wider: even though *My Place* (1987) was written almost twenty years before *Home* (2004), the texts claim the same necessity, i.e. ‘to let people know what has been done to Aboriginal people in the past, to tell a black version of history and in this way to somehow right those injustices’.⁴⁶⁶ The fact that they convey the same message is rather sad as this means that, in spite of the changes and improvements of the Australian society in these twenty years, Aborigines are still considered at the edge of society and need to find a way to claim their identity, as if it were something to be proved.

In *My Place*, as in *Home*, *belonging place* is what the main characters, the main narrators and authors of the texts, are looking for. As noticed in the previous section, in *Home* the characters struggle with their Aboriginality and have different responses to it, and two of them, Danny and Thomas, answer with denial; in *My Place* denial and silence tend to be the main attitudes as well (apart from Arthur), with Gladys and Nan. Sally Morgan, like Larissa Behrendt, tries to disclose the secrets of her heritage and look for home and for self; the difference between the two is that in the case of Larissa the work of discovering has already been done by her father Bob and her role is confined to that of storyteller; instead, Morgan acts as a detective and actively tries to break the boundaries of denial and silence. Nevertheless, the two characters look for their identity in the connection with the past by challenging the notion of history and claiming Aboriginality against a

⁴⁶⁴ Debbie Rodan, “Testimony, Narrative, and a Lived Life”, *Balayi: Culture, Law and Colonialism Journal*, 1 (2000), pp. 55-75.

⁴⁶⁵ Collingwood-Whittick; and Lizzy Finn, “Postnational Hybridity in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*”, *Moveable Type*, 4 (2008), pp.11-28.

⁴⁶⁶ Jody Broun, “Unmaking White Myths: Your Laws, My Place”, *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan’s My Place*, Delys, Bird & Dennis, Haskell, eds., Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992, p. 25.

representation of authenticity. The reticence of several characters is due to a feeling of shame that hit many Aborigines because for them ‘telling their life stories means publicly showing that they have been positioned outside both Aboriginal and white law’.⁴⁶⁷ For instance, neither *My Place* nor *Home* can be read without taking into consideration the historical and political background: the Assimilation policy and Protection Acts are white discriminatory practices that have changed and devastated Aboriginal lives. In fact, ‘[I]t is impossible to disconnect the story from the political past of Aboriginal people’;⁴⁶⁸ the political connotation of Aboriginal literature is what I have underlined in the first chapter of this dissertation and it is important to stress it once again because these autobiographies, if read as testimonies, ‘are a witnessing of both personal and communal experience’.⁴⁶⁹

Both works present the ‘structure of the narrative of quest’⁴⁷⁰ and what they manage to obtain is a representation of the problematic issue of Aboriginality because of its hybridity. They obtain this thanks to the plurality of voices in the texts: by portraying ‘Aboriginality as a hybridised form made up of multiple individual experiences, Morgan resists the homogenising pressure of the new multiculturally aware Australia through the representation of multiple versions of indigeneity’.⁴⁷¹ It is important to stress that in both stories the family has a central role, and in particular women are very strong models who hold the family together. For this reason I will focus on the characters of Gladys, Sally, and Nan in *My Place*; instead, for *Home* I will deal with two male characters because the women, as previously shown, have different reactions. Both Sally Morgan and Larissa Behrendt present family stories that can be universalized: in this way, ‘personal story provides powerful opportunities for rewriting history, and reconstructing cultural identities’.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁷ Kathryn Trees, “Counter Memories: History and Identity in Aboriginal Literature”, *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan’s My Place*, Delys, Bird & Dennis, Haskell, eds., Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992, p. 59.

⁴⁶⁸ Broun, p. 26.

⁴⁶⁹ Rodan, p. 68.

⁴⁷⁰ Subhash Jaireth, “The ‘I’ in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*: Writing of a Monologised Self”, *Westerly*, 3 (1995), p. 75.

⁴⁷¹ Finn, p. 15.

⁴⁷² Edward Hills, ““What Country Friends is this?”: Sally Morgan’s *My Place* Revisited”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 32 (1997), p. 99.

Many Aboriginal families have undergone the consequences of Australian laws and suffered loss, displacement, abuse, division; Sally and Larissa's families become in this way an *exemplum*.

Nan is Sally's grandmother and the one who carries both family and tradition; however, she is also the one who struggles more in opening up and telling her story:

Nan would tell us nothing. She maintained that if we wanted to find out about the past, we had to do it without her help. 'I'm taking my secrets to the grave', she told Mum and I dramatically, one day.⁴⁷³

Nan decides not to speak about the past and, similarly to Nana Vida in *Her Sister's Eye*, she keeps telling her niece to let sleeping dogs lie because the past is too painful. Her reticence mirrors Nan's negation of her identity: she seems to be ashamed of her Aboriginality, for this reason she hides every time they have guests at home and persuades her daughter Gladys to tell Sally that they are not Aborigines, but rather Indians.⁴⁷⁴ Apparently, she fears that history will repeat itself, hence the things that have happened to her (removal and abuse) could occur to the rest of her family.

The dialogue between Sally and her sister Jill exemplifies very well the puzzle presented in discovering to be Aboriginal:

'You know we're not Indian, don't you?' Jill mumbled. 'Mum said we're Indian.' [...] 'You know what we are, don't you?' 'No, what?' 'Boongs, we're Boongs!' [...] 'What's a Boong?' 'A Boong. You know, Aboriginal. God, of all things, Aboriginal!' [...] 'You know Jill [...] if we are Boongs, and I don't know if we are or not, but if we are, there's nothing we can do about it, so we might as well just accept it'. 'Accept it? Can you tell me one good thing about being Abo?' 'Well, I don't know much about them [...] they like animals, don't they? We like animals'.⁴⁷⁵

It is interesting to notice the two different attitudes towards being Aboriginal: Jill, like her grandmother Nan, is ashamed and does not want to recognize it; instead, Sally seems open to acceptance. However, this is only apparently true because in the reported last sentence it is clear that she does not even know what being Aboriginal means; she detaches herself from Aborigines in saying 'they' and only later corrects herself with 'we'. Her sister Jill seems more aware of what being Aboriginal means in a white world because, as several characters notice, if you are Aboriginal

⁴⁷³ Morgan, p. 162.

⁴⁷⁴ Morgan, pp. 38-9. p. 305.

⁴⁷⁵ Morgan, pp. 97-8. "Abo" is the pejorative term for Aboriginal person, it is an insult as bad as "boong".

“nobody owns you or wants you”. In this process of ‘owing up’,⁴⁷⁶ Sally understands that the first thing she needs to own is her past, for this reason she pesters her mother and grandmother about their background.

Nan, in a deeper understanding, is ashamed of the things that have happened to her; however, she does not realize that it is Australia that should be ashamed, as Sally tells her mother,⁴⁷⁷ because it is the tormentor that should be ashamed of his/her actions, not the victim. Furthermore, and more importantly, in the end she realises that what she is really ashamed of is her attempt at trying to be white (skin colour is obviously a metaphor of her identity – trying to be white, means to negate being Aboriginal):

I’m ashamed of myself, now. I feel ‘shamed for some of the things I done. I wanted to be white, you see. I’d lie in bed at night and think if God could make me white, it’d be the best thing. Then I could get on in the world, make somethin’ of myself. Fancy, me thinkin’ that. What was wrong with my own people?⁴⁷⁸

Nan’s step towards reconciliation with her identity is admitting that she has been wrong and telling her story, even if not the whole of it. Her silences are important for her because they ‘enable her to keep her dignity intact and sustain her against white intrusion’.⁴⁷⁹ However, when she tells her story, she ‘emerges as Aboriginal grandmother, custodian of an Aboriginal inheritance’.⁴⁸⁰ It takes most of her life to accept her Aboriginality and be ready to talk about it, but ultimately she does it, supported also by her daughter Gladys and brother Arthur who have told their stories before her.

Arthur is proud of being Aboriginal⁴⁸¹ and is willing to tell his story and is happy that someone records it before going back to his land to die in peace;⁴⁸² Gladys avoids telling her daughter anything about her past for most of the story, but when she understands her daughter Sally’s need for a place she realizes she does not have her *belonging place* either, hence she goes

⁴⁷⁶ Jaireth, p. 76.

⁴⁷⁷ Morgan, p. 151.

⁴⁷⁸ Morgan, p. 336.

⁴⁷⁹ Gail Hennesy, “Genocide with Good Intentions, the Stolen Generation and *My Place*”, *Social Alternatives*, 20 (2001), p. 48.

⁴⁸⁰ Hennesy, p. 48.

⁴⁸¹ Morgan, p. 147.

⁴⁸² Morgan, p. 166. Also in this occasion, as with other characters of *Home* or *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, Swain’s theory is supported because the Aboriginal characters, at least the elders, want to go back and reconcile with the land before dying.

with Sally to Corunna Station⁴⁸³ and decides to tell her story. The problem with Sally's identity is that her mother confirms that she is Aboriginal when she is almost in her twenties and this puzzles her because she does not understand her identity. The fact that some critics, such as Hirozako Sonoda,⁴⁸⁴ believe that 'it is open to question whether she truly succeeds in constructing a comprehensive Aboriginal identity because she lacks sufficient personal knowledge of indigenous culture'⁴⁸⁵, is only seeing one side of the story. It is true that Sally realizes that she does not know what it means to be Aboriginal because, as she says:

I've never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I'd never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?⁴⁸⁶

Nevertheless, what Sonoda fails to look at is that exactly this kind of representation of Aboriginality succeeds in challenging what the white reader expects to read: being Aboriginal does not mean to remain stuck in the past and be "authentic". Authenticity becomes the non-Aboriginal protocol of measure of identity; because Sally has never done these things, according to Sonoda, then she is not a "real" Aborigine. Sally Morgan shows that there cannot be a single definition of Aboriginality, because even if Sally 'attempts to define *herself*, [but] the inclusion of so many voices in her narrative prevents any one reading of indigeneity'.⁴⁸⁷

In *Home*, Danny and Thomas refuse to accept their Aboriginality; however, in contrast to Gladys and Nan who in the end do not negate their heritage, they pursue this behaviour until the end of their lives. Similarly to Nan and Bob (Bob only at the beginning though), these two characters try to fit into white society as if they were white themselves. Although Danny tries hard to do it, he succeeds only in being the outsider *par excellence*, as Bob notices:

Danny was more like Frankenstein's monster that he was, Bob thought, especially since Danny was even darker than he or Daisy and so more obvious, more tainted. For this

⁴⁸³ Corunna Station is where Nan and Arthur are from.

⁴⁸⁴ Hirozaku Sonoda, "A Preliminary Study of Sally Morgan's *My Place*", *The Otemon Journal of Australian Studies*, 35 (2009), pp. 157-70

⁴⁸⁵ Sonoda, pp. 167-8.

⁴⁸⁶ Morgan, p. 141.

⁴⁸⁷ Finn, p. 20. Italics are the author's.

reason, Bob believed Danny should have been trying the hardest to gain acceptance and fit in.⁴⁸⁸

Nevertheless, the harder he tries the more difficult the challenge becomes and he fails to fit in. The consequence is his denial of identity which is reflected in his anger towards his brother Bob and in his refusal of his family by detaching from it once and for all. Danny, to a certain extent, is more aware of his Aboriginality than Bob and once he realizes that 'it didn't matter what he did, people would always look down on him because of the colour of his skin',⁴⁸⁹ he denies everything belonging to his past and escapes from it.

Thomas is probably the character whose reaction is the most extreme: he lives most of his life pretending to be Greek and never revealing his Aboriginal background. His life is based on lies, starting from his homosexuality that he finds so hard to accept, because he needs to hide that part of himself he is ashamed of:

Dennis's disgust made him feel ashamed of his mother's darkness. Despite the strong love he had for her, he was ashamed by the heritage she had given him. He felt caged by the implication of his family's birthright.⁴⁹⁰

Unlike Sally, Arthur, Bob, and Larissa, he sets on a journey but in order not to discover his identity, but rather to forget it. From his point of view, Aboriginality belongs to the primitive and has to be condemned for this. He understands only at the end of his life that this is what society tried to inculcate in his mind, make him believe that being Aboriginal meant to be inferior. He finds liberation only with his death when he orders that Leonardo Da Vinci's words be engraved on his grave '[t]here shall be wings. If the accomplishment be not for me, 'tis for some other'.⁴⁹¹ He closes his life realizing that the accomplishment of being Aboriginal, though necessary, was out of his reach.

Therefore, it is clear that this "denial effect" that strikes so many characters in *Home* and *My Place* cannot be ignored because 'these narratives can be viewed as a communal 'telling' of the

⁴⁸⁸ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 179. It is interesting to notice that Larissa Behrendt uses the same kind of comparison with Frankenstein in *Home* for one of her characters, Bob.

⁴⁸⁹ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 291.

⁴⁹⁰ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 215. Dennis is William's friend who was teasing them for their Aboriginality.

⁴⁹¹ Behrendt, *Home*, p. 220.

collective experience of a [sic] peoples judged as 'inferior' by the dominant social order.'⁴⁹² Nevertheless, the fact that so many other characters manage to tell their stories and be proud of their Aboriginality indicates that there is something to be proud of and nothing to be ashamed of, because the guilt is not theirs, but it shifts towards a society, the Australian society, that makes them feel this way and this is what history tries to present, whereas, as a counterpart, *Home* and *My Place* try to challenge this.

⁴⁹² Rodan, p. 75.

VI. Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

6.1 A Liminal Place: Reality and *Dreaming*

After *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria*⁴⁹³ (2006) is Alexis Wright's second novel and her masterpiece. The Gulf of Carpentaria is where her grandmother and mother came from and, therefore, it is her place, where she belongs. She is part of the Waanyi nation that occupied that land for centuries, however, as she points out in an interview,⁴⁹⁴ the land has been almost destroyed because of the mine exploitation. In *Carpentaria*, she wants to give dignity back to the land and its people, and to do this she 'mobilizes the mythological in order to argue the interconnectedness of the Aboriginal sacred and political and ecological matters'.⁴⁹⁵ In this way, through traditional narratives, Wright underlines the importance of the land for herself and her people. *Carpentaria* is a very challenging reading, especially for a white reader, and this is mainly due to its innovation, the choice of the genre, the so called "magic realism"⁴⁹⁶, for which it is considered a 'landmark text in Australian literary history'.⁴⁹⁷ It is demanding because the story is presented from the Waanyi point of view⁴⁹⁸ which positions 'them as central to this cosmology and renders indigeneity the default position for humankind'.⁴⁹⁹ In this way, *Carpentaria* portrays 'the reality of the Indigenous world differently than in the context of how novels might normally be written and published in Australia'.⁵⁰⁰

This work is written as a 'traditional long story'⁵⁰¹ where 'the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side'.⁵⁰² The peculiarity and uniqueness of this work is that it exists and unfolds in a liminal place, where reality and dreaming and the *Dreaming* are interchangeable and

⁴⁹³ Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, London: Constable & Robinson, 2008.

⁴⁹⁴ Jean-François Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright", *Antipodes*, 18 (2004), pp. 119-22.

⁴⁹⁵ Francis Devlin-Glass, "Review Essay: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", *Antipodes*, 21 (2007), p. 82.

⁴⁹⁶ I will deal with aspect later in this section.

⁴⁹⁷ Adam Shoemaker, "Hard Dreams and Indigenous Worlds in Australia's North", *Hecate*, 34 (2008), p. 55.

⁴⁹⁸ Alexis Wright belongs to the Waanyi people, the natives of the Gulf of Carpentaria, north Australia.

⁴⁹⁹ Anne Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", *Australian Literary Studies*, 25 (2010), p. 97.

⁵⁰⁰ Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *Hecate* 13, n.s. (2006), p. 3.

⁵⁰¹ Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", p. 2

⁵⁰² Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", p. 3; p. 7.

the boundaries amongst them are uncertain and unclear. The white reader is led to believe in imaginary things: his/her models of rationality are put at risk because he/she is induced to abandon his/her scientific knowledge in favour of an open-minded reading. Tradition, folklore, politics, myth, religion, superstition are mixed in such a harmonious way that the narration becomes a long floating song, exactly like the Gulf music that tells its story to the stranger of the land. Alexis Wright presents *Carpentaria* as a place where, if you are ready to change your mindset and believe in her writing, everything is possible and even the most incredible things can happen. This is the great power of this work that has created many controversies amongst critics, to the extent that some of them suggest that the white reader will never wholly understand the text.⁵⁰³

Until this moment, Aboriginal writers, apart from Xavier Herbert with *Poor Fellow My Country* (1974) and most recently Vivienne Cleven with *Her Sister's Eye* (2002), have tended to adopt realism as the most chosen literary genre. However, the innovation of *Carpentaria* is that Wright 'employs Dreamtime Narrative as a levelling, performative agent of the Aboriginal Secret/Sacred in writing, and [...] opens up new horizons in fiction for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians'.⁵⁰⁴ The difference from the previous writers is the different means she employs to represent reality. With modernity, the writers' problem is to give a definition to reality, trying to find out whose reality it is and how to present it. In addition, for Aboriginal writers, and for many minorities alike, its representation is further complicated by the fact that they live in two realities: Aboriginal reality and Australian non-Aboriginal reality that coexist and theoretically should respect one another. The problem with this situation is that Aborigines live in the Australian reality, which in truth is not their own, and at the same time they want to maintain and support their own reality, which is the reality of a minority and their own real one. The clash between these two realities is what makes it difficult for some Aboriginal writers to present a unique vision of reality.

⁵⁰³ Alison Ravenscroft, "Dreaming of Others. *Carpentaria* and its Critics", *Cultural Studies Review*, 16 (2010), pp. 194-224.

⁵⁰⁴ Martin Renes, "Dreamtime Narrative and Postcolonialism: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* as an Antidote to the Discourse of Intervention", *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, 2 (2011), p. 117.

The Aboriginal reality, also called by Mudrooroo ‘maban reality’,⁵⁰⁵ has been oppressed and almost completely destroyed. It is important to underline that in the land of the fair-go this cruel aspect of Australian history is shown in the literature of most Aboriginal writers, who try to find their own way to talk about their reality.

During the nineteenth century, scientific thought was widely spread and was considered the “real” and “true” way to look at reality; only one reality was acceptable and the Aboriginal was not the one: ‘scientific reality had dispossessed the Indigenous people not only of their lands but also of their reality’.⁵⁰⁶ European anthropologists adopted this mentality to create stereotypes on Aborigines which were used to impose their rational reality: in a Darwinist ideology, Aborigines were seen as children, pagans, superstitious, and “good savages” (this is a stereotypical view that has been assigned to all, or most, Indigenous peoples). Obviously, these misrepresentations turn out to be completely wrong not only because they are based on false bases, but also because they do not take into account the variety of Aboriginal reality; in fact, there is not a single Aboriginal group. The Aboriginal nation is made of several and different communities (in the past of greater number), with their different languages, tradition and culture – to enumerate just some of them: Koori, Yamadji, Yolngu, Murri, Nunga, Wonghi, and Anangu.⁵⁰⁷ For this reason, it is very important for Aboriginal peoples to write about their own reality: there is a strong need to demolish stereotypes about them and give a more faithful portrait of the situation. However, this has been possible only relatively recently when Aboriginal peoples have found the strength and the means to denounce their situation. In fact, until the 1960s, anthropologists, such as A.W. Howitt, Walter B. Spencer, Francis James Gillen, Geza Roheim supported with their writings these stereotypes and contributed to these misrepresentations.

⁵⁰⁵ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, p. 91. Maban, in the Nyoongar lingo, is the Clever man, the tribal shaman.

⁵⁰⁶ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, p. 92. With ‘Indigenous’, Mudrooroo means Aboriginal and Torres Islanders, according to his opinion ‘Aboriginal’ should be substituted with ‘Indigenous’ because it is a term imposed by whites and is not fully comprehensive.

⁵⁰⁷ Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*, pp. 44-5.

In relation to this, Alexis Wright tries to depict the complexity of Aboriginal reality and she obtains this by mixing modernity and tradition, reality and the surreal, with the result that these elements become interrelated and almost interchangeable. Due to this way of writing, some critics⁵⁰⁸ have used the Western label of magic realism to categorize her work *Carpentaria*. The term was first adopted in the mid 1920s by the German Franz Roh to describe a post-modern art form, and only later for literature: this label was used to describe a subjective reality, ‘the very subjective strangeness of one’s own psychic reality’.⁵⁰⁹ There is a double aspect of reality that cannot be underestimated, “general” reality and “singular” reality, where the latter is a specific and fantastic/imaginary/magic reality seen and represented by the artist. In post-colonial discourse, things are slightly different: most commonly, the white label is applied with a certain pretension of authority over the colonized subject, whose “authenticity” is put at risk. The colonized subject becomes a hybrid subject embodied in this writing form: in magic realism, the colonizer distinguishes realism and magic, linking the first to “white” scientific reality; and the latter to the colonized superstitious ignorance; where obviously the latter is ridiculed in favour of western rationality.

Therefore, magic realism stresses the difference between two worlds because realism and magic are presented as two characteristics that belong to two different cultures. White readers have to keep in mind that their Western mind-set influences the reading of any kind of literature. Hence, in the white perspective *Carpentaria*’s reality appears as if it were magic; however, it would be fair to ask ourselves: what if, for a different non-western culture, that reality that I, as a white reader, see as being magic were not magic at all, but simply how they see reality, reality itself?⁵¹⁰ Those critics that fail to ask themselves this question mistakenly label this book with magic realism: Laura Joseph sees Alexis Wright’s use of this form as an expression of modernity, hence an expression of

⁵⁰⁸ Laura Joseph, “Dreaming Phantoms and Golems: Elements of the Place Beyond Nation in *Carpentaria* and *Dreamhunter*”, *JASAL*, 2008, pp. 1-10.; France Devlin-Glass, “A Politics of Dreamtime: Destructive and Regenerative Rainbows in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*” *Australian Literary Studies*, 23 (2008), pp. 392-407.; Nonie Sharp, “Review. Alexis Wright – *Carpentaria*”, *Island Magazine*, 111 (2007), pp. 61-7.

⁵⁰⁹ Ravenscroft, p. 196.

⁵¹⁰ Ravenscroft, pp. 197-8.

lack of certainties, almost a “political genre”;⁵¹¹ Frances Devlin-Glass considers magic realism as a means to analyze colonialism and present Waanyi culture;⁵¹² Paul Sharrad thinks Wright employs it ‘to create a truer replica of reality that holds out some promise for freedom’;⁵¹³ and Bridget Haylock does not apply the term but mixes ‘maban’ reality with the Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque.⁵¹⁴ However, *Carpentaria* ‘effects its own resistances against the exclusive coupling of ‘dream’ and ‘magic’ with ‘Aborigine’ because many white characters are ‘irrational and illogical [and] [...] naïve believers’.⁵¹⁵ Because of their rationality, white readers fail to comprehend Indigenous reality and prefer to name it, to own it, and explain it with “magic realism”. Therefore, I agree with Alison Ravenscroft who thinks of the genre of *Carpentaria* as an ‘aesthetic reminiscent of modernism rather than magic realism’⁵¹⁶.

If we are to label this work, I would rather use Martin Rene’s label of “Dreamtime Narrative”, ‘a literary transposition of Dreamtime onto Western epistemology’⁵¹⁷, where scientific knowledge is encoded in traditional Aboriginal knowledge. In this way, I would suggest that we should not use authority over Wright’s work, because if *Carpentaria* was written ‘to try and create a truer replica of reality’,⁵¹⁸ why do we want to be unidirectional? The reading of *Carpentaria* challenges white sovereignty and becomes a political call in favour of Aborigines.⁵¹⁹ The relationship of Aborigines and their ancestral land, the Gulf of Carpentaria, is mediated by ‘non-human forces as actors’⁵²⁰ and is used to claim Aboriginal sovereignty. This defamiliarization of whiteness and Dreamtime Narrative are obtained through the traditional narration of the *Dreamtime* and some Aboriginal characters who have a traditional relationship with the land.

⁵¹¹ Joseph, p. 3.

⁵¹² Devlin-Glass, “Review Essay: Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”; Devlin-Glass, “A Politics of Dreamtime: Destructive and Regenerative Rainbows in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”.

⁵¹³ Paul Sharrad, “Beyond Capricornia: Ambiguous Promise in Alexis Wright”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 24 (2009), p. 57.

⁵¹⁴ Bridget Haylock, “Enlisting Rage and Speaking Place: Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/haylockpaper.pdf> pp. 1-10. (Accessed 24 June 2013)

⁵¹⁵ Ravenscroft, p. 203.

⁵¹⁶ Ravenscroft, p. 205.

⁵¹⁷ Rene, p. 103.

⁵¹⁸ Alexis Wright, “Politics of Writing”, *Southerly*, 62 (2002), p. 13.

⁵¹⁹ Anne Brewster, “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 25 (2010), pp. 85-100.

⁵²⁰ Brewster, “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, p. 90.

Carpentaria's first chapter ("From Time Immemorial") and the first pages of the novel are exemplificative of the use of the *Dreamtime*. Alexis Wright opens the novel with the ancestral rainbow serpent that gives birth to the Gulf country and the town of Desperance, where the novel is set:

[t]he ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. [...] It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. [...] [t]he giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers [...] and it is attached to the lives of the river people skin. This tidal river snake of flowing mud takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend. Imagine the serpent's breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland, edging towards the spring waters nestled deeply in the gorges of an ancient limestone plateau covered with rattling grasses dried yellow from the prevailing winds. Then with outward breath, the tide turns and the serpent flows back to its own circulating mass of shallow waters in the giant water basin in a crook of the mainland whose sides separate it from the open sea.⁵²¹

Carpentaria is in fact 'narrated according to the cyclical, eternal time, of 'the ancestral serpent''.⁵²² The *Dreamtime* serpent is the creator that links forever the land with its native inhabitants. The land becomes the central character of *Carpentaria* and some characters, such as Norm(al) Phantom, his son Will, and Mozzie Fishman 'are agents of Indigenous political will to maintain custodianship of the land'⁵²³. The serpent shapes the Gulf near which the town of Desperance is set; its presence is always evoked in the river that crosses the town. Desperance, named after the founder Captain Matthew Desperance Flinders, is divided in three parts, where the Uptown is occupied by the white people and at the fringes, in the Eastside near the dump, and in the Westside, the Pricklebush Aborigines live, the river people; finally, in the Gulf, the mine is set. The ancient immortal creation of the land is in contrast with the modern settlement of multinational mining companies in the Gulf.⁵²⁴

Normal Phantom, also called Norm, is one of the main characters of the story. His relationship with the river (the town will re-name the river after him),⁵²⁵ the sea, and the land is so unique that he is considered the traditional owner of the land. Norm, contrary to his name, is

⁵²¹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, pp. 1-2.

⁵²² Joseph, p. 2.

⁵²³ Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", p. 91.

⁵²⁴ I will deal with this issue later in the chapter.

⁵²⁵ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 7.

anything but “normal”, he challenges the concept of normal reality: he has some kind of special sensibility for nature, or from a western point of view he has magic powers, that make him the most interesting character of the novel. Norm is a great storyteller and ‘had a hypnotic voice’ that ‘made people [...] feel that it was better to have been alive in the times of the real people, his ancestors’⁵²⁶. His most attentive listener is his cockatoo bird Pirate that old people consider a prophet: in fact, it is not clear whether Norm is the one who gives the parrot some special powers or the contrary; anyway, it is clear that Norm has a special relationship with the elements of nature. For instance, in his fishroom ‘he competed with the spirits of who knows what, to make fish from the sea come back to life, to look immortal’.⁵²⁷ Norm is one thing with nature and especially with water things:

Norm Phantom’s powers to navigate great bodies of water, to know stars and storms, the currents of the air and the sea, to know where great schools of fish are still to be found [...] cannot be imagined by the white citizens of Desperance.⁵²⁸

Desperanians, exactly like the white reader, cannot understand Norm’s abilities because they do not fit in western rational canons. His “powers” concern people of Desperance who fear him and admire him at the same time; it is due to these powers and to people’s responses to them that he is segregated at the edges of town, but it is also his ‘unsettling location between presence and absence, life and death, [that] associates him with the Dreamtime and provokes his total marginalisation’.⁵²⁹

The most exemplificative event of the shift between reality and dreaming, and one of the most touching moments of the story, is when Norm takes the body of his dead friend Elias back ‘to his own country, or the place he wanted to call home’.⁵³⁰ During this journey, very similar to the Coleridgian mariner’s, Norm has to face many difficulties: storms, the wind, the stillness of the sea, the Sea Woman and her cruelty, and once on shore the “reunion” with the devil woman Gardajala. The female creatures seem to be liminal figures between his imagination and reality: he speaks with the sea and in reply ‘the sulky waves barged forward, banged, thumped and dumped their debris

⁵²⁶ Wright, *Carpentaria*, pp. 86-7.

⁵²⁷ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 173.

⁵²⁸ Ravenscroft, p. 204.

⁵²⁹ Renes, p. 114.

⁵³⁰ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 217.

further up onto the beach’;⁵³¹ and their encounter with the devil woman is depicted as if it were reality:

[t]he bartering for her desires to quench his, and his to quench hers, went on until he could stand it no longer. He could almost feel his hands touching her body covered in yellow grass where she lay waiting for him.⁵³²

His encounter with the devil woman is seen as a ‘ritual sexual joining with country’⁵³³ and his ‘experience with the Bush Dreaming is manifest in the sense of rebirth, recovery and resolution’.⁵³⁴

Norm is disoriented as much as the reader is; however, Norm does believe in what he sees, it is the land or the sea calling him and he, exactly like Elias, is just going to ‘the right place’.⁵³⁵ For us white readers, his reality remains hard to believe, this is the incommensurability of the gap between a western and an Aboriginal perspective.

6.1.1 Singing the Country

Music is very important in this work, for instance, as Alexis Wright explains, one of her intentions ‘was to write the novel as though it was a very long melody made of different forms of music, mixed somehow with the voices of the Gulf’.⁵³⁶ In fact, the inhabitants of Desperance often hear the Gulf music, the Aboriginal inhabitants hear the voices of the ancestors of the land and many characters sing. Moreover, *Carpentaria* opens with a song ‘[A] NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*’⁵³⁷ and closes with a song to the country ‘[t]here was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh as they walked hand in hand out of town, down the road, Westside, to home’.⁵³⁸ In this way, *Carpentaria* creates ‘new cycles of sacred songs or “songlines” in writing which map out country and allow for postcolonising walkabouts—

⁵³¹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 228.

⁵³² Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 231.

⁵³³ Renes, p. 115.

⁵³⁴ Renes, p. 115.

⁵³⁵ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 212.

⁵³⁶ Alexis Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*”, p. 9.

⁵³⁷ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 1. Capitals and Italics the author’s.

⁵³⁸ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 438.

physical and spiritual journeys of re-encounter with and re-instatement of tribal land'.⁵³⁹ Indeed, singing the country is another Aboriginal way to relate with their own land:

[e]ach song, like each design or painting is part of a moment in a larger story. Songs make up a song series or a 'songline' which is a map of the country based on the travels of the Dreaming ancestors. To knowledgeable Aboriginal people, seeing a painting or a design will call to mind a song. Many senior painters sing as they paint the story of the song.⁵⁴⁰

This definition explains very clearly what many characters in *Carpentaria* do, especially Norm, Will, and Mozzie Fishman. They sing the country and listen to the voice of the country, their relationship with the land is mediated through music and songs, as it was traditionally before colonialism.

Songs are and were a form of expression of Aboriginal culture. They can be sacred or secular, and most of the time they were/are associated with ceremonies and rituals, and accompanied by dances. Dances and songs 'were exchanged often at large ceremonial gatherings when many people gathered together and when trade goods were also exchanged'.⁵⁴¹ In addition, no matter the kind of ceremony, usually

each song verse is brief but either it is repeated many times [...] or variants using a finite corpus of song words are improvised by the singers [...] and in most Aboriginal communities the language of the song is different from that of everyday discourse.⁵⁴²

During the ceremonies and rituals there was an expert or leader, woman or man, who was the holder of the songs, and very often his/her 'inspiration for such compositions is often said to come to the singer in a dream-vision in which an ancestor or Dreamtime being gives him the idea for the new creation'.⁵⁴³ Traditionally, songs could have had multiple purposes and could have been of different and several kinds and genres; amongst these the songlines are interesting to understand the Aborigines relationship with land.

⁵³⁹ Renes, 116.

⁵⁴⁰ Australian Government Official Website, <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-indigenous-ceremony>. (Accessed 15 June 2013).

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Margaret Clunies Ross, "Australian Aboriginal Oral Tradition", *Oral Tradition*, 1 (1986), p. 242.

⁵⁴³ Ross, p. 244.

According to Paul Sharrad, Norm, like the rest of the characters, needs to access ‘dreams, stars charts, songlines of the land for meaning and hope to be possible’.⁵⁴⁴ I rather believe that Norm cannot be enumerated amongst these characters because his singing the country, like his reading of the stars, are part of his nature, his Aboriginality. Norm can travel the sea because ‘[h]e has inherited his father’s memory of the sea’⁵⁴⁵ and he will pass it on to his son Will and nephew Bala; his hope resides in his memory, in his ability to pass on the stories about the land: his storytelling ‘constitutes indigenous law which describes indigenous social and cosmological relationships to land and sea, to ancestors, and those that pertain to the domain of social intercourse’.⁵⁴⁶ It is no coincidence that ‘[m]en such as Norm Phantom kept a library [...] full of stories of the old country stored in their heads [...] trading stories for other stories’.⁵⁴⁷ Norm listens to the spirit of the country, learns its story and tells it to his nephew or son; he never gets lost because he just needs to sing the country and he finds his root again:

[i]f he hoped to find his way back, he knew his hopeless task was to visualise and commit to memory the multitude of landmarks. An unfamiliar voice pointed out that these were the wrecked artefacts of an ancient past fossilised in parts of the sea where the likes of people living, who ought to leave well enough alone, should never have ventured. [...] He heard the names of places in a harsh language which was both strange and uninviting.⁵⁴⁸

Norm and the land are one altogether; as he says, ‘[w]e are the flesh and blood of the sea and we are what the sea brings the land’,⁵⁴⁹ and his singing the country is the way he tries to restore the link with the land if he has in some way loosened the bond.

Will, the activist custodian of the land, heir of Norm’s “powers”, can hear the spirit’s voice of the land:

Will closed his eyes and saw the tremendous fury of the winds gathering up the seas, and clouds carrying the enormous fury of the winds gathering the seas, and clouds carrying enormous bodies of spiritual beings belonging to other worlds. Country people, old people, said it was the sound of the great spiritual ancestors roaring out of the dusty, polluted sea all of the time nowadays. Will believed this.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁴ Sharrad, p. 61.

⁵⁴⁵ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 15.

⁵⁴⁶ Brewster, “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, p. 88.

⁵⁴⁷ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p.

⁵⁴⁸ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 227.

⁵⁴⁹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, pp. 28-9.

⁵⁵⁰ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 338.

Will is identified with the ‘most political, and subtle, embodiment of the Rainbow’⁵⁵¹ because of his close relationship with the sea. However, on shore, when he gets lost he cannot find himself back again, he needs the help of an elder and, because he is alone and he has not spoken with his father for years, he does not have Norm’s support. In this moment, another father-figure intervenes: Joseph Midnight, his wife’s father and leader of the Eastside Aborigines, helps him out ‘unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen’.⁵⁵² Thus, if Norm is able to find his way through the country thanks to the voice of the country itself, Will is not ready yet to go alone, even if he has gone through a process of initiation with Mozzie Fishman in a long trip through the country. Bala, in this sense, represents Will’s liberation because Will gets lost again looking for his son and wife, whereas Bala will remain with his grandfather and learn the Law, which Will will never wholly understand because of his distance from his father.

Mozzie takes Will and other people around the country because he wants to renew ‘the strength of the country’⁵⁵³ following the *Dreamtime*, ‘along the spiritual travelling road of the great ancestor’.⁵⁵⁴ It is important to stress that here, as in the case of Norm, it is memory that allows the relation between the country and its people, it’s people’s survival:

[t]he challenge was to be always on the move, following the old ones travelling their country to at least a thousand sites they knew by memory. It was a test of how good they knew the country before they were able to find old White Whiskers waiting for them. Every family had to know the story of the past. Know, to go about their separate ways, be reclaiming land from fighting long ago.⁵⁵⁵

Mozzie, together with Norm and Will, helps to maintain the custodianship of the land through storytelling and keeps a traditional relationship with land. Like Will who is able to become one element of nature (he “is a tree” when Joseph discovers him and helps him), Mozzie can do the same, actually he is the one who taught Will how to do it. Mozzie, unlike Norm, is a countryman and a water diviner so he could travel the country by sensing ‘the presence of water far underground

⁵⁵¹ Frances Devis Glass, “A Politics of Dreamtime”, p. 397.

⁵⁵² Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 375.

⁵⁵³ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 127.

⁵⁵⁴ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 100.

⁵⁵⁵ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 27.

and, knew exactly where he was headed'.⁵⁵⁶ Will could have been the Clever⁵⁵⁷ Aborigine of Desperance, complete with Norm's "sea powers" and Mozzie's "country powers", however, he represents the modern spirit of the land who needs to listen to his heart before singing the country and cannot always listen to the voices of the spirits. Nevertheless, he still is one of the most important holders of Aboriginal knowledge. These three Aborigines, Norm, Will, and Mozzie, are so important because they 'maintain cultural practices and knowledges about these forces and about the land'.⁵⁵⁸

6.2 Carpentaria: A Contested Land

To begin with the title, it is clear that, as anticipated before, *Carpentaria* is a story about the land: 'Wright said she chose the title "Carpentaria" as a celebration of the ancestral lands that her mother and grandmother, members of the Waanyi nation, were forced from'.⁵⁵⁹ Therefore, given that the title corresponds to the land itself (the Gulf of Carpentaria where the work is set), it is 'as if the land was telling the story about itself'.⁵⁶⁰ This choice is important because, as the author explains, the place is part of her history, her identity, because the Gulf of Carpentaria is

where I come from and the place I know best: that country's in my psyche. When I was a girl my grandmother was talking about a place I couldn't see, I couldn't go to, so that created a huge imagination of the place she loved. I think we've got enough stories there in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and I've got enough ideas to last for some time to do the writing I need to do at this particular point of time.⁵⁶¹

The importance of the land for her and for her mob is the reason why she decided to show 'how the land might respond to different stories',⁵⁶² to the extent that, as she says, that '[t]he land is, I suppose, one of or even the central character'.⁵⁶³ The story is about its inhabitants, but mostly is about the land, a contested land; it is no coincidence that she creates the characters of the stories

⁵⁵⁶ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 377.

⁵⁵⁷ With Clever I mean an expert Aborigine on Aboriginal tradition and culture.

⁵⁵⁸ Brewster, p. 88.

⁵⁵⁹ Jane Perlez, "Letter from Australia – Aboriginal Lit.", *New York Times Book Review*, 2007, p. 31.

⁵⁶⁰ Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", p. 9.

⁵⁶¹ ~~Jean-François~~ Vernay, p. 120.

⁵⁶² ~~Jean-François~~ Vernay, p. 121.

⁵⁶³ ~~Jean-François~~ Vernay, p. 121.

after having depicted the land.⁵⁶⁴ Therefore, talking about the land is important because it allows Wright to talk about the mechanisms of the relationship between the land and its inhabitants.

From the first chapter, we are presented with a problem in *Desperance*: who are the real owners of the land? This is a very western notion of land, as if the land could be possessed by someone, as if it did not have a voice of its own. Land is seen as a commodity by the Uptown people, but also by the Eastside Aborigines who want to gain profit from it (they even invent a new identity with this goal); however, it is seen with respect, as a living being, by the Westside Aborigines who try to protect and save it. Westside Aborigines, in particular Norm, represent ‘the ‘phantom’ presence of Black Australian in the history of the nation’,⁵⁶⁵ instead, Uptown people represent the colonizers with their interests. In this way, the little town of *Desperance* becomes a representative ‘metonymic of the white postcolonial nation’,⁵⁶⁶ a sort of microcosm of the Australian nation itself that tries to go towards a new and different future;⁵⁶⁷ and Wright manages to show this because

the dynamic, disobedient, alchemical and archipelagic material elements of the gulf country are harnessed to challenge juridical, discursive and economic claims to the region made by both the nation and international corporations.⁵⁶⁸

The problem of belongingness is fundamental, because claiming one’s belongingness to the land means asserting its possession. The problem is that while *Desperanians* are always ‘[f]ighting, fighting all the time for a bit of land a little bit of recognition’,⁵⁶⁹ the land rebels through cyclones, storms, heat, and drought. At the beginning of the story, there seems to be no hope for reconciliation between the land and its inhabitants; however, the solution to this problematic issue will reveal itself only towards the end.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁴ Jean Francoi Vernay, p. 121.

⁵⁶⁵ Sharrad, p. 58.

⁵⁶⁶ Brewster, “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, p. 85.

⁵⁶⁷ Joseph, p. 1.

⁵⁶⁸ Joseph, p. 2.

⁵⁶⁹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 9.

⁵⁷⁰ I will deal with this aspect later in the chapter.

The land, when the Gurfuritt⁵⁷¹ company wants to exploit it as a mine resource, becomes a problem for the Gulf inhabitants because it embodies the representation of belongingness: no land means having no origins. Aborigines identify themselves with the place where they belong ('Indigenous identity is embedded in an attachment to a specific geographical Region'),⁵⁷² no wonder the characters of the works I have analysed in my study are always trying to go back to their land, which is seen as their home and *belonging place*; and this is shown in this text too:

[i]n its imagery, narrative point of view, characterisation and plot, *Carpentaria* foregrounds the cosmological, cultural and spiritual relationship of indigenous people with their country. This relationship is the basis of their cultural traditions and identity, and a central aspect of indigenous sovereignty.⁵⁷³

When the possession of the land is threatened, identity is put at risk as well. Non-Aborigine Australians do see things differently, mainly they see the land as a tool for power; however, they did create a myth for themselves related to the land as well, the so-called 'bush legend' invented in the late 1880s and relevant for the "formation" of the Australian identity.⁵⁷⁴ This fact cannot be avoided when taking into consideration the issue of the land as a means to frame one's identity. Therefore, in *Carpentaria* Uptown is afraid to lose the land, due to the land activists, for two main reasons: first, because they would lose their money; secondly, because they are worried about their own identity. In fact, the problem for them is that '[b]elonging is especially critical for a constituency who have an 'evanescent' sense of their origins and a problematic juridico-political status as colonisers'.⁵⁷⁵

The problem of the contested land is not relative only to the fictionalised Desperance; on the contrary, this is still a very common problem in Australia. In Desperance, the land is contested because on the one side, the Westside people claim the place as their land ('[t]hey even made up a

⁵⁷¹ Most of the names in the story do have a meaning, Renes suggests that the name of the company might evoke the expression "go for it", as an ironic invitation to take possession of the land and exploit it at will. p. 113.

⁵⁷² Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", p. 92.

⁵⁷³ Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", p. 90

⁵⁷⁴ For further information see Baron Alder, "The Australian Legend Fifty Years on", *Quadrant*, 52 (2008), pp.78-80; Leigh; John Carroll, ed., *Intruders in the Bush: the Australian Quest for Identity*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992; C. Elder, "White Australia Meets Multiculturalism", *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2007, pp. 115-46; V. Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963; R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1965; Richard Waterhouse, "Australian Legends: Representations of the Bush, 1813 – 1913", *Australian Historical Studies*, 115 (2000), pp. 201-22.

⁵⁷⁵ Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", p. 59.

name for themselves – Wangabiya – and said that they were the real traditional owners’);⁵⁷⁶ on the other, the Eastside claims the same. Finally the Uptown thinks that the ‘place belonga Desperance Shire Council’.⁵⁷⁷ There is no agreement amongst them, in fact ‘[e]veryone started slinging off about who would want to belong there anyway? The place was a mess [...] too full of fighting all the time’.⁵⁷⁸ The climax of the debate is when Angel Day, Norm’s wife, while looking for “useful” things in the dump, where she lives, claims that what she finds belongs to her. She finds a wall clock and a statue of the Virgin Mary and she believes that now that she owns two whitefellas’ things, she would own ‘the luck of the white people’.⁵⁷⁹ Angel Day, the outcast *par excellence* of the story, on the one hand wants to assimilate with whites and become one of them; but on other hand she claims her Aboriginality, as the owner of the land: ‘you people don’t belong here. Who said you got any normal rights to be hanging around here? On other people’s laaand for? [...] What about the traditional owner then?’.⁵⁸⁰ Angel’s behaviour is very understandable when you are part of a minority who is the owner of the land but who is deprived of it, and obliged not only to live on the fringe of the land but also on the fringe of society.

Another climatic moment is Elias’s arrival in town. Elias is a man with no baggage and no memory who comes from the sea. His arrival raises the problem of origins, especially for white Uptown people who see his arrival like their own:

Uptown whitefella mob was full of people claiming they had no origins. They usually met one another on the street with greetings like: *Hey! stranger, where did you come from?* They said that they were not strangers because they had originated from nowhere. This was the reason why they contrived the waiting for Elias into a honest act of homage to the comings of their forebears.⁵⁸¹

Elias is firstly “unwelcomed” with fear, as if he were an invader, then like Santa Klaus, and finally like a messiah. However, when they start realizing that he is more similar to Aborigines in a sort of

⁵⁷⁶ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 44.

⁵⁷⁷ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 32.

⁵⁷⁸ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 22.

⁵⁷⁹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 20. In the text there are continuous references to Catholicism or the Bible, very often they are almost ridiculed.

⁵⁸⁰ Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 21.

⁵⁸¹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, pp. 48-9. Italics the author’s.

way because he ‘might be equated with the Dreamtime’⁵⁸² for his sea knowledge, because his non-belongingness is compensated with his attachment to the country,⁵⁸³ he becomes the *farmacòs*, the scapegoat of the town who needs to be taken away and finally eliminated (similarly to what happens to Kevin, Norm’s youngest son, and Will). The stillness of the city where nothing can ever change, not even the name of the town, resembles the paralysis of white society that does not want to accept any kind of differences amongst them.

The land, apart from being the central character of the work and the symbol of origins, becomes the element used to establish sovereignty; as Anne Brewster points out, the crisis of whiteness, of Uptown, is due to ‘the plenitude of indigenous spiritual, cosmological and historical connectedness with the land and the sea, that is, with indigenous sovereignty’.⁵⁸⁴ Despite Uptown’s attempts to take possession of the Gulf and the multinational company to exploit it, the ‘land has a power of its own that will resist all attempts to tame or destroy it’.⁵⁸⁵ As I have shown before, some Aboriginal characters, Norm, Will, and Mozzie have a peculiar relationship with the land and, as custodians of it, they protect it. Will is the most implicated because he tries to stop the mine company and later is obliged to go away from Desperance because he risks his life. Later, he is kidnapped and, only thanks to the help of Mozzie and other activists, he manages to escape and contributes to the explosion of the mine. However, even if these characters act in favour of their land, the land sets itself against the whitefellas.

The result is that both the land and its natives rebel against the exploitation of the country: Aborigines make the mine explode and a cyclone clears off the whole place. Therefore, it is true that

Carpentaria “sings” white Desperance and its mine to destruction, seeking repair for the human and environmental disasters caused to Gulf Country by market-capitalism and neo-liberal culture, and promotes an Indigenous, holistic paradigm of managing country as authentically Australian historical linear temporality of nation.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸² Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 43.

⁵⁸³ Brewster, “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, pp. 94-5.

⁵⁸⁴ Brewster, “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, p. 86.

⁵⁸⁵ Sharrad, p. 62.

⁵⁸⁶ Renes, pp. 118-9.

In fact, *Carpentaria* offers some hope for the future only with Aboriginal characters and their traditional beliefs. The ‘land-based spirituality’⁵⁸⁷ becomes the ‘foundation for reconciliation’⁵⁸⁸, at least for the Phantom family: Norm, after a long troubled journey, manages to arrive safe and sound on shore with Hope and Bala. During his journey, he forgives his wife Angel who abandoned him and their seven children; he forgives his son Will who married the “enemy’s wife”; accepts his daughter-in-law and his nephew. *Carpentaria* closes with an open, and I believe positive, ending where Hope, following the land’s voice, goes back to the sea looking for her husband Will.

⁵⁸⁷ Sharrad, p. 62.

⁵⁸⁸ Sharrad, p. 62.

VII. Conclusion

Some critics have tried to give Aboriginal literature ‘a primeval status by equating it with the very land itself, as timeless, undivided and arcadian’.⁵⁸⁹ This is quite a reductive belief on literature, because narratives do change and evolve; however, Muecke et Al. think that ‘there is an Aboriginal practice of stressing the immutability and continuity of their traditions as well as the eternal and intimate associations that these literary traditions maintain with the land’.⁵⁹⁰ Though I disagree with them on the idea that Aboriginal literature is static and monolithic, I believe they are right in stressing the link between literature and the land. Literature, as a form of expression of the world, changes and shapes in time; for instance, originally the most used and common form to express Aboriginal grief was autobiography and biography. Nowadays, works like *Carpentaria* and *My Sister’s Eye* show that other genres have been adopted with a conscious re-working towards Aboriginality. In addition, the earlier women’s writing (such as Monica Clare, Shirley Smith, Margaret Tucker and Oodgeroo) were not ‘singular searchers for identity’⁵⁹¹ and had a strong feeling of community and familiar unity, which ‘usually do not happen with men’s writing, it is a gendered thing’.⁵⁹² Nowadays, this is only partly true for some Aboriginal women writers; instead, for other authors, such as Sally Morgan, Larissa Behrendt and Tara June Winch, their quest is more personal: the goal is, thanks to their journey, to establish a relationship with the Aboriginal reality that has been undisclosed for years. Even if dealing with Aboriginal identity means dealing with Australian identity, the quest of the characters, and in some cases of the authors’, is a search for one’s own identity. I do suggest then there is a shift from community towards subjectivity; but I argue as well that contemporary writers maintain traditional Aboriginal characteristics in their literature.

⁵⁸⁹ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, p. 28.

⁵⁹⁰ Muecke, Davis & Shoemaker, *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, p. 28.

⁵⁹¹ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, p. 193.

⁵⁹² Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia*, p. 194.

Starting from the importance of the Country, in Aboriginal culture the land was and still is essential, it is considered a reference point. For instance, in the past, most of the initiation rites were based on a relationship created, among other things thanks to songs and storytelling, between the person and the land. In this sense, the land, the journey, identity and storytelling are very much related to one another. Storytelling is an important characteristic of Aboriginal culture and this is exemplified in every work that I have analysed. It allows the mythological transmission of Aboriginal culture, this transmission of information is fundamental because it makes Aboriginal tradition and culture ever lasting. In every work I have analysed there is at least one character who is on a journey, very often on a sort of spiritual quest. The journey is also a feature of Aboriginal culture: it was characteristic of their nomadic way of living, for example, for initiation rituals such as walkabout, which ‘is the traditional initiation journey, [that] enables them to locate themselves in their land.’⁵⁹³ The journey is linked to storytelling and singing, because during the journeys usually people did sing and tell stories. In almost every work I have analysed, there is always someone telling a story; but only in one work there are some characters “singing the Country”. In fact, characters such as Normal Phantom, show that it is possible to travel across one’s country only thanks to the songs to the land.⁵⁹⁴ The importance of the link with the land is essential for Aboriginal identity and this is maintained in contemporary Aboriginal literature.

All the authors I have chosen in my dissertation are women, part of the Stolen Generations, and who belong to families that have suffered removal, dispossession, and displacement. It appears clear in my study that they need to go out and look for their home and *belonging place* in order to fill a gap in their Aboriginal identity. It is obvious that there will always be someone, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, who will be looking for their place in the world. However, in relation to Aboriginal

⁵⁹³ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 114

⁵⁹⁴ As I have shown in chapter six, these songs are about the routes to follow, the animals on the way, the plants to avoid, they become like a map of the country. Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, London: Constable & Robinson, 2008.

literature, this kind of literature might form a stream, similar to the one in Quebec;⁵⁹⁵ it is however true that

[a] major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.⁵⁹⁶

This means that the Aboriginal concern on *belonging place* is shared by many other minorities and therefore likely to be not completely specific and unique to Aboriginal literature. This happens because other colonized peoples have suffered similar traumas to what has happened to Aborigines; however, this does not lessen the importance of land for Aborigines. Land is part of their Aboriginality and reconciliation with it is the main concern of the authors I have analysed. It is possible that in a couple of generations this kind of “literature of the land” will no longer be as common; this is not to say that things will be forgotten and there will no longer be the need to talk about the themes I have dealt with; however, I do hope that in time the Aboriginal wounds will be healed. Time cannot erase the brutalities Aboriginal peoples have gone through, but I believe in the transformative potential of writing where grief can make some room for hope of a better future.

⁵⁹⁵ I am referring to the “Roman du Terroir” and “Poesie du Terroir”.

⁵⁹⁶ Hawkes, Terence, ed., *The Empire Writes Back*, England: Clays, 1998, pp. 8-9.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Behrendt, Larissa, *Home*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004.
- Cleven, Vivienne, *Her Sister's Eye*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002.
- Kennedy, Gayle, *Me, Antman & Fleabag*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007.
- Morgan, Sally, *My Place*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987.
- Winch, T. June, *Swallow the Air*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006.
- Wright, Alexis, *Carpentaria*, London: Constable & Robinson, 2008.

Critical Literature

- Abey, Duncan, "Gratifying Return to Illawara for Writer", *Illawara Mercury*, n.v. (2006), p.4.
- Aldred, Debra, "Literary Award Winner is no Accidental Storyteller", *The Courier-Mail*, n.v. (2004), p.3.
- Althaus, Katrin, *Darkness Subverted: Aboriginal Gothic in Black Australian Literature and Film*, Germany: Bonn University Press, 2010, pp. 116-32.
- Ashcroft, Bill & al., *Post-Colonial Studies: the Key Concepts*, London: Routledge, 2007.
- Attwood, Bain, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005, pp. 11-35.
- Behrendt, Larissa, "Consent in a (Neo)Colonial Society: Aboriginal Women as Sexual and Legal 'Other'", *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15 (2000), pp. 353-67.
- Behrendt, Larissa, "What Lies Beneath", *Meanjin*, 65 (2006), pp. 38-47.
- Behrendt, Larissa, "Reconciliation: Forty Years On", *Australian Quarterly*, 79 (2007), pp. 48-53.
- Behrendt, Larissa, "Home: the Importance of Place to be Dispossessed", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 108 (2009), pp. 71-85.
- Behrendt, Larissa, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*, Milton: Wiley Publishing Australia, 2012.
- Bell, Diane, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 1938.
- Ben-Messahel, Sahlia, "Speaking with Sally Morgan", *Antipodes*, 14 (2000), pp. 99-103.
- Berndt, Catherine, H., "Expression of Grief among Aboriginal Women", *Oceania*, 20 (1950), pp. 286-332.

Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

N.A, “Strong Role Models – Larissa Behrendt”, Binn-Sallik, M. Ann, ed., *Aboriginal Women by Degrees – Their Stories of the Journey towards Academic Achievement*, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2000, pp.65-76.

Bogle, Deborah, “Young Writer Wins Award”, *The Advertiser*, n.v. (2008), p.30.

Brantlinger, Patrick, “Eating Tongues: Australian Colonial Literature and ‘the Great Silence’”, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 41 (2011), pp. 125-39.

Brewster, Anne, *Literary Formations – Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*, Victoria: Melbourne Press, 1995.

Brewster, Anne, “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 25 (2010), pp. 85-100.

Brewster, Anne, “Australia: Aboriginal Literature”, in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, Quayson, Ato, ed. by Ato Quayson Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 511-38.

Brough, Mark, & al., “Social Capital Meets Identity – Aboriginality in an Urban Setting”, *Journal of Sociology*, 42 (2006), pp. 396-411.

Broun, Jody, “Unmaking White Myths: Your Laws, My Place”, *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan’s My Place*, Delys, Bird & Dennis, Haskell, eds., Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992, p. 25.

Byrne, Madeleine, “An Interview with Tara June Winch”, *Antipodes*, 22 (2007), pp. 130-1.

Carlson, Eve B., & al., “Relationships Between Traumatic Experiences and Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress, Dissociation, and Amnesia”, J. Douglas Bremner & Charles R. Marmar, eds., *Trauma, Memory & Dissociation*, Washington: American Psychiatric Press, 1998, pp. 205-228.

Catherine H. Berndt, “Digging Sticks and Spears, or, the Two-sex Model”, *Woman’s Role in Aboriginal Society*, Fay Gale ed., Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970, pp. 39-47.

Charles P. Mountford, “The Rainbow-Serpent: Myths of Australia”, in Ira R. Buchler & al., eds., *The Rainbow Serpent*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978, pp. 23-98

Choo, Christine, “Review: Her Sister’s Eye by Vivienne Cleven”, *Network Review of Books*, 2004, http://www.apinetwork.com/main/index.php?apply=reviews&webpage=api_reviews&flexedit=&flex_password=&menu_label=&menuID=homely&menubox=&Review=4729 (accessed 29 April 2013).

Clark, Maureen, “Mudrooroo: Crafty Impostor or Rebel with a Cause?”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 21 (2004), pp. 101-10.

Clark, Maureen, *Mudrooroo: a Likely Story, Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*, University of Wollongong, 2004,

<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?filename=0&article=1189&context=theses&type=additional> (accessed 3 February 2013).

Clunies Ross, Margaret, "Australian Aboriginal Oral Tradition", *Oral Tradition*, 1 (1986), pp. 231-71.

Collingwood-Whittick, Sheila, "Re-presenting the Australian Aborigine: Challenging Colonialist Discourse through Autoethnography", *World Literature Written in English*, 38 (2000), pp. 110-31.

Cornwell, Jane, "The Face", *Weekend Australia*, n.v. (2008), p. 3.

Cowlshaw, Gillian, "Colour, Culture and the Aboriginalists", *Man*, 22 (1987), pp. 221-37.

Creagh, Sunanda, "Woman of the World", *Sydney Morning Herald*, n.v. (2006), p. 30.

Curtis, Lidia, "'D' for Difference: Gender, Genre, Writing", *Female Stories, Female Bodies - Narrative, Identity and Representation*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, pp. 30-53.

Davis, Jack, "Aboriginal Writing: a Personal View", in Jack Davis & Bob Hodge, eds., *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers Held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985, pp. 11-21.

Day, David, "27 December 1941 Prime Minister Curtin's New Year Message: Australian Looks to America", in Martin Crotty and David Roberts, eds., *Turning Points in Australian History*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008, pp. 129-42.

Del Villano, Bianca, "Ghostly Alterities: Spectrality and Contemporary Literatures in English", *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies: Book Reviews*, 2007, <http://irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/bookreview11.html#top>, (Accessed 30 April 2013).

Delys, Bird, and Haskell, Dennis, *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan's My Place*, Australia: Harper Collins Publisher, 1992.

Devin-Glass, Francis, "A Politics of the Dreamtime: Destructive and Regenerative Rainbows in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", *Australian Literary Studies*, 23 (2008), pp. 392-407.

Devin-Glass, Francis, "Review Essay: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", *Antipodes*, 21 (2007), pp. 82-4.

Edwards, Lorna, "Spreading the Word to Women", *The Age*, n.v. (2010), p.10.

Elkin, A., P., *The Australian Aborigines*, Sydney: Printatone, 1966.

Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 1986.

Farca, P. Anca, "Roots to Routes: Contemporary Indigenous Fiction by Women Writers in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand", December 2009, <http://dc.library.okstate.edu/utills/getfile/collection/Dissert/id/72674/filename/73365.pdf>, (accessed 15 November 2012).

- Ferrier, Carole, ““Disappearing Memory” and the Colonial Present in Recent Indigenous Women’s Writing”, *JASAL*, n.v. (2008), 37-55.
- Finn, Lizzy, “Postnational Hybridity in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*”, in *Moveable Table*, pp. 11-28. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english/graduate/issue/4/pdfs/finn.pdf> (accessed 3 November 2012).
- Freud, Sigmund, “From the “Uncanny””, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Peter Simon et al., eds., New York: W. W. Norton, 2010, pp. 824-41.
- Fuller, Bree, “Winch’s Certain Style”, *Illawara Mercury*, n.v. (2009), p.34.
- Gare, Nene, & Crawford, Patricia, “Nene Gare and Patricia Crawford: Sally Morgan’s *My Place* – Two Views”, *Westerly*, 32 (1987), pp. 79-84.
- Garland, Caroline, “Pensare il Trauma”, Garland, Caroline, ed., *Comprendere il Trauma: un Approccio Psicoanalitico*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori, pp. 9-32.
- Goldie, Terry, “On Not Being Australian: Mudrooroo and Demidenko”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 21 (2004), pp. 89-100.
- Green, Stephanie, “Wildflowers and Other Landscapes”, *Transformations*, 5 (2002), pp. 1-10.
- Haylock, Bridget, “Enlisting Rage and Speaking Place: Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/haylockpaper.pdf> pp. 1-10. (Accessed 24 June 2013)
- Heiss, Anita & Minter, Peter, eds., *Macquarie PEN: Anthology of Aboriginal Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008.
- Henderson, Margaret, “Subdivisions of Suburbia: The Politics of Place in Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs* and Amanda Lohrey’s *Camille’s Bread*”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 18 (1998), pp. 72-86.
- Hennesy, Gail, “Genocide with Good Intentions, the Stolen Generation and *My Place*”, *Social Alternatives*, 20 (2001), pp. 45-9.
- Hiatt, Betty, “Woman the Gatherer”, *Woman’s Role in Aboriginal Society*, Fay Gale ed., Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970, pp. 2-8.
- Hiatt, L. R., *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Hill, Ronald P., “Blackfellas and Whitefellas: Aboriginal Land Rights, the Mabo Decision, and the Meaning of Land”, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 17 (1995), pp. 303-22.
- Hills, Edward, ““What Country, Friends, Is This?”: Sally Morgan’s *My Place* Revisited”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 32 (1997), pp. 99-112.
- Hohenboken, Angus, “Aboriginal Writer’s Timely Award”, *The Australian*, n.v. (2008), p.3.
- Hughes, Juliette, “The Eyes Have it”, *The Age*, n.v. (2006), p.21.

Hunt, Kathy, "Some Rough Diamonds are Better Left Unpolished", *Weekend Australian*, n.v. (2006), p.14.

Jacobs, M., Jane, "'Women Talking up Big': Aboriginal Women as Cultural Custodians, a South Australian Example", in Brock, Peggy, ed., *Aboriginal Women's Cultural Knowledge*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1989, pp. 76-99.

Jaireth, Subhash, "The 'I' in Sally Morgan's *My Place*: Writing of a Monologised Self", *Westerly*, 40 (1995), pp. 69-78.

Jensen, Erik, "Nobel Laureate Winches Writer into Limelight", *Sydney Morning Herald*, n.v. (2008), p.7.

Johnson, Colin, "White Forms, Aboriginal Content", in Jack Davis, & Bob Hodge, eds., *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers Held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985, pp. 21-35.

Joseph, Laura, "Dreaming Phantoms and Golems: Elements of the Place Beyond Nation in *Carpentaria* and *Dreamhunter*", *JASAL*, n.v. (2008), pp. 1-10.

Joseph, Laura, "Opening the Gates of Hell: Regional Emergencies in *Carpentaria* and *Dreamhunter*", *Southerly*, 69 (2009), pp. 66-80.

Kable, J., "Thoughts on Aboriginal Literature", *Aboriginal Child at School*, 13 (1985), pp. 31-52.

Kolig, Erich, "The Rainbow Serpent in the Aboriginal Pantheon: a Review Article", *Oceania*, 51 (1981), pp. 312-6.

Kurtzer, Sonja, "Vivienne Cleven, *Her Sister's Eye* - "Reviews"", *Australian Feminist Studies*, 18 (2003), pp. 324-6.

Lattas, Andrew, "Colonialism, Aborigines, and the Politics of Time and Space: the Placing of Strangers and the Placing of Oneself", *Social Analysis*, 40 (1996), pp. 20-42.

Lehmann, Petra, "The Music Culture and Music System of Aboriginal Australia", *Aratjara: Aboriginal Culture and Literature in Australia*, Dieter, and Davis, V., Geoffrey, eds., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.

Little, Janine, "Incantations of Grief and Memory. Vivienne Cleven, *Her Sister's Eye*", *Hecate's Australian Women's Book Review*, 14 (2002), pp. 22-4.

Little, Janine, "Incantations of Grief and Memory", *Australian Women's Book Review*, 14, (2002), pp. 22-4.

Lucashenko, Melissa, & Best, Obette, "Women Bashing: an Urban Aboriginal Perspective", *Social Alternatives*, 14 (1995), pp. 19-22.

Madison, Sarah, *Black Politics Inside the Complexity of Aboriginal Political Culture*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2009.

- McCredden, Lyn, "Historicising the Metaphor of Mother Earth", in McDonnell, J., Deves, M., eds., *Land and Identity – Proceedings of the 1997 Conference*, Adelaide: Hyde Park Press, 1998, pp. 126-31.
- McGregor, Russell, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory 1880-1939*, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1997.
- McKenna, Mark, "Anzac Day: How it did become Australia's National Day?", in M. Lake, H. Reynolds et al., *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*, Sydney: Unsw Press, 2010, pp. 110-34.
- McLean, Sandra, "Reality is the Fiction", *The Courier – Mail*, n.v. (2004), p.6.
- Miles, Robert, "Abjection, Nationalism and the Gothic", Fred Botting, ed., *The Gothic*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001, pp. 47-70.
- Mooses, Alexa, "Sparkling Journey Starts with a Punch", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 2006, p. 35.
- Moran, Jennifer, "Indigenous Writer Makes Short List for Coveted Prize", *The Canberra Times*, n.v. (2008), p. 5.
- Mountford, Charles P. "The Rainbow-Serpent: Myths of Australia", in Ira R. Buchler et. Al., eds., *The Rainbow Serpent*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978, pp. 23-98.
- Mudrooroo, Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe, A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, Melbourne: Hyland Publishing, 1990.
- Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia-Milli Milli Wangka*, Raylee Singh, ed., Melbourne: Hyland Publishing, 1997.
- Muecke, Stephen, "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis", *Southerly*, 48, (1988), pp. 405-18.
- Muecke, Stephen, Davis, Jack, & Shoemaker, Adam, "Aboriginal Literature", in Hergenhan, Laurie, ed., *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988, 27-45.
- Myers, R. Fred, "Ways of Place-making", *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 45 (2002), pp. 101-19.
- N.A., "Promising Debut Shows a Writer to Watch", *The Canberra Times*, n.v. (2006), p. 13.
- N.A., "African Mentor for Tara June Winch", *Artery*, 7 (2008), p. 13.
- N.A., "Your View", *Weekend Australia*, n.v. (2006), p. 2.
- Nailon, Brigida, "The Power of Place", *The Australasia Catholic Record*, 83 (2006), pp. 320-332.
- Neill, Rosemary, "The Face – Tara June Winch", *Weekend Australian*, 6 May 2006, p. 3.

- Nelson, Emmanuel S., "Literature against History: An Approach to Australian Aboriginal Writing", *World Literature Today*, 64 (1990), pp. 30-4.
- Neuenfeldt, Karl, "The Ongoing Debate about Women Playing Didjeridu: how a Musical Icon can Become and Instrument of Remembering and Forgetting", *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1 (2006), p. 36-43.
- Nolan, Maggie, "Identity Crises and Orphaned Rewritings", in Oboe, Annalisa, ed., *Mongrel Signatures, Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, pp.107-128.
- O'Brien, K., "Alexis Wright Interview", *Hecate*, 33 (2007), pp. 215-219.
- O'Conner, Penny, "Heritage and Landscape: A New Rate in Comprehensive Regional Assessments", in Maria Cotter, William E. Boyd, Jane Gardner, eds., *Heritage, Landscapes: Understanding Place and Communities*, Lismore: Southern Cross University Press, 2001, pp. 443-457.
- Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean", Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 229-57.
- Perlez, Jane, "Letter from Australia – Aboriginal Lit.", *New York Times Book Review*, n.v. (2007), p. 31.
- Prentis, Malcom D., *A Concise Companion to Aboriginal History*, New South Wales: Rosenberg, 2008.
- Price-Williams, Douglass, & Gaines, Rosslyn, "The Dreamtime and Dreams of Northern Australian Aboriginal Artists", *Ethos*, 22 (1994), pp. 373-88.
- Proshansky, Harold M., Fabia, Abbe K., & Kàminoff, Robert, "Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self", *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 3 (1983), pp. 57-83.
- Punter, David, & Bronfen, Elisabeth, "Gothic: Violence, Trauma and the Ethical", Fred Botting, ed., *Essays and Studies 2001: The Gothic*, Oxford: The English Association, 2001, pp. 7-23.
- Rank, Otto, *The Double: a Psychoanalytical Study*, translated by Harry Tucker, Chapel Hill: University of North California Press, 1971.
- Ravenscroft, Alison, "Dreaming of Others. *Carpentaria* and its Critics", *Cultural Studies Review*, 16 (2010), pp. 194-224.
- Renes, Martin, "Dreamtime Narrative and Postcolonialism: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* as an Antidote to the Discourse of Intervention", *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, 2 (2011), pp. 102-22.
- Riemenschneider, Dieter, "Aboriginal Literary Discourses and Australian Literature", *Aratjara: Aboriginal Culture and Literature in Australia*, Dieter, and Davis, V., Geoffrey, eds., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.

- Rodan, Debbie, "Testimony, Narrative, and a Lived Life", *Balayi: Culture, Law and Colonialism Journal*, 1 (2000), pp. 55-75.
- Rodan, Debbie, *Identity and Justice: Conflicts, Contradictions and Contingencies*, Brussels: Peter Lang, 2004, pp. 105-26.
- Ross, Margaret C., "Australian Aboriginal Oral Tradition", *Oral Tradition*, 1 (1986), pp. 231-71.
- Russo, E. Katherine, "Practices of Proximity: Appropriation in the Australian Contact Zone", thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Schools of English, The University of New South Wales, in partial fulfilment of the degree of PhD, 2007.
- Russo, E. Katherine, *Practices of Proximity: the Appropriation of English in Australian Indigenous Literature*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.
- Ryan, Lyndall, "Reading Aboriginal Histories", *Meanjin*, 45 (1986), pp. 49-57.
- Sabbioni, Jennifer, "Aboriginal Women's Narrative: Reconstructing Identities", *Australian Historical Studies*, 106 (1996), pp. 72-8.
- Sharp, Nonie, "Review. Alexis Wright – *Carpentaria*", *Island Magazine*, 111 (2007), pp. 61-7.
- Sharrad, Paul, "Beyond Capricornia: Ambiguous Promise in Alexis Wright", *Australian Literary Studies*, 24 (2009), pp. 52-65.
- Sheridan, Susan, "Reviews", *Australian Feminist Studies*, 18, (2003), pp. 321-32.
- Shoemaker, Adam, *Black Words, White Page, Aboriginal Literature 1929 – 1988*, Tony Hassall, ed., Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1989.
- Shoemaker, Adam, *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993. Shoemaker, Adam, "Mudrooroo: Australia's Most International Author?", *Aratjara: Aboriginal Culture and Literature in Australia*, Dieter, and Davis, V., Geoffrey, eds., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.
- Shoemaker, Adam, "Mudrooroo and the Curse of Authenticity", in Oboe, Annalisa, ed., *Mongrel Signatures, Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, pp. 1-24.
- Shoemaker, Adam, "Hard Dreams and Indigenous Worlds in Australia's North", *Hecate*, 34 (2008), pp. 55-62.
- Short, Damien, "Reconciliation, Assimilation, and the Indigenous Peoples of Australia", *International Political Science Review*, 24 (2003), pp. 491-513.
- Smith, Sidonie, "Finding Likeness, Reframing Lives", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40, (1994), pp.509-42.
- Somerville, Margaret, "Place Literacies", *Australian Journal of Language and Uteracy*, 30 (2007), pp. 149-64.
- Sonoda, Hirozaku, "A Preliminary Study of Sally Morgan's *My Place*", *The Otemon Journal of Australian Studies*, 35 (2009), pp. 157-70.

- Spivak, Gayatri C., "Can the Subaltern Speak?", http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf ; pp. 66-111. (Accessed 10 April 2013).
- Strohscheidt, Elisabeth, "Land Rights for the First Australians, A Long Way Still to Go", Riemenschneider, *Aratjara: Aboriginal Culture and Literature in Australia*, Dieter, and Davis, V., Geoffrey, eds., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997. pp.50-51.
- Swain, Tony, *A Place for Strangers, Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Taçon, Paul S., Wilson, Meredith, & Chippindale, Christopher, "Birth of the Rainbow Serpent in Arnhem Land Rock Art and Oral History", *Archaeology in Oceania*, 31 (1996), pp. 103-24.
- Thompson, Angela, "Writing a New Chapter: Meet the Coledale Author Hoping to Change the World", *Illawara Mercury*, n.v. (2010), p.9.
- Tiffin, Helen, "Re-Placing Language: Textual Strategies in Post-colonial Writing", in Terence Hawkes, ed., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 38-77.
- Trees, Kathryn, "Counter Memories: History and Identity in Aboriginal Literature", *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan's My Place*, Delys, Bird & Dennis, Haskell, eds., Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992, p. 59.
- Turner, David H., "Dreamtime: Life, Afterlife and the Soul in Australia Aboriginal Religion", *India International Centre Quarterly*, 18 (1991), pp. 4-18.
- Verity, William, "Leaving Home – Profile", *Illawara Mercury*, n.v. (2007), p.7.
- Vernay, Jean-François, "An Interview with Alexis Wright", *Antipodes*, 18 (2004), pp. 119-22.
- Wagner, Benno, "'We Know All about the Past...'" From Mythology to Mythography in Aboriginal Australia", *Aratjara: Aboriginal Culture and Literature in Australia*, Dieter, and Davis, V., Geoffrey, eds., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997. pp.25-26.
- Wesson, Sue C., *Murni Dhungang Jirrar: Living in the Illawarra*, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Hurstville (NSW): Department of Environment and Conservation, 2005.
- Wilson, Peter, "Mentor as Anything", *The Australian*, n.v. (2009), pp. 15-6.
- Wilson, Tikka J., *In the Best Interest of the Child?: Stolen Children, Aboriginal Pain, White Shame*, Fyshwick: Paragon Printers, 1997.
- Winch, Tara June, "Walking Life Glorious Adventure", *The Age*, n.v. (2007), p. 18.
- Wright, Alexis, "Politics of Writing", *Southerly*, 62, (2002), pp. 10-20.
- Wright, Alexis, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *Hecate* 13, n.v. (2006), pp. 1-17.

Wright, Alexis, "A Brief Conversation with Alexis Wright", *World Literature Today*, 82 (2008), p.55.

Wright, Alexis, "Entangled in Mystery", *The Age*, n.v. (2009), p.14.

Wyndham, Susan, "Indigenous Voices and Stories Echo down the Centuries", *Sydney Morning Herald*, n.v. (2008), p.15.

Yengoyan, Aram, A., "Economy, Society, and Myth in Aboriginal Australia", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 8, (1979), pp. 393-415.