

SEARCHING FOR LIVING WATER:
SALLY MORGAN, KIM SCOTT AND GLENYSE WARD
AND THE QUEST FOR ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

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After noting the words of their song *Living Water*, Rosemary Crumlin begins her commentary with these words:

This is... the song the Yagga Yagga women of Balgo sang as they brought to life their painting, Tjibari... It is a song of search, of adventure, of discovery and of celebration. Like a refrain, the song repeats: 'These two women, they painted their body, that's what they did, the painting and dancing and singing.' They were searching for living water, an underground stream that would never dry up. Their journey took them a very long time, during which they changed from children to adults. There was an epic voyage, a search for living water. And they eventually found it, they went underground as the women sang, and the painting shows, these two ancestors, they went underground and today they are still there.¹

Mudrooroo Narogin, in his analysis of contemporary Aboriginal writers, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, borrows from the French critic Roland Barthes a particular perspective on these texts:

... a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author - God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.²

I intend to explore three texts by Nyungar (Aboriginal) writers - Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987); Kim Scott's *True Country* (1993) and Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1993) - from this double perspective: as texts through which protagonists engage in searching for the living water of Aboriginal identity; and as 'multi-dimensional spaces', as 'tissues of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture', where a 'variety of writings... blend and clash'.

In the Tjibari painting from Balgo, in the central desert of north-western Australia, it is possible to trace the journey tracks of the protagonists as they travel through rough country in search of the deep spring of living water. Their song traces their journey from place to place, from Mulirayupungu through rocks, soak water, Wilkinarra and Killikipunda, until they arrived at their destination,

And they gave names
to the country
and they went a bit further down.

They were coming
near the
Living Water.

And there is a sense to be had from both painting and song, that these travellers are not simply moving across the landscape, but that they are being transformed in and through that journey of theirs.

Much has been written about the meaning and context of Sally Morgan's *My Place* since its first appearance more than ten years ago, particularly about the Aboriginality of both writer and text, and about her place and the place of her text as Aboriginal in relation to the white dominant society.³ One writer, John Bryson, argued about links between Sally Morgan the writer and Sally Morgan the painter.

... You can see it's [*My Place*] made by a painter and by the sort of painter Sally Morgan is. What you get is the book cross referencing its own emblematic things and then there is the linear quality of it, like the paintings where you can almost trace with your finger the journey from waterhole to waterhole.⁴

My first edition copy from Fremantle Arts Centre Press has emblazoned on its cover a Sally Morgan painting, threading together, with a clearly marked serpentine journey track, images of people and houses in differing settings, which embody the teller's story of her family through three generations of women.

For Veronica Brady this was not simply the story of a young Aboriginal Australian in search of her roots; the text had a larger meaning in the context of the tangled relationships between white and black Australians.

The story... becomes a genesis story, a search for origins, and it is precisely this kind of story which resonates as much or more perhaps in the non-Aboriginal as in the part-Aboriginal Australian [which] responds to our anxieties.⁵

This issue of the ways in which Sally Morgan's text creates resonances of anxiety and questioning in the dominant society, which Veronica Brady raises, will need to be explored further. Meantime, Stephen Muecke, as a student of cultural studies, has raised questions of ambiguities in relation to both *My Place* and Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl*. He wonders whether such Aboriginal writings have roots in the repressions which a dominant white society creates for Aborigines and their 'black consciousness'. He explores the autobiographical 'confessional' qualities of these two texts and seeks to locate their acceptance in the sphere of the growth in publication of black writing in various quarters of Australian publishing. He also raises questions about the

power relationships which underlie the growing 'popularity' of such books among certain publishing houses and the white reading public.⁶

On one level each of these Nyungar texts is autobiographical, in that it tells the story of a person's life, their journey, their quest. The texts by the two women writers are in the form of autobiography; that by Kim Scott is a novel, though its focus seems to be the unravelling of the journey of the protagonist Billy Storey in search for his 'true country', the roots of his Aboriginal identity.

But to confine these texts to that 'line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning', a single autobiographical line, would be to misconstrue their real meaning.

In spite of the fairly conventional autobiographical form of *Wandering Girl* there are other ways in which this text slips away from the white versions of the genre and stands out on its own as a unique work of Aboriginal literature...

argues Stephen Muecke. And he proposed that one of the more significant focuses of this text is that of food: 'its availability, the prohibitions surrounding it, the delight in its consumption... As in more traditional Aboriginal narratives, places and journeys are about finding food and how different places are characterised by different sorts of food'.⁷ Here an echo with the Balgo women's song and the travellers' search for waterholes as places of refreshment and release in the heat of a desert trek.

Sally Morgan's quest breaks away from the constraints of its genre, too.

My Place also moves away from standard autobiography towards Aboriginal textual convention in one important way. The story, it is stressed, does not just belong to the narrator, Sally Morgan, because she is creating the context for further stories to be told, those of Arthur, Gladys and Daisy Corunna, she is making the book into a collective storytelling occasion for those who have the right to the story, the correct custodians, if you like...⁸

With exposure to texts like *My Place*, *Wandering Girl*, as well as *A Fortunate Life*, and to other Aboriginal writers and poets, as well as to the postmodern novel, Kim Scott's autobiographical narrator's voice in *True Country* inhabits 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings [voices]... blend and clash'. So, Katharine England notes,

Billy's exploration of his interior space, his search for a foothold in the past, takes him to Karnama, an Aboriginal community and decaying Catholic mission on the Western Australian coast. It's an isolated spot, accessible by tourist catamaran or a day and a half's dusty four-wheel drive from Derby in the dry, and intermittently by plane during the wet. It is described in lyrical terms in the first chapter by the Aboriginal voice which acts throughout the book as a kind of Greek chorus - commenting, cautioning, explaining, putting a different point of view, setting the record straight.⁹

This dynamic tension and harmony between the narrator's voice, storyline and search, and the community Aboriginal chorus constantly alerts the reader to sense that this is an Aboriginal text in which the narrator's search is not a solitary experience, but part of a larger context. Billy is drawn by the community and its voices and challenged by the discordant, individualised and often fragmented voices of the dominant whites who are exiles in an alien place and community.

Each of these three quests for identity; each search for living water has a distinctive autobiographical voice. So each needs to be read differently and each has its particular context. Sally Morgan's search for her place, her roots, leads her into her family history, beyond suburban Perth, on a pilgrimage to the Kimberleys and back again. Her search, her questioning about her own origins, and those of her mother, her grandmother Daisy and her great uncle Arthur, releases their voices and they tell their own stories in ways that liberate Sally in her newfound country of Aboriginality. But they are stories of deprivation, loneliness, oppression and pain. Daisy is so scared by her past pain and loss that she resists telling her story and leaves many silences and gaps in that telling.

The experience of this quest leads Sally to reflect:

...The story of my own family is not unique. It is echoed thousands of times over the length and breadth of Australia. It is important for us to discuss and detail such things; to reclaim the past, our families, ourselves; to have something to be; a framework within which we can exist, learn, be proud. In the telling we assert the validity of our experiences and we call the silence of two hundred years a lie. And it is important for you, the listener, because, like it or not, we are part of you. We have to find a way of living together in this country, and that will only come when our hearts, minds and wills are set towards reconciliation. It will only come when thousands of stories have been spoken and listened to with understanding.

... Reconciliation brings wholeness and peace, but the process itself is painful, angry and frustrating. Reconciliation takes time and patience...¹⁰

Her words are to be found in the Foreword to *The Lost Children.*, an edited collection of stories from thirteen Australians 'taken from their Aboriginal families and telling of their own struggles to recover links with their natural parents'. Gladys and Daisy Corunna, Sally Morgan's mother and grand mother were taken from their families at a young age. So traumatised were they by those experiences that they hid their true Aboriginal identity from Sally and her siblings. Sally's search revealed this family past. Her search had this familial context, this communal context of pain and loss. It led her back to her place, 'our place' and had for her this wider Australian context.

Glenyse Ward, too, was taken away from her mother as a small child and taken to the orphanage on the German mission station of Wandering. The book opens with scenes from that institutional life at a place which became 'home' for her. Very soon we are located with the sixteen year old girl who becomes the 'dark servant' of no name to Mrs Bigelow the farmer's wife. The body of the text is focused on experiences at the farm. What is clear from the beginning are both the fierce independence of the 'dark servant' below the obedient, compliant surface, and the unremitting cruelty and racism of her upright, cold, Christian mistress. The tone of the narrative is ironic, sceptical and humorous. Glenyse makes close friends with Bill who gardens at the farm and with a woman shopkeeper in the nearby town. On days when she is alone with Bill, or by herself, the 'dark servant' finds herself and her freedom, subverts the grinding oppression, feasts on forbidden food and makes music. In the end she finds an ally, another girl from the Mission, and breaks free, moves away from the farm and the Mission and begins a new life.

The 'Epilogue' to the book, written in her early mature years, when she has prospered in her chosen career, engaged in adult education, married and begun her own family, is a reflection on her new identity.

There'll be no washing other
Peoples' dishes, or
Getting dropped off at bus-stops
For any of my children.
We will be making sure that our
Kids will be given every opportunity
In their lives to get a good education,
So that they can take their places
In today's society as Lawyers or Doctors,
... - and be equal in the one human
Race! (1993:159).¹¹

This sense of integrity and authenticity at which she had arrived when she wrote *Wandering Girl* was for Glenyse Ward a spring of *living water*. Having arrived there, she could reflect back on her experiences as Mrs Bigelow's 'dark servant' with irony and humour; an irony and humour which mitigated the pain and humiliation which the sixteen-year old girl must have felt. But that same sixteen-year old had a growing spirit of rebellion and independence which was nurtured through close bonds of companionship she had with special others. Thus she was able to subvert the cruel system and to break away. Her 'dark' identity came from birth and ancestry, was defined and reinforced by the racist system embodied by the dominant society. Her bonds of freedom and companionship linked her with others who were marginalised.

She phrases her arrival at the spring of *living water* in terms of a universal and just, shared humanity. So, her autobiography, like Sally Morgan's, but in its own terms, is shaped out of communal relationship and bonds.

True Country is a 'multidimensional space in which a variety of ...[voices] blend and clash'. This text is 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'. The central image, figure is Karnama, the isolated, decaying Catholic mission station and one year in its turbulent life, from wet season to wet season. But the driving metaphor is the exploration of one man's journey to self-awareness, as part-white, part-Aboriginal in heritage. As Kim Scott puts it in his opening 'Author's Note':

This novel began with a desire to explore a sort of neglected interior space, and to consider my own heritage. Having turned my attention to that primary personal territory, and the blank page, I selected some words and images from my little store and scattered them before me. Here I hoped, might be some place from which to begin.¹²

It would be simplistic to trace Billy Storey's one year journey through confusion, conflict, ambiguity towards self-awareness as a single narrative thread, when the tapestry of this text has many discordant, cross-cutting, just as visible threads too. But Billy is, sometimes with naivety, engaged in this kind of search. There are other protagonists besides him, other voices, and there is a shift of narrative voices between Part I and Part II of the novel. In Part I, consisting of 15 chapters, this narrative voice is Billy's own, in Part II, made up of 35 chapters, the narrator's voice is the third person, telling us about Billy and others. These narrative voices are broken into within chapters, (and sometimes occupy whole chapters), by the voice of Aboriginal elders, perhaps giving Billy authority to uncover their stories, but also performing, chorus fashion, as Katharine England has suggested: '...commenting, cautioning, explaining, putting a different point of view, setting the record straight...'¹³ This register is not the voice of educated white Australian English; it is a local Aboriginal Australian voice - direct, earthy, ironic, critical and subversive of the official, dominant culture, yet authentic and authoritative in its own terms, in its own country.

The whites, so divided, so clinging to their own sense of importance and progress, are represented as having a fragile hold on Karnama and its culture and history. This is shown in that powerful early chapter 'Preparations' in which the naive Billy begins to record the history of the early encounters between Aborigines and missionaries and the founding of the station, by tape-recording the testimony of the elder Fatima. What emerges on the tape is a conflict of voices, of oral memory in conflict with the written words of the

missionaries' texts, of challenge and conflict about testimony and truth and of shifts between Billy's and Fatima's telling. They revealed a wall of difference over a shooting incident between missionaries and local people:

It's hard to say. Dislocated? Yes, I felt dislocated by her tone, her sincerity, the nervousness she displayed in talking about this. And, suddenly, still calmly seated at the table, and with the pages fluttering about us, it was as if we were both wrapped in her memory and ascending into the stratosphere like one of those paintings of the Ascension...

But no. Not yet. There may have been a small jolt. Fatima shifted in her chair.¹⁴

Then came time for Fatima to make a concluding statement and to leave Billy's house, with clear instructions for him to write down what she had told him. He helped her down the stairs and to her place, striding back to his house.

I was taking huge strides, barely able to keep myself from breaking into a run, and leaping for the joy I felt within me. I felt I was about to take off, and soar. That's what I thought, even then.¹⁵

Just as Glenyse Ward's fierce free spirit emerged in Bill's company despite her treatment as a 'dark servant', Billy Storey, at this stage, despite the dislocations and misunderstandings between him and Fatima at this recording session, emerged full of joy, in touch with strands of his own roots and was tempted to soar above the murky contradictions of life at Karnama. (This perspective, at a distance, from above the tangled lives on the ground at the station, is another device which Kim Scott employs to help readers sense the changes which are taking place in Billy Storey).

The final chapter reaches some resolution, not necessarily clarity, and is entitled '...And Knowing'. It ends in a wild storm, but begins with Billy fishing for barramundi and trekking through the countryside near the mission station, as most whites leave. We do not know whether he is unconscious or dead after he slipped into the raging river.

The final paragraphs are in three distinct voices. The book closes with the Aboriginal chorus:

The rain spat in the window, onto his face.

I felt it

See? Now it is done. Now you know. True country. Because just living, just living is going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing anykind like mad. We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit new, little bit special, all the time.

We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you.

Billy Storey has come to the spring of living water, the book has come full cycle. The first chapter bore the title 'First Thing, Welcome'. Its opening paragraphs describe the experience of arriving at Karnama by air, as Billy perceives the station from the plane which brings him and other whites from outside. Soon, the Aboriginal chorus voice breaks in:

You alright on higher ground, gather, sing. It may be.

You listen to me. We're gonna make a story, true story. You might find it's here you belong. A place like this.

And it is a beautiful place, this place. Call it our country, our country all around here...¹⁶

So, in his ending is his beginning. Billy Storey encounters his true country in the torrents which rise from the downpour of a storm which ushers in the wet season. This torrent is his own spring of living water.

An early review of *My Place* written by Judith Brett was subtitled 'Breaking the Silence: A Gift to the Reader'. Brett argued,

Being in a family, belonging to a people, is a value stressed again and again in *My Place* and it is just this that has been denied to so many Aboriginal people this century (1987:10).¹⁷

Sally Morgan wrote these words in her dedication 'To My Family':

How deprived we would have been
if we had been willing
to let things stay as they were.
We would have survived,
but not as a whole people.
We would never have known
our place¹⁸

These three Nyungar texts break the silence concerning Australia's 'black' history (in both senses of that word). They subvert the hold which the dominant white society has had through their repression of that history of pain, oppression and loss through the ownership and control of history. These writings belong to that black renaissance which is shaking the old ways of writing history. As each protagonist in these texts engages in their search for the hidden springs of *living waters* they reveal that hidden history and challenge readers to think again what might our shared history be and how we might seek common ground between us.

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