

# AUNTIE RITA'S STORY

JANINE LITTLE

It is appropriate that this paper brings Auntie Rita and Jackie Huggins, at least in spirit, to Canberra. I cracked a bottle of champagne with Jackie last week to celebrate the first two advance copies of her book finally making the trip from the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies press here in Canberra, back to Auntie Rita and Jackie in Brisbane. That trip was long awaited, and this paper will today tell some of the story, which is really Auntie Rita's story. It is a story that is only part of all the tellings and happenings of two single Murri mothers, the writing of their mother-daughter story, the publication process. *Auntie Rita* will be launched formally in Brisbane in September, amid the anticipation and relief of all of those who have witnessed, and perhaps joined, the struggle that these two women have experienced. This is where it goes on the record, because, as Jackie says, it has to be known. From the outset, I want to say that I have heard the argument about experiences of problems and delays with publishing not being confined to Aboriginal women writers. I do not accept that as a reason, however, to ignore the particular silencing of Aboriginal women's voices that keeps colonialist discourses intact. When the stories of Elder women like Auntie Rita are involved, delays and problems in publishing are serious. The chances to rewrite histories and set records straight do die, and of ten the absences are not even recognised.

*Auntie Rita* is a biography that may be called a collaboration between two generations of Murri women. Collaboration is chosen in this instance with an awareness of the particular connotations it has generated within Aboriginal women's studies. These issues might be considered background to the work with Jackie and Auntie Rita, since Jackie herself of ten comments about particular cases that seemed to assist in formulating and steering the *Auntie Rita* project. The comments could be summed up as suggesting that some white women collaborators could go and try to reproduce themselves rather than reproduce her and Auntie Rita in their language.

Critics and researchers in history, anthropology, literary and cultural studies view these collaborations as vital resources for future projects between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. They might, for some critics, be gathered into a genre, marked like any other genre, by the ongoing conflict and debate it generates. Conflict and debate can become heated. But this is exciting, deadly, because women are talking across barriers and negotiating their ground. The scrutinising and dismantling of these barriers is one of the ways in which intellectual criticism can bring about social change in a society which is still undeniably racist (Gunew 10). Debates are played out often through feminist approaches to the disciplines within Aboriginal studies, but sometimes men join in too. Tim Rowse and Bain Atwood are two recent examples, both historians, poised at opposite ends of a debate on Sally Morgan – a long story told elsewhere, but relevant to the publication of *Auntie Rita*, as explained later. Those who argue the collaboration issues vary from all non-Aboriginal critics, non-Aboriginal with Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Aboriginal, distinguished in this way because the language, style, location of and access to the debates often reflect such distinctions. Some seem to translate into the 'I'm glad it wasn't me' genre, others into the 'Big Shame Job'. Collaborative projects in

Aboriginal women's prose are, in any case, fraught. I have argued elsewhere that this may have more to do with dissimilar notions of knowledge and authority than race itself.

This is more of a narrative without corners that could say 'I' in that collaborative tradition of Mary Durack, Daisy Bates, Diane Bell and Margaret Somerville. When it realises it is doing this, however, it also realises that this 'I' need not tell the story of how the non-Aboriginal voice got to speak in the collaborative project. Some of the stories from *Auntie Rita* are known to me because they tell of the place where I have lived most of my life. Inala's writers until now were known for their word economy, developed through the finite number of clean government-owned walls and the content of a can of spray paint. The community has been written about only in newspapers, romanticising and exoticising the place with the familiar tropes of 'thugs', 'gang wars', 'cheap houses' or 'Police fear Blacks'. All true, but only part of the story. Outsiders know it as that place near the dump that's like Redfern or the Bronx, but Auntie Rita and Jackie offer a perspective in prose that enables a comprehension of communities such as Inala as part of a wider programme of social, historical and political control and the strategies people like Auntie Rita, Jackie their family and my family, use to resist it. Auntie Rita's family was one of the first Aboriginal families to live in Inala, 'now the most densely populated Aboriginal suburb in Brisbane' (Huggins 1992, 112).

That weekend we had seventeen people living in our house (which is not unusual for some Aboriginals to have more than that all the time) and it was wonderful. It felt like old times again. It reminded me of Inala days when the Bond boys would come down and make themselves at home with their girlfriends and friends. My friends who were in need of a place to stay the night would also camp over. In fact anyone who I knew was responsible could stay the night. My house was always open and welcome to them. My children thrived on this and to this day it has given them an appreciation about helping other people out by seeing the hordes come and go . . .

(*Auntie Rita*)

I was a kid in a different part of Inala, same hordes though. My house backs onto the house belonging to Auntie Rita's nephew, where her sister, Ruby, lived until her death four years ago, and where her niece and her family now live. I remember Auntie Rita and Auntie Violet visiting the most, but there were so many people around that it was hard to keep track of everyone. I watched mostly – the footy games, and neighbourly fights, usually my sister beating up the boy next door. I was skinny and sick all the time, which is why Auntie Rita still calls me 'that poor little girl'. My sisters knocked around with Jackie's cousins, and my oldest sister still knocks around with Denise. I knew Mrs Martin (Ruby), her kids and the Bond kids, but there were always people around. Families know families who know cousins who have friends, and this continues strong today, especially if someone picks a fight. This, until now, was not written about, and perhaps remains little understood. It was around me all the time, but no big deal, not particularly unusual. Yet it was how I reconnected with Jackie and Auntie Rita, after university culture shock, and how parts of the book *Auntie Rita* connect with my memory and reality. It is an opportunity to see both worlds, a strategy of applying education to social reality. Although the two are not mutually exclusive in this academic setting, they are for most Murri people, and poor whites. When individuals from these groups, especially women, do attain education, its relationship to social reality is defined and inevitably strategic.

The strategy needs to remind us then of those background problems of collaboration, into which hook other aspects of Aboriginal women's storytelling situated at particular historical and cultural points. Auntie Rita says that she always wanted to write her life

story, but she had to educate a daughter to do it. With the added help of a mainstream education that provides conventions of written discourse for a mass of memory and oral stories, Jackie recovers her mother's history, and situates it within her own experience as a Murri woman. In her essay, 'Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person', June Jordan comments:

History prepares the poor, the victims of unnecessary injustice, to spit at tradition, to blow up the laboratories, to despise all knowledge recklessly loosened from the celebration of all human life. (22)

The structure of the Huggins narrative suggests that the mother-daughter shared history facilitates the incorporation of a type of experiential knowledge discussed by Jordan, in these Murri women's stories. For this reason (among others) *Auntie Rita* will no doubt attract comparisons with *My Place*, through its recapitulations of family history as social history, and as a mother-daughter text. The PMP (post-*My Place*) experiences described by writers such as Jackie seem to derive from perceived differences between uncontradictory and ongoing Murri women's experiences, and those of 'born again Aboriginals'. Jackie comments in her article, 'Pretty Deadly Tidda Business':

Yes, I too have lived through every one of those feelings as she related them to me. By virtue of being Rita's daughter, and a close one at that, I possess many of her experiences.

However, as Rita is a product of her time, so too am I. Some of the things she may have been obliged to accept (I say obliged here, as I feel she has never accepted anything), particularly the blatant patronisation, discrimination and subjugation, are like waving a red flag at a bull to me. (114)

The publication process culminating in *Auntie Rita* needs to be viewed as a significant reason for departing from post-Morgan interpretations. I have followed the *Auntie Rita* saga since it began publicly for whitefellas four years ago, and have had the benefit of being able to talk to women in Western Australia and New South Wales about comparable experiences with the publishing system. What was repeated by women such as Glenyse Ward and Rilby Langford Ginibi were the sentiments of how inexperience and personal urgency to set the records straight combined into a sure formula for disappointment and burned fingers. Back home, I was observing the same process with my friends; like so many other aspects of this research, the pattern was there to be traced. Jackie gave a paper at the Women/Australia/Theory Conference at Queensland University in 1990, titled, 'Writing My Mother's Life', outlining aspects of the historical context in which *Auntie Rita*'s story was being produced. She estimated that the Institute of Aboriginal Studies would have the book out in six months, saying:

Recording the memories of elderly Aboriginals is an urgent task, otherwise much information about *Australian* history will be lost forever. (90)

A year later, the typescript was still being edited with no date for completion. How naive she was, she tells me. When *Auntie Rita* only last year suffered a heart attack that almost killed her, the urgency of Jackie's task intensified, along with her frustration with her publishers, the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Although it might be argued, as I said at the beginning, that this experience is not restricted to Aboriginal women writers, the implications for these writers and their work are distinct.

It is where the dichotomy between their social reality and the capacity to attain agency in the institutions of power (of which education is one, mainstream publishing another) assumes a materialist dimension. Redressing this dichotomy has meant a shift in Aboriginal cultural production from the oral to the written, which 'releases material that was previously encapsulated in local or regional setting' (Huggins 1991, 90).

Aboriginal women's manuscripts are accepted, because there is a general, mainstream taste for what is called Aboriginal women's autobiography or life writing, PMP. Once accepted, however, the manuscripts are too often left sitting on shelves as low priority projects (which has serious personal and communal implications when dealing with Elder women), or assigned to editors who have little or no knowledge of Aboriginal culture or expression. Non-Aboriginal women do experience obstacles similar to this, but the historical and cultural influences are not the same. Mudrooroo states that: 'Representation of Aboriginality is directly related to the collective and concrete struggles of Aboriginal people'. The ideological scales have not tipped so far that this relationship can be obstructed without ill effect.

In Jackie's case, the defence from the editor was that some additions were needed and that Jackie had not replied to them. Apparently Jackie had become so pissed off previously when she had sent material to be assessed (and which was left untouched for three months at a time, after an anxious phone call saying, 'What's next? Did you get my stuff?') that no wonder she felt peeved. Jackie tells me that it took her no longer than a month to get the appropriate material back to the publishers in between finding odd jobs to support her young son.

Jackie's first editor, she recalls, sent repeated requests for footnotes in explanation of Murri sayings such as, 'Look Out', and, 'Good Go'. 'How can you explain them?', she comments, 'I tried, but there's just no way you can give an accurate English translation'. Sneja Gunew observes this desire to translate the untranslatable as relating to Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject as the ambiguous, threatening area on the borderlines between meanings. She notes that the threat of language to knowable meaning and subject-formation is particularly acute if the words are situated in a predominantly anglophone context. Gunew suggests that these words-as-abject '... threaten meaning and subject-formation, including the notion of a coherent national identity'; words are feared because they cannot be assimilated (16-17). Words which are apparently English-as-signs, but fail to function in conventional sense-making systems, as in Murri conversation, can either be shaped by editing to fit a national discourse, or they can work to destabilise it. This is a fine discrepancy which, nevertheless, supports the call for aware publishing practices. In Jackie and Auntie Rita's case, this consisted of editor number two, a freelancer, plus editor number three, going literally and methodologically to *their* country.

Jackie received a grant from the Aboriginal Studies Institute to write her mother's story, and she says, was encouraged to interpret Auntie Rita's speech into what was deemed 'acceptable prose'. After working non-stop on the manuscript and sending it to the Press in Canberra, she and Auntie Rita began the long process of redrafting, answering queries, filling in gaps upon request from their first editor, travelling to Canberra for meetings, and waiting. In the middle of last year, Auntie Rita collapsed at her home and was taken to hospital, suffering a heart attack. During, and after, the long illness, both she and Jackie feared that she would not be around to see her book published. They had been waiting more than two years since the initial submission of the manuscripts for the editing to be completed. This is from a story Auntie Rita told me:

Once she was well enough to travel, Auntie Rita accompanied Jackie to Canberra, and arrived at the Institute, asking to see the editor. She was told that the editor was too busy to speak with her. Auntie Rita said she replied that she had brought a pillow and a blanket with her, and would sleep in the foyer until she got to speak with the editor. Jackie was meanwhile explaining that her mother was an old woman, and had almost died waiting for her book to be published. She said she would take the book elsewhere rather than risk any more delays.

A short time after this, a Melbourne freelance editor, Alison Ravenscroft, was assigned to the book, adding the problem of distance between Jackie and Auntie Rita and their editor. Luckily, the women struck it lucky with Alison, according to Jackie, and work progressed to the extent that she visited Brisbane and worked with Jackie and Auntie Rita for three weeks to finish the task. Keeping in mind that political and cultural issues come to the fore in a non-Aboriginal/Aboriginal women's collaboration, it was more luck than good management that Alison proved a good choice. Indeed, the Institute provided three months' funding for a job that took six months, and Alison completed the editing at her own expense.

Jackie says the *Auntie Rita* story was restructured so that it is now mother and daughter talking together, two voices unaltered, telling of their lives and perspectives as two generations of Aboriginal women. Both Jackie and Auntie Rita commented on their experiences in the struggle to publish as involving the contentious issues of collaboration. Their slow progression through the process of textual production, in their view, highlights the difference between an editor participating in the project with tact and concern, and one who attempts to force Aboriginal women as authors and subjects to conform to a prescribed notion of collaboration and biographical writing. The situation of double collaboration - between Jackie and her mother, and between two Aboriginal women-as-subjects and a non-Aboriginal woman as editor offers an interesting comparison with other instances of collaboration. These include: *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs*, in which Margaret Somerville figured as a white feminist sociologist speaking alongside Patsy Cohen; *When The Pelican Laughed* by Alice Nannup with Lauren Marsh and Stephen Kinnane, and *Mumshirl*, by Shirley Smith, with Bobbi Sykes. In many ways, this is the obvious approach, and it has been more refreshing for me to read *Auntie Rita* as Murri women strong in their histories, a small part of which I have shared.

Re-meeting Auntie Rita and Jackie and sharing stories with them is one of the reasons why research in the academy by non-middle-class, non-Aboriginal critics now seems vital. It is not only relevant to our shared memories of community in Inala - a tribute to a system which allowed all of us a good view of the poverty line - but also is a largely unexplored means of combatting social and institutional racism. People of privilege, especially those with privileged backgrounds, are people of power, but privilege takes many forms, as Jackie says in *Auntie Rita*. I have a privileged background: I grew up respecting, sharing and, to a point, understanding Aboriginal culture. It is a double vision, exposing the reluctance to consult with Aboriginal people as an inhibition which has been projected onto all non-Aboriginal critics by those who have never seen, nor heard of any place where blacks and whites spoke the same lingo. Believe me, they exist. This is one story. There are many others.

WORKS CITED

- Gunew, Sneja. 'Feminism and the Politics of Irreducible Differences: Multiculturalism/Ethnicity/Race'. *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*. Eds. Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993.
- Huggins, Jackie. 'Pretty Deadly Tidda Business' *Second Degree Tampering: Writing by Women*. Melbourne: Sybylla, 1992: 112.
- Huggins, Jackie and Rita. *Auntie Rita*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994. All references to *Auntie Rita* are from manuscript with the kind permission of the authors.
- Jordan, June. *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays*. London: Virago, 1969. 22.
- Huggins, Jackie. 'Writing My Mother's Life'. *Hecate* 17.1 (1991): 90.
- Mudrooroo. "'Couldn't Ya Cry If Ya Couldn't Laugh': The Literature of Aboriginality and its Reviewers'. *SPAN* 34/35 (1992-93): 376-83.