A path of words: the reception of autobiographical Australian Aboriginal writing in Italy

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To the Memory of my Father Luigi

The trodden paths, and new paths for the future

The words of Indigenous Australian women took me to Australia several years ago, and one could, therefore, take my title literally, and say that I reached this wondrous continent by following 'a path of words'. However, being fully aware of the fact that 'the syllables / on the page are not / the land beneath the name', as Patricia Sykes puts it, I knew I had to see the *land*.¹ When I did see it, I had the extraordinary good fortune of meeting Jackie Huggins, whose works I had read, and whom I now consider my 'guiding light' in my journey through Aboriginal literature.

I started studying Aboriginal women's autobiographies in 1999 and they remain one of the main interests in my research activity. My work in this area is obviously situated in one or more specific cultural and political contexts, primarily in the Italian contemporary ambit, where my immediate audiences are my students, colleagues and friends. I also intend my activity as a dialogue with colleagues and friends in the antipodes, that is, in Australia. From this position, in the pages that follow, I will provide an account of the state of the reception of Aboriginal literature in Italy today, in areas that include translation, publishing and the academic community.

Creating an Italian audience through translation, publishing and academic discourse

In the Italian context very few Aboriginal texts are known, because they are not translated and disseminated by Italian publishers. Among those one is Sally Morgan's bestseller *My place*, translated as *La mia Australia*² [My Australia], a title echoing Karen Blixen's Italian edition of *Out of Africa* translated as *La mia Africa*.³ Market strategies here clearly overlook the political and epistemological differences among texts which relate to very different contexts, and are spoken from widely different, and even essentially antithetical perspectives.

While Sally Morgan's book is easily found in Italian bookshops, other translated texts, which I deem very interesting and valuable, are quite rare or virtually non-existent. Paradoxically, Mudrooroo is considered 'an Aboriginal writer' in

Italy, while his standing as an Indigenous author is essentially denied in Australia. His work *Wild cat falling, Gatto Selvaggio cade*, was translated into Italian as part of the emerging Indigenous canon.⁴ Even more frustratingly, the fake Aboriginal world created by Marlo Morgan in *Mutant message down under* [in Italian, *E venne chiamata due cuori*] is very popular, and it is difficult to convince people that Marlo Morgan's fiction is not 'Aboriginal literature' by any means.⁵

Clearly in the mainstream Italian cultural world there is much to be done in terms of wider, deeper, and better knowledge and circulation of Australian Aboriginal literature, while other forms of art such as music, visual art and cinema⁶ have in general a wider recognition, although often in a stereotypical way. The notion that dot painting and didgeridoo are *all* the 'Aboriginal art' that exists is fairly common. In this respect it is interesting to witness the reception of a volume on Aboriginal art edited by myself and Franca Tamisari.⁷ The text includes contributions by several Aboriginal artists, including Fiona Foley and Jenny Fraser and is published in Italian in order to inform a wide Italian audience about the vitality of Aboriginal art in the realm of visual arts, music, literature and film. It offers an overview of the complexity of Indigenous creativity in Australia and usually provokes surprise in the Italian reader, as it is meant to shatter commonplace perceptions of Aboriginal culture as exclusively 'traditional', 'timeless' and unchanging, by focusing on the prominent 'urban' dimension of contemporary Indigenous art in painting, multimedia installations, autobiographical writing, poetry, cinema and music.

In Italian university curricula, Australian Aboriginal fiction, poetry and drama are uncommon. Anthropological and historical studies are more widespread, and in this respect the University of Venice has a leading role. As far as literature is concerned, apart from some universities where academics have occasionally shown some kind of interest (for example, the Universities of Padua and Lecce), the Indigenous literature of Australia is presented generically as the problematic 'post-colonial literature', and is not in any case thoroughly examined as a specific cultural phenomenon. The University of Trento is an interesting exception, since in the last few years the study of Aboriginal literature has become a relevant curricular activity. Indeed, I taught three courses for our PhD students specifically on Aboriginal literature, focusing in particular on autobiographical writing. The reception of the courses has been very positive. The students have shown great interest and were very excited by the topic. A relevant and meaningful feature of this positive reception is again the element of surprise: students are always very surprised, and shocked when learning about Australian contemporary history through Aboriginal literature.

Although at undergraduate level curricula do not involve Australian Aboriginal literature institutionally, several of our undergraduate and graduate students

show interest in this kind of literary production. Some wrote their final dissertation on the topics 'Australia and Aboriginal culture'; "'While the stories came out of his eyes and nestled among the coals": Archie Weller's *Pension day* and Australian Aboriginal literature'; 'Aboriginal culture and its expression in women's autobiographical writing'; "'Murries speak, not migloos": Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam pigs* and Australian Aboriginal literature'; '*Follow the rabbit-proof fence*: a reading'.

When I discuss literary works, I invite my students to ponder on the fact that although Australian Indigenous texts do not belong to our cultural traditions, they can, nonetheless, be studied and understood with the same means we employ when reading Italian, French, German or British authors, because literature is an intrinsically trans-cultural practice. This means that the criteria according to which we judge these literary works are always at least double: at one level they are valuable because they convey a political message which needs to be uttered and to be heard; at another level, they must be judged on their relevance in the realm of 'world literature', that is, for their artistic merit. Of course such 'merit' is always relative to the community of readers and their times, so that while all readers may perceive the political message (and accept it or refuse it for political reasons, but the message is indisputable for all of them), not all readers would be prepared to grant the same artistic value to a specific novel or poem. For example, Dr Johnson despised the metaphysical poets and they had to wait for TS Eliot to be fully valorised.

The hermeneutical instruments of my readings of autobiographical Aboriginal writing range from the philosophy of Deleuze and Heidegger, to the works of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, in a dialogic dimension which is intended to be inter-cultural and cross-cultural. In my interpretative activity, I also try to foreground the ethical and political dimension of literature, bearing in mind Lisa Bellear's words: 'Hold me sister / I need your strength / got to keep believing / that somewhere someone / cares'.⁸ What follows is to say that *here*, but also elsewhere, we and others, *do* care.

Indigenous autobiography as/(is) literature

Reading Indigenous autobiographical writing *as* literature is a challenging and rewarding activity. The recent debate over the literary canon has produced a widespread, new awareness of what I would now call the 'literature of identity', be it ethnic, gender, or class oriented. In this sense, researching Aboriginal women's writings is an essentially political activity, concerning, as it does, the representations of both cultural and social difference. Yet it is more than that: a number of autobiographies by Indigenous women whose stories and whose literary status is widely different, share common roots and a common struggle to represent the bond to their own land and culture as marks of authentic selfhood, and constitute at the same time a precise literary phenomenon.

Starting from my previous investigations in the field of the gaze and literature, and specifically on the gaze on/of women in biographical and autobiographical writings,⁹ I will now explore some hybrid autobiographical narratives¹⁰ by Aboriginal women whose stories deserve to gain visibility in the context of a belated, but growing interest in ethnic studies, in particular, three works which have appeared over a little less than a decade, between 1994 and 2002. They are Rita and Jackie Huggins' *Auntie Rita*, Ruth Hegarty's *Is that you Ruthie?*, and Nugi Garimara's *Under the Wintamarra tree*.¹¹ These writers aim at articulating their own experience in the Australian context of the 1920s, and up to the 1960s. Their task in contemporary culture is that of achieving a new recognition of their formerly suppressed and denied 'indigenality'. The political circumstances in which these women grew up did not allow sufficient cultural space to express themselves fully as Indigenous subjects, and furthermore prevented their cultural and political recognition. Writing helps them recover from such cultural loss of visibility, and to claim back a history that was either entirely obscured, or largely misrepresented by government bureaucrats in racist and patronising narratives and reports. These stories are *both* family memoirs and Australian history, their status is therefore inevitably a hybrid condition between literary narrative and historiography.

Rita and Jackie Huggins' words are exemplary in defining the nature and purpose of these autobiographies:

We want the book [*Auntie Rita*] to be a record for my children and their children and other members of my family. Hopefully it will speak to other people, too, including those white people who want to know what the story looks like from the Aboriginal side.¹²

Besides their purpose, and their private and public form of address, we should note Rita Huggins' statement: 'These are my own recollections. I speak only for myself and not how others would expect me to speak'.¹³ She intends to tell her story in her own voice, a sure sign of a recovered identity and self confidence, but also an invitation to the reader to place her utterance in the context of other voices, which can be different, and perhaps even antagonistic.

Whether the so called 'literature of identity' represents a specific literary genre is a question that depends on one's definition of genre, either in terms of theme or in any other terms (including style, structure, chronotope).¹⁴ As I have said above, the recent debate over the literary canon, and the necessity of its expansion beyond traditional parameters of 'high literature', eurocentric and male categories certainly favours a new apprehension of literary forms that are concerned with the issues of race, gender, class and language.

'My eyes fix on a face / a time / a space':¹⁵ some considerations on time and space

One of the main topics in Indigenous autobiographical narratives is the relevance of the issue of the relationship of the protagonists and narrators with the land.¹⁶ This implies an articulation of the category of 'space', which in the literary chronotope is inextricably linked to 'time'. In Rita Huggins' *Auntie Rita*, the relationship with the land is linked to the trauma of deportation. Her story recalls that 'land' and 'home' have a strong and specific sense in Aboriginal consciousness. Despite the lacerating experience of deportation, which Rita Huggins underwent at a very young age, the land remains for her a bedrock of Indigenous existence: 'It will always be home, the place I belong to'.¹⁷ The recollection of the times that Rita had spent in harmony with the wilderness of the bush, and within her clan, gives an edenic overtone to the representation of the wildest of territories, recalling Bakhtin's definition of idyllic landscapes and times.¹⁸ This does not mean that the life in the bush was easy and smooth, we know that Indigenous people often did suffer severe hardship, but in this particular case the landscape is pictured as edenic because it implies the symbolic connotation of a time of past childhood happiness. Huggins feels and evokes the call of this 'paradise lost', and she establishes an ideal and vital connection with her cultural past, which goes back to times immemorial:

Our people lived in this land since the time began. In our land are waterfalls, waterholes and creeks where we swam and where the older people fished. Our mob always seemed cool, even on the hottest days, because the country was like an oasis. There were huge king ferns. I believe they have been described as living fossils because their form has not changed for thousand of years.¹⁹

The political consequences of this type of literature are immediately obvious; less obvious and more subtle are its epistemological implications. The Aboriginal gaze on the land has a specificity that must be discerned before and beyond the problem of legal rights. The land as space to conquer, or the land as commodity, that is the land in the gaze of the colonisers, fails to account for the mythical perception of the land as a sacred and vital space, an entity, a force, and even a human condition, that is the land in the Aboriginal gaze. Cultural difference is fully at stake in the different epistemological perspectives, which can provide, when made visible, the opportunity of a true cultural encounter and exchange. I believe that we need to look at Aboriginal writings in order to create a dialogical return of the gaze. Our reading of these texts cannot be a merely voyeuristic look at something outside, and a sad reduction of other utterances to fashionable 'exotism' or 'orientalism'. Rita Huggins' story is probably the most significant because the most 'typical' in Lukács' sense.²⁰ In fact, it reflects the experience of most Aboriginal people in the twentieth century, whose lives were closely

intertwined, and always painfully so, with the history of the Australian government policies towards Indigenous people.

Likewise, Ruth Hegarty's *Is that you Ruthie?* is the representation of an experience that is not exclusively personal, but rather the common lot of Aboriginal women, victimised by a system created by the invaders, and by its disruptive effect on a millennial culture. Hegarty's book is both the story of a 'dormitory girl' and a historical document on the minute organisation of the government-established Indigenous settlements, and in particular of the sections that were reserved for the children when they were separated from their families and their single mothers.

The story seems to freeze, at a certain point, significantly when the protagonist comes of age at 21, and it begins to revolve around a repetitive and impersonal destiny:

I was twenty-one when I had my second child. [...] I was back to the babies dormitory. [...] 'Can you see the pattern continuing?' I asked myself. It was frightening, and we were all becoming victims of the system and moving back to where most of us started from. Our children, through no fault of their own, could end up making the same journey as we made, and achieving nothing. Caught in the same victim trap, without the ability to fulfil their dreams and goals.²¹

In this narrative, and in others of this kind, Indigenous people's philosophical categories, that is the conception of time and space that, in Heidegger's sense, are the 'original structures' of our human 'being in the world', are totally obscured and repressed. Aboriginal time and space are completely shattered by the disruptive force of an alien gaze, which gives shape to the real in forms that become uncontrollable by Indigenous people. In Hegarty's narrative what was to be 'just a little while' in the camp, due to an economic crisis imported by the colonisers, turns out to be a repeated expropriation of self and culture, across different Aborigines generations. Not surprisingly, the unconfined space of life in the bush exists only in Hegarty's mother's memory, since the space the daughter experiences is limited by barbed wire or by bureaucratic provisions that send her to specific, and still confined places outside the camp.²²

Hegarty's decision to articulate the story of her Aboriginal identity in a novel shows her desire to commit it to the memory of readers. Her writing is clearly meant as a re-appropriation and redemption. In fact, through her mother's accounts, she is able to re-appropriate times and spaces that are now present only in cultural memory, and despite this fact, or perhaps precisely because of this, she writes her story so that it may become a vehicle of shared and living cultural heritage.

'I know that I don't speak the language of my ancestors':²³ the role of language

Nugi Garimara's *Under the Wintamarra tree* is a novel about the return to one's origins, after the experience of deportation and alienation imposed on the natives by colonial rule in Australia. Nugi Garimara's ancestors, belonging to the Mardu tribes of Western Australia, were driven away from their territory in the desert and forced into the 'white' settlements at its fringe. Garimara's mother, Molly, was taken away from her family and place, and regimented into Moore River Native Settlement, from which she eventually escaped, with two young girls, thus accomplishing an unbelievable counter-migration and returning to her homeland. This story is told in *Follow the rabbit-proof fence*, a narrative which has gained international reputation as the film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, directed by Phillip Noyce in 2002.²⁴ *Under the Wintamarra tree* tells a story which is once again a vivid representation of the same cruel destiny for several generations of Australian Indigenous people, and of their resilient spirit of rebellion and survival. The articulation of Aboriginal identity in its deep complexity is exquisitely represented in the following passage which highlights the central role of language in shaping cultural and ethnic identity:

When the sun was high and the heat uncomfortable, the Mardudjara women returned to camp, their *wirnis* filled with *wamula*. Tjirama Garimara and his sons arrived with a cooked kangaroo and a couple of *bungarras* to add to their collection. After the meal of kangaroo meat, *bungarra* and *wamula* everyone rested, as was the custom.

'Who's that?' old Bambaru Banaka asked.

'I don't know, I can't see them clearly yet,' her husband Tjirama replied. As the group came closer, he recognised them. 'It's old man Bayuka, my brother, and his family,' he announced happily. As his family watched the visitors approach they could not know this meeting would lead to a decision that would change their lives forever.

Bayuka and his family were on their way to Jigalong, the government depot for the maintenance teams that travelled up and down the rabbit-proof fence.

Bayuka informed them that everything had run out in their country. There was no food left north of the river. 'We're all starving up there.'

Many clans in the region were migrating to Jigalong because their traditional food sources were disappearing. They were coming to depend on the Government rations from the depot.²⁵

The passage opens the novel and tells about an experience of forced migration and of uprooting from the land which is the beginning of the loss of original

identity. From here stems the need of the protagonist of this *Bildungsroman* of recovering the past, after innumerable hardships and suffering. The symbol of the wintamarra tree, under which her mother gave birth to her, has sacral connotations and literally represents the tree of life.

The colloquial and immediate tone of the passage, which is typical of most Aboriginal autobiographical writings, is a precise and self-conscious literary style, which is far from being assimilable to any form of 'primitivism'. A supposed 'primitivism' in Aboriginal writings and art has often been presented as a mark of 'anthropological authenticity'; on the contrary, it actually represents the basis of too many aberrant readings of Aboriginal texts. Garimara's text demonstrates that these readings are offensively oversimplified and epistemologically wrong, since it is a text that is highly conscious of its literary devices. Let us consider, for example, the inclusion of many words in an Aboriginal language (*wirnis*, *wamula*, *bungarras*). These words are obscure for most 'western' readers, and they both signal and provoke a sense of exclusion of the invaders, not for the relevance of their meanings (they probably have their correspondence in botanical, scientific words in English), but at a symbolic level. The use of such phrases, in this and other Indigenous texts, invite a perception of cultural difference and a salutary resistance to easy appropriations. 'Western' readers are not part of the community represented in the novel, and language is the deliberate instrument of this exclusion. This evokes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of 'minor language', that is a language which inscribes in the hegemonic idiom identity marks which are able to obscure commonplace meaning, and thus derail mainstream discourse.²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari define Kafka's writing as 'a minor literature', that is a literature that deviates from the hegemonic language, but belongs to a community and becomes irrevocably political. It goes without saying that 'minority' here does not mean that the language or literature is simply non-canonical or non-canonised. This is the current use of the term 'minority', that is minority as a synonym of 'marginality'. I do not deny that Aboriginal literature has often been relegated to such a marginal cultural space. However, what I am suggesting is quite another idea involving 'minority' in a specific philosophical sense. The fact that Deleuze and Guattari call 'minor' the language and literature of a canonised and celebrated author like Kafka illustrates the meaning of the term in their discourse as being different from 'marginal' or 'less important'. As already stated, 'minor literature' is for them always collective, deterritorialising, and directly political. The issue is not about canonicity but about the capacity of such literature to compel re-thinking about both politics and literature.

In many Aboriginal novels, Indigenous language skillfully obliterates the linearity of English, in its refusal to use a hegemonic language when presenting a subaltern condition. This linguistic strategy once again accounts for the intrinsic complexity of Indigenous utterances, and foregrounds the necessity of a non-naïve dialogic

attitude, that is a confrontation with alterity within a cultural awareness of difference.

In the previous pages I have advocated a 'return of the gaze' between Aboriginal and Italian culture. A lot still needs to be done to disseminate the knowledge of Aboriginal literature and art in Italy, but the initial work carried out so far, and here illustrated, seems to be promising a wider understanding and deeper appreciation of the meaning and value of Indigenous culture beyond Anglophone cultures.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Sykes 2005: 5.

² Morgan 1998. A second edition of the novel has been published by Bompiani, one of the major Italian publishers, in 2000. On Morgan's book see Di Blasio 2003.

³ Blixen 1954.

⁴ Mudrooroo 2003.

⁵ Morgan c1994.

⁶ In this respect see, for example, the Film Festival *Sguardi australiani* [Australian perspectives] and its catalogue, Tuccio 2002.

⁷ Tamisari and Di Blasio 2007.

- ⁸ Bellear 1996: 23.
- ⁹ Di Blasio 2001.
- ¹⁰ On the concept of 'autobiography' and 'autobiographical gaze' see Carla Locatelli 2002, 2000.
- ¹¹ Huggins and Huggins 1994; Hegarty 1999; Garimara 2002. I have discussed them elsewhere. See Di Blasio 2005, 2005b, 2006b.
- ¹² Huggins and Huggins 1994: 1.
- ¹³ Huggins and Huggins 1994: 1.
- ¹⁴ Bakhtin 1981.
- ¹⁵ Heiss 2007: 31.
- ¹⁶ Tamisari 1999.
- ¹⁷ Huggins and Huggins 1994: 7.
- ¹⁸ Bakhtin 1997.
- ¹⁹ Huggins and Huggins 1994: 7.
- ²⁰ Lukács 1969.
- ²¹ Hegarty 1999: 128.
- ²² For a more extensive discussion of the concept of 'space' in Indigenous literature see Di Blasio 2006.
- ²³ Heiss 2007: 39.
- ²⁴ Garimara 1996; Noyce, Phillip, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 89 min, Jabal Films Pty Ltd.
- ²⁵ Garimara 2002: 1–2, italics added.
- ²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari 1975.