

(Post)Colonial History, Personal Stories. Indigenous (Auto)Biographical Writing at the Intersection between History and Literature

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections and reciprocal interactions between literature and history with reference to texts marked by their Aboriginal authorship. Two life stories published in the last decade of twentieth century Australia spawn reflections on this topic. Here, the analysis and interpretation of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Auntie Rita* focuses on both their literary and historical features, taking into account the emotional and political issues they engage with.

Keywords: literature, history, Aboriginal Australian.

1. By 'inhabiting' language in a distinctive way (Deleuze 1975), and by taking a mostly narrative form, literature finds itself at the intersection of many other discourses. Among them: science, psychoanalysis, linguistics, the visual arts, and history. As far as the question of narration is concerned, history and literature enjoy a unique relationship (Ricoeur 1983; 2000). This long, challenging, and stimulating correlation is characterised by different representations of (the questions of) balance, empowerment, and 'authority' that continue to change over time. Investigating the contact zones between literature and history first requires a theoretical discourse on the specificities of these two human/istic disciplines. This overview, although partial, helps to set the subsequent analysis on firmer ground.

From the tradition of the historical novel to the 'linguistic turn' of the twentieth century, the interdisciplinary interplay between these two discursivities has changed, especially considering the concept of the "literariness of history", and the fact that historical discourse itself is now inescapably bound to the concepts of "emplotment", in Hayden White's terms (2010), or of "*mise en*

forme” in Paul Ricoeur’s. “History” can imply a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it is intended as a repository of the past, which it uniquely ‘preserves’ and represents through the reconstruction of the chain of events, acts, and moments that have led to, and shape, a given cultural context; on the other hand, by so doing, history articulates itself as a discourse, (re)telling those ‘facts’ from different points of view, in *narrations* that may obviously widely differ. The intersections between literature and history, as disciplines and as forms of knowledge, are precisely related to their intrinsic proximity to narration, which implies intricate elements of contiguity between the two.

(Post)colonial texts are especially interesting in this respect, since literary works from these contexts greatly contribute to the reconstruction of a past uttered by voices that reflect different levels of empowerment. In order to tackle this issue, what follows will focus on, and interrogate from a critical perspective, two texts by Australian authors whose voices are suspended between literature and history: *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (1996), and *Auntie Rita* by Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins (1994). According to Barbara Foley’s terminology, these texts are also definable as “documentary novels”, given that, as Foley puts it, this specific subgenre “constitutes a distinct fictional kind. It locates itself near the borders between factual discourse and fictive discourse, but it does not propose an eradication of that border” (Foley 1986: 24f).

Both texts date back to the mid-1990s (1996 and 1994, respectively); this is in itself an important trait as far as the critical discourse on the interplay between history and literature is concerned. In fact, this very moment in the recent history of Australia was significant for several reasons: about three decades had passed since the first Aboriginal Renaissance of the sixties, marked by a new collective political awareness concerning the vindication of the rights of indigenous people, along with the first flourishing of Aboriginal literature, marked by the publication, in 1964, of *We Are Going* by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, then still Kath Walker¹; the controversial celebrations for the Bicentenary (1988)

¹ Effectively, Aboriginal authors’ access to writing (and publishing) began several decades earlier; in this respect, David Unaipon’s *Legendary Tales of the Australian*

of the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney in 1788 were just a few years away; in 1991, the Commonwealth Parliament established a Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, which eventually led to the foundation of, and was superseded by the non-government, not-for-profit foundation Reconciliation Australia, in 2001; last but not least, during this period a meaningful contribution to the reconstruction of the colonial and postcolonial past of the country came from the publication of a great deal of biographical and autobiographical writings, mainly by women authors (Di Blasio 2005).

To this genre belong both *Auntie Rita* and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, which are analysed here in terms of the different but equally intriguing relations they entertain with Australian history. Overall, the first can be read, in its opening chapters, as the 'emotional', and symbolical, indigenous counterpart of the chronicle of the British invasion in Western Australia at the beginning of the nineteenth century; on the other hand, the second text tackles the interplay between history and literature through its hybrid form. This work addresses our topic from the point of view of the *modus operandi* of the two disciplines, while representing postcolonial Australian society in a Lukácsian perspective based on the vicissitudes of the main character's life in the twentieth century. In both cases, literature plays a special role in re-telling the history of Australia through the stories of the original inhabitants of this vast continent, and these stories provide a version of history that probably would never have been told, if not voiced through these texts and according to *their ways of putting things*.

2. Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, by now an Aboriginal classic, was adapted for the screen in a mainstream production directed by Phillip Noyce in 2002, and thus reached worldwide audiences. Published in 1996, it is a relevant biographical text participating in the cardinal process of Aboriginal voices accessing writing and visibility in the last decades of the twentieth century (Brewster 2015). Garimara's text embodies key features of Aboriginal literature and can be interpreted as an

Aborigines (1924-1925) is a case in point. However, from the sixties onward the Aboriginal literary presence acquired a new pervasiveness.

Aboriginal epos as well as a historical document in the postcolonial history of Australia. Memory, in various forms of subjective and collective remembering, is often intertwined in the book with the hegemonic and official recordings of Australian history.

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence will be taken here as the epitome of the narration of colonial history, and this analysis will focus on the first part of the book, a *de facto* re-telling of the tragic turning point of the invasion, narrated according to indigenous points of view.

This text has gained worldwide visibility as the postcolonial story of three girls, namely the mother and other relatives of the author, forcibly removed from their families and home country and institutionalised in the Moore River Settlement in the 1930s. This is certainly a prominent feature of the plot, revolving around the vicissitudes in the lives of three members of the Stolen Generations, differently but still all deeply affected by the then customary governmental policy of separating 'half-cast' children from their families in order to raise them in the Western way (and eventually to gain a cheap workforce to be used in household work and farming). The centrality of this aspect is probably reinforced by the fact that the aforementioned film focuses exclusively on this storyline in adapting the life story for the screen.

The first part of the original written text, though, extends to cover a wider segment in the history of Western Australia, going back to the nineteenth century, *i.e.*, to the *colonial* past of this state². In three different sketches, we are taken back to the establishment of the first military post by Edmund Lockyer, who in the 1920s led an expedition to claim Western Australia for Britain, to the creation of the Swan River colony in 1829, and to the slow and inexorable decline of Aboriginal culture throughout the century, up to the postcolonial phase when what is acknowledged as the main storyline of the abduction of the three girls takes place.

In the first three chapters, the vivid and tragic narrative of the first colonial contacts accurately represents the historical reconstruction of the moment of the invasion, as well as the subsequent dispossession, told from the perspective of the Aboriginal people.

² It is worth noticing that Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010) superbly addresses this very period of Australian history, also exploring early contacts between Aboriginal people and newcomers around this area.

The very opening of the book is splendid and iconically effective:

It was still very cool in the early summer morning: the fresh, clean air he breathed into his lungs felt good. He stood up and stretched his arms above his head then dropped them to his side. He was the first to rise. This was not unusual, Kundilla always woke before anyone else and this morning was no different from any other. He looked slowly around at the sleeping forms covered by warm animal-skin blankets, lying outside their shelters made from branches and slabs of bark. There was no shortage of trees and shrubs around here, that is why this spot was chosen for the winter camp. Kundilla walked silently to perform his early morning rituals, away from the camp, which was situated in a clearing a hundred metres from the river. On his return he stopped along the banks of the river to pull up the fish traps he had set the previous evening. How peaceful it was, with the sounds of birds twittering high above, amid the leafy branches of the giant river gums, and the occasional splash of the fish in the river. Dawn was his favorite time of day. As the sun rose he could meditate and reflect on the events of the past few days but, more importantly, he could plan future activities without interruption and distraction.

Little did he know that soon devastation and isolation would shatter his tranquil environment; that this pristine forest would echo the anguished cries and the ceaseless weeping of thousands of people – his people – as they were tormented by foreigners and driven off their land.

His long, wavy, gray hair and thick white beard heightened his dignified appearance as he approached the camp carrying two fish traps filled with marrons and gilgies for his family's breakfast. He had power and strength which commanded respect. (Garimara 1996: 1f)

The hieratic figure of Kundilla, set in a natural environment, which is also culturally connoted as his people's *place*, appears at ease and in control: "he had power and strength which commanded respect". A symbol of sovereignty *over* and *in* his own land, right on the verge of the catastrophe of the invasion, Kundilla is a piece of history inserted in a form of literary narration that fosters empathy in the reader, and promotes an emotional understanding of the historical facts involving this character and his people. Kundilla also expands to symbolically embody all of his people, and ultimately his country, inexorably doomed to experience the trauma of dispossession and alien violence.

In the following chapter we find other Aboriginal characters; they are hunters, presented as perfectly in control of a harsh environment

and very skilled in the art of making the most of it, according to a millenary and 'sustainable' lifestyle. These same people are soon confronted with the enemy, when Captain Fremantle's fleet arrives, claiming possession of that very land, and using a foreign and alien language that is the epitome of the unidirectional and coercive action of the invasion:

"All agreed, er, um gentlemen," [Fremantle] said standing to attention. The Nyungar men glanced once again at Dayup, who was just as stunned and confused as they were. He put his hands out in front of him and shook his head in despair and frustration. He truly wished that he understood the language. He turned to his kinsmen and told them, "I don't know what he's talking about."
 "I take it that we are all agreed and that I have your consent," said Captain Fremantle nodding to the Nyungar men who stood motionless, staring blankly at him. (Garimara 1996: 9f)

Dayup's preoccupation with understanding is here especially striking, his "despair and frustration" account for a willingness to gain knowledge that is totally alien to the self-assured and arrogant newcomers, with their condescending haughtiness. This literary rendering of the imbalance of power (and lack of mutual understanding) effectively echoes, in literary discourse, what Paul Gilroy says on the political (and again, historical) side: "In Australia and the United States, the history of dealings between governments and the indigenous occupants of their territories is also replete with evidence of a total warfare that fully substantiates James Gump's description of it as 'imperial overrule'" (Gilroy 2004: 50).

The third act in colonial history, which once again *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* graphically imparts, is the alienation of a people not only from their sovereignty, but also from their traditional ways of life, beliefs, and livelihoods, and ultimately their personal (and political) freedoms:

Cut off from their natural food source, the Nyungar people expected these white settlers to share some of their food with them.
 "We will take a sheep, they have plenty, they won't miss one," said Bidgup. His young brother Meedo agreed.
 "If there isn't going to be any sharing of food, we'll help ourselves."
 When the brothers were caught spearing a sheep they were the first of

many Nyungar men to be brought in to be sentenced under the English law. They received several years imprisonment and were transported to Rottnest Island Penal Colony. Their people stood on the banks of the muddy river as they sailed away to their prison. Their elderly parents and wives and children wept and wailed, while others watched silently as they were shoved roughly, their legs in irons, into a boat and sailed down the river, out to the open sea. They were never seen again. Hundreds of others followed them, bound in chains, across the waters into the unknown. (Garimara 1996: 14)

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the watershed of the inception of Australia's colonial history is then translated into the empathic and effective powerfulness of literary discourse, integrating historical and political knowledge with its narrative, as well as memorial and emotional awareness. With respect to this last aspect, the specificity of the narrative discourse is central to the emotional insight, since the narrative (that is, the recounting of a story) implies a proximity with the "representation of life". This is what makes literature so powerful in eliciting empathy and emotional understanding, given that, as John Gibson puts it, "the way a story is told matters immensely. To tell a story a certain way is to invest it with a kind of significance, with a point" (Gibson 2011: 3). Furthermore, as Berys Gaut states, "narration can position viewers both cognitively and emotionally, and [...] doing so can teach them things of some importance about the actual world" (Gaut 2011: 42).

The first part of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* can thus be considered an effective literary re-telling of the history of colonial Australia. Likewise, *Auntie Rita* is the literary compendium, and a sort of 'historical archive' of Australian postcolonial history.

3. *Auntie Rita* revolves around the story of Rita's life, from the experience of the reserve back in the 1920s and 1930s, to the Aboriginal Renaissance in the last decades of the twentieth century. In its typicality, Rita's story intersects and interweaves with the Australian macro-history of the time, and with the other infinite micro-histories of the Aboriginal Australian living in the same period. In the text, the two voices of Rita and Jackie are present together, each one indicated by its own graphic format (italics correspond to Jackie's voice), and each one characterised by a very precise style. The orchestration of the two voices determines the

hybrid and composite nature of the volume. Jackie, the daughter *and* the historian, contributes to the hybridity of the text by adding a precise historical perspective. Through her intervention within and alongside Rita's narration, Jackie situates Rita's story within a framework: the twentieth-century macro-history of Australia in general, and Queensland in particular. Documentary sources are added to the text (pictures, a certificate of exemption, letters) so as to demonstrate this adherence to the historical method. In fact, as I have already suggested, Jackie Huggins is a historian, or, as she shrewdly but seriously says about herself "an Aboriginal historian, rather than a historian who happens to be Aboriginal" (Jackie Huggins 1998: 120).

The continuous and close relationship between literature and history one finds in *Auntie Rita*, given its mixture of two genres, has the function of highlighting the empathic effectiveness of the narrative genre with respect to that of the treatise; Rita is a captivating storyteller, certainly because of her personal ability, but also because of the genre she uses: the storyteller wins over the historian, and, in a broader sense, literature wins over history by capturing the reader through an imaginative, 'iconic' and emotional involvement with the *facts* that are related. At the same time, however, Jackie's voice sometimes changes, moving from a professional tone to a more colloquial one, or yielding to her emotional involvement, thus promoting the stratification of different genres and discourses in the text, and contributing to its originality.

Historiography has a precise *modus operandi*, focused on researching, studying and relying on sources in order to transmit facts, and make sense of them. The very concept of 'making sense' of historical facts, though, eventually shows the ineluctable proximity of history to narration. History is thus constituted by a narration that is grounded in documentary sources; in contemporary perception, the different possible outcomes of this/these narration/s make *History* a non-univocal *story* (Locatelli 2010: 7). In other words, it is possible to perform very different, and differently integrated narrations of the 'same' history, relying on different sources, or even the same ones dealt with from different perspectives. History, therefore, ceases to be a univocal discourse on 'facts', because of the epistemological premise according to which facts exist precisely in the narration that includes them, and not in an absolute sense

(Ricoeur 2000; White 2010, 1987). As Roland Barthes puts it, “*Le fait n’a jamais qu’une existence linguistique*” (Barthes 1993: 164).

A further aspect that innovates the discourse of and on history in these works is the fact that the “*grand récit*” (Lyotard 1984) of macro-history is flanked by the “*petit récit*” of micro-history (Ginzburg 1976). In other words, the use of alternative sources that lead to a ‘bottom-up’ historical reconstruction is of great importance in *Auntie Rita*. In this way, a counter-history is produced (Gallagher 2000), an alternative history that originates precisely from minority groups counter-reporting on official history, on the basis of their direct knowledge of the facts that are being narrated; in the neo-historical perspective, these counter-narratives can start from other documents, not considered “sources” in the orthodox sense, such as literature, oral accounts, or other forms of individual memory.

I have dealt elsewhere with the proximity of this text to orality in terms of narrative effects (Di Blasio 2018). Here I deal with it in terms of cultural memory by referring to Aleida Assmann’s positions in “Memory, Individual and Collective” (2006). Assmann focuses on the relevance of both individual and collective memory in political analysis and investigates the close relationship linking the one to the other. As a political agenda, preserving and transmitting individual memory contributes to creating collective memory, and ultimately a sense of collective identity relying on *shared* cultural memory.

In the scenario of cultural expropriation characterising the colonial and postcolonial history of Aboriginal people, it is easy to imagine how difficult it was for Aboriginal people to preserve and transmit historical documentation on the invasion and abuses of white supremacy. Epistemologically linked to an oral system of knowledge transmission, Aboriginal people inevitably struggled to preserve this specific way of telling (*i.e.* oral narratives), that nevertheless suffered a drastic setback under the white regime in its subsequent phases of domination. Everything traditional from an indigenous point of view – language, customs, ceremonies, religious beliefs, codes of conduct, oral and customary legal systems – had been discouraged in a coercive way. Moreover, the dispersion and separation of original groups caused by the reserve system and by protection and assimilation policies contributed to the dispersion of shared oral traditions, both ancient and modern. This implies that, since the oral tradition has not been safeguarded, or has been

severely compromised, and the access to writing has been quite arduous³, the Aboriginal version of history has run the risk of getting largely lost, making it difficult to renegotiate the possibility of intervening in a historical narrative strongly conditioned by an imbalance of power tipped towards the colonial (and postcolonial) regime. One of the paradoxes that can be observed in *Auntie Rita* lies in the fact that, while perfectly conscious of the methodology of historical research, and its *modus operandi* rooted on access to sources, Jackie Huggins has to face the impossibility of accessing these very sources, a further effect of the still ongoing and various forms of silencing that Aboriginal people have to confront:

One of the many contemporary forms that the silencing takes is the resistance that Aboriginal people meet in white bureaucrats when they attempt to see Aboriginal records. Files were compiled on every person who had lived on a reserve, in Queensland and elsewhere, and often were continued long after the person had moved on. As part of writing this book, we sought access to my mother's personal files held by the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs in 1990. When I first made inquiries about seeing my mother's file, I was made to watch across a huge desk as two white public servants turned the pages. Watch, not touch. (Rita & Jackie Huggins 1994: 4)

In this course of events, it is of vital importance to preserve what can be salvaged from the cultural memory handed down in the voices and lives of people directly involved in the facts, otherwise left at the mercy of a biased but 'official' historiography. From this perspective, *Auntie Rita* is not only the narrative of the individual hardship and discriminations Rita had to endure, it is also a counter-history in the strict sense of the term. Moreover, I propose to view it as a form of "minor literature", to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1975) terminology, a literature endowed with clear and stringent political relevance. *Auntie Rita* is both a micro-history, and a counter-history, that stands out against the scenario of the "grand récit" of macro-history and contributes to re-narrating it. Just like all these forms of storytelling, it becomes *a version* of the story itself, which does

³ On how Aboriginal communities developed their own cultures of reading and writing, see the very interesting book by Penny Van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia* (2006).

not oppose the official history but can and should participate in it, helping historians to (re)write it.

4. In the books that have been taken into consideration, the characters' individual, and yet extremely representative stories interface with the macro-history of white policies towards indigenous people. These (auto)biographical narratives of struggle, resilience, and achievement place themselves at the intersection between literature and history in an emblematic and meaningful way, and they contribute to shaping and recording a recent and traumatic past, whilst concurrently becoming a form of recovery from the lived trauma. They are a powerful means of reconstructing and sharing a decolonised indigenous *Weltanschauung*.

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