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# The Power of Form: Indigenous Australian Autobiography, the Rewriting of History, and the Fiction/Non-Fiction Divide

According to a statistical report, the autobiography stands among the most frequent literary genres of published Indigenous Australian literature (Cooper et al.: 11). Indigenous autobiographies have indeed increased in the Australian market since the Bicentenary of British settlement in 1988, with well over 177 book publications produced (Haag). Different theories have been canvassed about the possible reasons underlying the proliferation of published Indigenous autobiographies and literature in general, including changes in funding policies, the nexus between publications and broader inter-national events, the vested economic interest of publishing houses, and the success of Sally Morgan's bestseller *My Place* (1987), which has spawned subsequent publications in the very genre (e.g., Brewster: 7; Shoemaker: 75; Muecke; Haag: 8-9).

Quite another reason, I contend, lies in the genre of the autobiography itself.[1] The autobiography is, after all, an ideal form through which to convey history—a motive that characterises most Indigenous autobiographies. The common assignation of autobiography to non-fictional forms further corroborates the conveyance of history. Thus, I put forward the theory that published Indigenous autobiographies flourished at particular points in time when the needs for publicising historical experiences coincided with demands for seemingly authentic Indigenous histories. They have also flourished because Indigenous autobiographies are published in a *non-fictional* genre that allows the establishment of an immediate alliance between personal experiences and (truthful/authentic) history.

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[1] Scholarly writing on autobiographical theory is distinguished by a great complexity. Key texts are Olney; Smith and Watson; Lejeune.

The present article examines the fiction/non-fiction divide from the perspective of (specialist) readers of Indigenous autobiographies. Based on a range of interviews[2] conducted with Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers—authors included—it poses the question of whether the differentiation between fictional and non-fictional genres plays a role in designating Indigenous autobiographies as historical documents. Does the differentiation influence the ways in which the autobiographies are received? Does it affect the perceived truth of the work? This question has two underlying considerations. First, the difference between fictional and non-fictional classifications allows an examination of the relevance of the truth effects of genres, and, thereby, also allows one to ask whether the genre classification was decisive in determining history and truth, respectively. The second consideration is to identify possible underlying meanings, both in interweaving truth with fiction and also in adopting fictional genres to counteract historical narratives.

## History and Truth in Indigenous Autobiography

History forms an important theme in Indigenous autobiography. In scholarly analyses, Indigenous autobiographies are often classified as *Indigenous* modes of history (e.g., Attwood: 123; McGrath: 373). Moreover, many authors themselves emphasise the historical value their stories bear. In Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), Arthur Corunna says: "It's history, that's what it is. We're talkin' history" (163). In a similar fashion, Alice Nannup concludes, "I had to tell those things because they are the truth and part of doing this is the hope that all people, young, old, black, white, will read this book and see how life was for people in my time" (217-218).

The genre of the autobiography is crucial in this respect because it is germane to history. Loosely defined, both genres are concerned with incidents that happened in the past. Conversely, Indigenous modes of history are close to what in a loose sense can be termed autobiography. Lyndall Ryan captures some characteristics of (published) Indigenous Australian history: the motivation to testify to Indigenous survival, the distinctive forms of Indigenous style and humour, the absence of bitterness, the centrality of the author, and the idea that the historian was part of the history (56-57). In short, the autobiographical genre is a constitutive part of what has come to be called Indigenous history. This form of history is based on the memory of personal experiences, sometimes reaching back over many generations and thus relating to wider historical contexts that involve the family and community. As Isabel McBryde remarks, "[t]o Aboriginal people, a history that is grounded in personal and family histories or accounts of familiar territory (country) has primacy" (12). Put another way, Indigenous history is derived from both an autobiographical and a local background, with personal experiences as the basis of historical accounts.

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[2] I conducted 22 qualitative in-depth interviews with researchers in the areas of Indigenous Studies, History, and Literary Studies; all respondents are specialised in Indigenous literature, autobiography, and/or history. This also includes authors of autobiographies and fiction.

Furthermore, many authors stress not merely the historical value but also the veracity of their stories: "I speak the truth and I speak of what I know" (McKellar 167). Similarly, Della Walker insists that "[t]his story, it's true. It's not made up what I'm telling you in this book" (14). Quite separate from such explicit remarks, some autobiographies also contain a multitude of cross-references ranging from file extracts to police records, and citation of secondary literature (e.g., Huggins and Huggins 34-35, 49-50, 53-54; Hegarty 111).

One of the most telling examples in this respect is a booklet by Marjorie Woodrow entitled *One of the Lost Generation* (1990). This self-published and seldom-cited autobiography contains 60 printed pages, 65% of them consisting of mere file extracts and historic letters.[3] Such overwhelming trust in archival verity indicates the high value attached to truth. After all, in light of the *History Wars*, in which the violent moments in inter-racial Australian history have been severely downplayed, truth has become a prevailing issue. When asked about the reasons behind inserting file extracts in her mother's biography, Jackie Huggins in her interview confirms the relevance of truth:

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[3] Pages written by the author ∑=21; (pp.5-6, 11-26, 57-59); the rest (∑=39) consists of files.

> It was an artefact for presenting the truth or an evidence of historical reference. [. . .] And it's good when you have those things because they're there in black and white. How can you change a signature or a date from 1908? (Personal interview, 18 Aug. 2004)

Truth is an essential component within the context of Indigenous autobiography. Much of this importance relates to the truth of the genre, more precisely, the 'truth effect' that emanate from a genre. Though truth is not part of the literary definitions of autobiography—it is usually defined as a text in which the names of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist match (Lejeune 26)—autobiography is nevertheless married to truth, especially when reading strategies are taken into account. As Margaret McDonell states, "readers' perceptions of truthfulness and authenticity are integral to the acceptance of autobiographic writing." (60).

These commentators recognize that readers have considerable expectations regarding the veracity of autobiographical accounts. Simmering debates over hoaxes or presumable falsehoods are a reliable indication of this hypothesis. For example, such a debate erupted when Leon Carmen, a white taxi-driver, was exposed as having published the autobiography of 'Wanda Koolmatrie, a Pitjantjantara woman' who, as must be added, had never existed.

Furthermore, from the authors' standpoint, the aura of truth in non-fictional genres serves to underpin veracity. Put simply, the history (re)writing author gains credibility by choosing a non-fictional over a fictional genre. Although history conveyed through fictional genres is not necessarily false (White 1987), readers can easily dissociate themselves from accounts they believe unreal. Some scholars have indeed advanced the argument that Indigenous authors favoured the autobiography because of the truth assumption that enabled the conveyance of personal experiences and witnessing (e.g., Watson 125-126, 193-194; Westphalen 96).

## The Fiction/Non-Fiction Divide

History and truth are seen as being important to Indigenous authors. This importance might enhance the relevance of non-fictional genres because non-fiction is broadly associated with stories that rely on verifiable facts and thus, historical truthfulness. More precisely, one is led to assume that if Indigenous authors intended to write history, they would choose a non-fictional genre. As already outlined above, some scholars have indeed proposed such theories, assuming that Indigenous authors chose to write in the autobiographical genre precisely because of the perceived truth of the genre. Yet, though this presumption may sound logical, it is not always true empirically, particularly with younger and emerging authors. As Melissa Lucashenko says:

> I call my books novels. Certainly, they are novels with a strong historical flavour. [. . .] I would agree that what I do in my books is rewriting history—if not rewriting, then at least complementing or establishing history and providing an alternative voice or alternative viewpoint. (Personal interview, 17 Aug. 2004)

Another Indigenous author I consulted prefers to write in the genre of historical fiction in order to address a younger readership:

> My novel is in the genre of historical fiction; the characters are created, but also I had to sign a contract with the publisher saying that all the facts, all the dates and policy and everything was historically accurate. That it has all been researched by whitefellas. The reason for doing it in that format—the historical novel as a journal—was so that young people, who aren't going to read an academic text, can actually learn about the significant moment in Australian history. (Anita Heiss, Personal interview, 12 Aug. 2004)

In her published dissertation *Dhuuluu-Yala* (2003), Heiss goes even further, arguing that the rewriting of Australian history was inherent to all genres of Indigenous literature (36), thus somehow suggesting that genre plays no role in reading Indigenous literature with regard to its historical contents.

What is more, this ambiguous picture of genre classification of Indigenous autobiographies also applies to scholarship in which Indigenous autobiographies are—at least in some quarters—categorised as fiction and/or novels. Carole Ferrier has written the most technical theoretic text on the reasons for calling Indigenous autobiographies 'novels'. The author's aim is to include Indigenous autobiographies in literature courses, in order to analyse literary aspects such as language and style (Ferrier 201-202). However, Ferrier does not relate her genre assignation to historical truth—Indigenous novels were, as her text suggests, no less truthful than autobiographical/non-fictional texts.

Other scholars, too, employ the term 'novel' (without defining it) for particular Indigenous autobiographies. For instance, Sonja Kurtzer, without making explicit the reasons for her genre choice, terms Glenyse Ward's autobiography *Wandering Girl* (1987) a 'novel' (183), just as Stephen Muecke considers *My Place* (1987) a novel (1988). Yet given that Indigenous autobiographies are suffused with history, how does this suffusion then square with a fictional genre like the novel? After all, the novel has, at least to historians, a weak status as a format for conveying history. This does not mean that one should consider autobiography and history as truthful *per se*. Autobiography and history are in a sense fictional as they are *narratives* of the past. However, non-fiction is nonetheless *perceived* as historically more accurate not just because it is verifiable. This belief may also apply to common readers, for reminiscences written entirely in a fictional genre are usually not recognised as truthful and historical, let alone eligible for the rewriting of history. Significantly, the frequently heated debates arising over presumable hoaxes testify to the nexus between *non*-fiction and veracity (Egan 2004).

Considering that Indigenous autobiographies are also described as novels and thus as fictional, and that Indigenous literature is always an attempt to re-write (white) history, the question becomes whether the distinction between fictional and non-fictional genres is important in *reading* Indigenous autobiographies as historical documents. Does it, in such context, make a difference if the Indigenous autobiography is classified as a fictional genre? I always confronted my interviewees with one particular question: 'Why or why not is it important to differentiate between fictional and non-fictional genres in Indigenous autobiographical writing?' I hasten to add at this point that I did not make 'truth' or 'history' explicit in my question and never mentioned either word in conjunction with it.

The reason for asking this particular question is to verify the relevance of the truth of the genre when reading Indigenous autobiographies as historical texts. After all, genre is not merely a literary category defined by scholars for scholars, but also a form of interaction between reader and author, thus "a specific type of artistic or cultural composition, identified by codes which the audience recognize" (Anderson 136). While this study has its focus on a scholarly audience—an empirical study of common readers would probably yield different results—it nonetheless gives a graphic picture of the importance of non-fiction/fiction categories in reading Indigenous autobiographies as historical documents. Thus, here I am not merely interested in the motivations of authors to employ fictional or non-fictional genres when communicating history, but also in readers' perceptions of Indigenous autobiographies as historical texts.

The interviews indeed show significant differences between authors and readers. While some authors think it important to write in non-fictional genres when conveying their historical experiences, the bulk of them do not deem the genre classification important in this respect. For example, Ruby Langford Ginibi, author of several autobiographies, perceives non-fictional genres as truthful *per se*. She was very emphatic about this issue when I asked her whether it was important to differentiate between fictional and non-fictional forms:

> No, it's not a novel; it's the truth. Because it is the truth. And I mean everybody that I wrote about in my books has walked back in my life, those that are still alive. But it is truth and it is history. It is a rewriting of history to get the acknowledgement for our people. (Personal interview, 18 Sep. 2004)

To this author, the genre choice was absolutely crucial to imparting an Indigenous counter-history. Put another way, the author opted for the autobiographical genre for it is a) non-fictional and thus b) provides the possibility of telling a truthful history. Jackie Huggins, in turn, answered my question with reference to her mother's initial efforts to withhold certain phases of her life; Huggins is co-author of her mother's dialogically narrated biography *Auntie Rita* (1994)—to her, the differentiations between fiction and non-fiction are imperative:

> There is an element of fiction and non-fiction that I know is in the book [. . .]. I must say that, and I admit this, that historically there were just some parts where I've questioned, 'did this actually happen?' The editor picked up that there was a seven-year gap in the story line. And she said, 'what did your Mother do; where did she go?' And Mum had never ever told me that story [. . .]; it had been such a shameful thing. (Personal interview, 18 Aug. 2004)

Thus, the truth of the genre has, in the latter two instances, indeed a bearing on the decision to write an autobiography or biography. These examples consequently lend support to the arguments deployed in scholarship that Indigenous authors prefer the autobiography because of the truth of the genre. However, as the intrusion of the shame factor already suggests, this cannot be generalised. The aversion to confessing shameful and painful incidents, particularly on the part of elderly Indigenous persons, has been documented in scholarly literature. Different theories have been proposed for such reticence. It has been explained as a deliberate resistance to information and representation politics (Gelder 362). Other reasons include the reluctance to speak about events perceived as shameful, and the circumstance of there being restricted cultural information not destined for the public gaze (Cowlishaw 185-189). The latter means that culturally sensitive issues, such as gender-based work or sexuality, should not be shared between the generations and sexes, both within and outside the family. The difficulty in revealing the truth bears relevance for the genre itself. Alexis Wright turns the assumed correlation between non-fiction and truth on its head, saying:

> Fiction is a better way of telling the truth. [. . .] There are a lot of people of our mothers' generation, the older people of the communities, who have gone through terrible times. [. . .] How can you find a way to disclose these experiences—which means to expose these people—in a non-fiction form? (Ravenscroft 75-76)

Thus, to some authors, non-fictional genres are a difficulty, rather than a trigger, to imparting history. Trauma and shame are grave reasons which render non-fictional genres too 'hurtful' and/or immediate for telling personally experienced history.

Other Indigenous writers that were also interviewed consider the need to differentiate between fiction and non-fiction of low importance. Melissa Lucashenko, a novelist, remarks:

> Is it important to distinguish? For me, no. Not really. I mean in my writing I wouldn't invent a scenario that either hadn't happened or that I didn't think could have easily happened. I think that's pretty true of all Aboriginal women writers that I know. We are not setting out to fabricate some kind of history or some kind of contemporary society. We write from what we know. (Personal interview, 17 Aug. 2004)

Though not considering distinctions between fiction and non-fiction essential, the respondent nonetheless attaches great significance to truth. This is similar to Anita Heiss, author of fiction, who regards the differentiation between fiction and non-fiction as yet another categorisation serving the purpose of academy, publishers, and booksellers. By way of contrast, Indigenous authors had to fulfil the urgent task of reclaiming history:

> Whether it's theatre, or poetry, or autobiography, or fiction, all our books have common themes of survival, oppression, the ongoing cultural genocide of one government after the next. You know, it tends to maintain or reclaim identity and language. So it doesn't even matter what genre it's in, most our writers are doing the same things in different formats. (Personal interview, 12 Aug. 2004)

The differentiation between particular genres does not seem to matter to most Indigenous authors. How then do their opinions relate to readers' perceptions?

The interviews with readers yield the following results. Most respondents demand a differentiation between fictional and non-fictional genres. This is glaringly evident in those cases where Indigenous autobiographies are read for their historical value. And significantly, most respondents read Indigenous autobiographies as bearing historical information. Melbourne-based historian Bain Attwood, for one, strictly distinguishes between history and fiction, as well as between autobiography and fiction. He refers to a debate as to whether Sally Morgan had invented that Howden Drake-Brockman had committed incest with her grandmother. Assuming that the incest might be fabricated, Attwood argues to consider *My Place* no longer an autobiography but a novel:

> [W]e should remind ourselves that in *My Place* there is a claim there about incest [. . .]. So I would read Sally Morgan's book as a novel these days. I wouldn't read it as autobiography. And I suspect the incest claim is part of its characteristics as a novel. (Personal interview, 02 Aug. 2004)

The autobiography here is associated with a factually grounded, that is, true story, and, contrariwise, fiction with a story that is incorrect. This reader clearly expects an (Indigenous) autobiography to be factually truthful. Linda Westphalen, author of a doctoral thesis on Indigenous women's autobiographies, is also reluctant to perceive Indigenous autobiographies as fictional; more so, she conceives them as histories in their own right:

> I count Indigenous life histories as being knowledge production about the past. I don't want to call them anything that associates them with fiction, because that then undermines the story. That makes it seem like they are not telling us the truth when, in fact, what they are doing is, for me, opening up a whole area of Australian history that I know very little about, apart from what they tell me. (Personal interview, 09 Aug. 2004)

Tim Rowse, a scholar specialising in Australian and US Indigenous autobiographies, also distinguishes between fictional and non-fictional forms. He considers the differentiations between non-fictional and fictional genres imperative, not least of all because, in the public gaze, truth claims have to stand up to factual verification:

> I think it's very important to make this distinction between fiction and non-fiction. That is, in the public sphere, truth claims are important and there are recognized ways of testing truth claims. [...] I think there has to be some factual basis to an autobiography. (Personal interview, 02 Sep. 2004)

In quite a similar way, historian Peter Read does not consider fictional writings as historical, since fictional accounts are less accurate and reliable than facts:

> Archie Weller is a wonderful writer but you can't exactly use that as evidence of history in Western Australia. Of course you can't; you can say, Archie Weller describes it as that and there is other confirming evidence that the police acted in that sort of way. But that is not to say it's nearly so powerful for us historians as somebody who is saying, 'this is what actually happened to me and there is Mister Neville, and this was the year and this was what happened.' (Personal interview, 13 Aug. 2004)

Lastly, Stephen Muecke differentiates between fiction and history, with the latter being distinguished by real facts:

> I am not going to use the word history if these works are fairly fictional. Sometimes it's clear from the techniques of the writing that it's fictional and even autobiographies and histories also use fictional techniques and are selective in what they write about [. . .] Histories are closely linked to a factual basis and they include more dates, they include specifics about time and place, they include the real names of the protagonists. (Personal interview, 12 Sep. 2004)

As these answers show, there is a strong demand to differentiate between fiction and non-fiction and to assign genre an important role when reading Indigenous autobiography as historical texts. Significantly, most respondents fall into this category. Yet much depends on what expectations readers bring to a text—if Indigenous histories are read as historical texts, which becomes evident in the interview results, the fiction/non-fiction genre divide does occupy a crucial footing. Thus, even while some authors may write in fictional forms and still wish to convey history (or even deliberately adopt fictional forms to convey history), this alliance does not seem to be evident with readers.

Yet it seems worth noting that truth compels great attention, even from those (few) respondents who do not deem the fiction/non-fiction genre divide important in reading Indigenous autobiographies as histories. Truth is thus held in great esteem, even in the case of fictional formats. However, there are two 'groups' of respondents who approach truth in different ways: one who does not relate the question of truth to the attribution of genre, with some interviewees regarding fiction as just another—perhaps more artistic and flexible—way to tell the truth about Australia's past. The other (and numerically greater) group attributes the question of truth (also) to genre.

Another even more remarkable feature of the responses is that two different themes have been discussed. First, though they were never asked explicitly about *truth*, but rather for the necessity to differentiate between fictional and non-fictional *genres*, the respondents identified truth as a central theme of their own accord. This phenomenon lends empirically-grounded support to the supposition that the truth of the genre is decisive in reading Indigenous literature as historical texts.

Second, the discourse on truth falls into two different yet sometimes conflated strands. One is the truth of the story, which includes the accuracy of the facts and contents; the other is the truth of the genre. Though genre alone is not a reliable indicator by which to assess historical truth, there is an indication that the classification carries considerable weight with readers. The perceived truth of the genre has a considerable bearing on the reading of Indigenous autobiographies as historical documents. The correlation between non-fictional genre choice and Indigenous history writing suggested in scholarship on Indigenous Australian autobiography must thus be slightly revised: this correlation applies to readers rather than to Indigenous authors.

This different perception of genre between authors and readers has important consequences. As this study has shown, genre is the first and crucial form of interaction between the author and the reader. The intended message—that is, to convey history—runs the risk of being ignored or at least taken less seriously if Indigenous autobiographies are interpreted as fictional.

What is more, genre is not merely crucial in reading Indigenous autobiographies as historical texts. I contend that it also plays a fundamental part in the proliferation of Indigenous autobiographies, for the autobiographical genre is appealing on grounds of its closeness to truth and history. This has to be understood in a broader context of what W.E.H. Stanner in the late 1960s famously called the 'Great Australian Silence', that is, the neglect of Indigenous history by Australian historians. Since the 1970s/80s, the increasing erosion of this silencing has resulted in an additional demand for Indigenous histories. The autobiography has been an ideal medium through which to narrate such histories, for it is close to the concepts of Indigenous history-telling, and, still more important, it suited audience expectations to read personal histories in a genre that promises truth.

This study has empirically proven the very nexus between genre and specialist readers' expectations. This nexus may only apply to scholarly readers in Australia. A further survey about common readers needs to be conducted in order to draw broader conclusions. Such a survey may probably yield similar results. As empirical studies of readers' behaviours have shown, the differentiation between fiction and non-fiction seems to be important to most readers (e.g. Mann 149-50). There is further evidence for this assumption: in Australia, historical truth in relation to inter-racial history has become an important and broadly contested issue. The debates on topics such as land rights, genocide or the History Wars are indicators for the stance of truth in Indigenous history in the broader non-academic domain. The discursive importance of truth may likely influence the reading of Indigenous autobiographies.

Furthermore, this nexus between genre and readers' expectations is reflected in the dustcover marketing of Indigenous autobiographies—most books are clearly advertised as truthful histories, some even explicitly. Publishers, in other words, sensed readers' demands for historical accounts, and thus concentrated on a genre that best suited these demands—the autobiography. However, such a nexus is, at the same time, place and time-specific: for instance, to overseas readers the issue of genre and truth are of different importance compared to settler Australians. Significantly, Sally Morgan's German edition of *My Place* (1987), *Ich hörte den Vogel rufen* (1991) bears the genre-specific subtitle 'novel', apparently because the dialogic structure of the book is unconventional for an autobiography. Thus, the German translation is not advertised in relation to historical truth.

In conclusion, the responses suggest that the question of genre is important in reading Indigenous autobiography. As has become apparent, many (scholarly) readers attach importance to the truth of the genre. The status of truth in the form of writing, that is, genre, has significant bearing on the text: genre does matter.

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