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My Place as Counter-Memory

On the 31st August, 1991 a large group of Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian people gathered in Forrest Chase, Perth, to celebrate the independence of their homelands. The flags of the newly independent Baltic States were proudly held aloft. Testament of the oppression experienced by the peoples of these countries at the hands of invaders was given. Freedom candles were then lighted while prayers of thanksgiving were offered. As grey clouds gathered overhead, Croatian, Yugoslavian and other people whose countries are still 'shackled by the yoke of communist oppression' marched into the mall. They were met by and offered the support of the Baltic people. I stood, watched and listened. An Estonian woman asked what country the flag on my lapel represented. My reply - the 'Aboriginal' people of Australia - did not receive acknowledgement. In that instant I once again felt complicit in a violent history of oppression.

Why even at such a moment, when people from many different countries were celebrating an end to colonialism in their homelands, was there no thought for 'Aboriginal' people who were displaced so that we might stand there to celebrate freedom? I do not ask this as a liberal humanist that has any romantic notions of 'Aboriginal' people and their culture but rather as a person who values freedom and dignity. It is my thesis that many 'Australians' are unable to empathise with 'Aborigines' as an oppressed, displaced people because even today the 'native' is still understood as sub-human. Aborigines, be that of Australia, America or Africa, because they are considered to be variants of 'primitive man', are never the creators of history, only the subjects of anthropology.

The past two hundred years of Australian history has been dominated and formulated by a network of 'white' discourses. Specifically, official representations of the relationships between 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' societies have been written by the 'colonisers' to construct an official Australian history. This 'history' has ensured the relegation of 'Aboriginal' history and heritage to a mythical time pre-1788 and thus these official constructions of history are instrumental in the subjugation and marginalisation of knowledges from displaced peoples. These knowledges would otherwise challenge or rupture the apparent linearity of official history. For the purposes of this paper I look to Foucault for an understanding and the implications of a written history. I assert that history, specifically official Australian history, is a fiction that both creates and substantiates a political reality that is itself fictitious. A more equitable account of Australian history post-1788 is possible if official history is mediated by a reading of 'Aboriginal' literature as history. I would further assert that counter-histories that both disrupt the apparent linearity and homogeneity of 'white' historiography and foreground previously subjugated 'Aboriginal' knowledges are emerging in a growing body of writings by 'Aboriginal' authors (designated as 'literature') that can be read as 'history.'

Subjugated knowledges are defined by Foucault in Power-Knowledge as being "the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in functionalist coherence or formal systematisation." The insurrection of subjugated knowledges "allow us to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle"¹ that the new order or functionalist coherence "is designed to mask."² Subjugated knowledges also include:

... a whole set of knowledges that have been dis-qualified ... a particular, local, regional knowledge ... which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it.³

Official history has served to marginalise 'Aboriginal' knowledges, customs and beliefs and further ensures

a privileged place for 'white' knowledges, customs and beliefs as the foundation of Australian society. 'White' Australian culture has come to be considered the 'natural,' central or dominant culture of Australia which is passed on through birthright. This general condition of 'white' culture as the dominant, and therefore the official, culture of Australia was clearly the result of British political and economic desire to deny the heteroglossia - social, historical, physiological conditions - already functioning within 'Terra Nullius' when 'colonisation' initially took place. What followed was a 'narrativisation' of Australian history through the writings that represented 'white' settlement.

British imperialism and politics has thus facilitated the legitimation of 'white' Australian history. This newly-invented history has subsequently been utilised to legitimate Australian politics - 'white' dominance, 'White' Australia Policy, paternal attitudes to 'Aborigines.' 'Aboriginal' subjugation and marginalisation is subsequently justified through the domination of 'white' social/political/economic relationships. Despite the injustice upon which these politics are based, such an account appears to be justified when 'Aborigines,' their technologies and cultures are viewed and evaluated by Western standards, as they most often are.

It is evident that to facilitate an understanding of the relationships between 'Aborigines' and 'white' Australian society, it is necessary to develop some insights into the relationship of the coloniser and the colonised. Improvements in the social and economic status of the colonisers have been attained at the expense of the colonised. In Australia this involved the exploitation of 'Aborigines' through the taking of their land, and their exploitation as servants or unpaid labour. This exploitation is always possible in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised because the colonised "are not protected by the laws of the colony." Sartre, in his introduction to Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* has this to say about the colonised and the law:

Political and social regulations reinforce one another. Since the native is sub-human, the Declaration of Human Rights does not apply to him; inversely, since he has no rights, he is abandoned without protection to inhuman forces - brought in with colonial praxis, engendered every moment by the colonialist apparatus, and sustained by relations of production that define two sorts of individuals - one for whom privilege and humanity are one, who becomes a human being by exercising his rights; and the other, for whom a denial of rights sanctions misery, chronic hunger, ignorance, or, in general, "subhumanity."⁴

In 1901 Australia was empowered by Britain "to legislate in relation to any race of people except 'aboriginal natives.' It was advised that 'aboriginal natives' should continue to be excluded from that law, as such they remained under the jurisdiction of the Department of Flora and Fauna. It was not until 1967 that 'Aborigines' were awarded citizenship. Because the terms 'Aborigine, Aboriginal and Aboriginality' are implicated in this history, I will invoke Derrida's reasons for writing *sous rature*, that is to highlight the inappropriateness, in this case as a result of racist origins, of the terms 'Aborigine' and 'Aboriginal.' I will physically foreground this inappropriateness by italicising the words *Aborigine, Aboriginal, Aboriginality, half-, quarter-caste* and also *white* (which stands as the other or opposition to *Aborigine*). This strategy recognises a history of invasion and violence that has brutalised and 'ab/originated'⁵ Aboriginal societies, cultures and language groups. It is used out of respect for those people who wish to positively affirm their identities as *Aborigines* without the burden of white stereotyping.

To read literature written by Aboriginal people as history it is necessary to take account of the ways in which the dominant white Australian discourse makes distinctions between historical and literary texts. These distinctions are generally based on the assumption that history is factual, therefore authoritative, while literature is fictional. Within the roles of history and literature, thus defined, a reader employs quite different reading strategies and politics for reading, interpreting and making value judgements of historical and literary texts. Notwithstanding this, accounts of Aboriginal/white history written by Aboriginal authors demonstrate the interconnectedness and disjunctions of Aboriginal oral history, official Australian history and literature written by Aboriginal authors. I want to claim that this history, produced in the form of literature, serves as what Foucault would call a 'counter-memory' of the violence and deculturation to

which Aboriginal people have been subjected, but which has been omitted from official white Australian histories.

To highlight the strong connections in the writings of Aboriginal literature to history, Sally Morgan's *My Place* can be read as a counter-memory of colonialism. It challenges colonial history by bringing to the fore issues such as paternalism/family relationships, land and language rights and the suppression of history post-1788. The relationship of history and *My Place* is further highlighted when one considers the nature of autobiography, a genre that combines the functions of both the historical and literary textual discourses. Literary conventions allow for the emotional elements of experience such as love, suffering, displacement, the search for meaning and identity, while the historical function of autobiography produces discourses to counter existing histories. Autobiography is thus a powerful tool for constructing, what I call here 'counter-histories.' The questions of bias - political, emotional - that may arise in the case of biographies or official histories do not appear to be highlighted when autobiography is in question. As Stephen Muecke points out, autobiography makes the job of the critic/reader difficult:

Are we to ignore the generic constrictions of event and character, the rhetoric of the fiction, in favour of interpretation of the text as straight history? And if we question the motives of this or that character will our comments be taken as criticisms of real people? This is still more difficult to deal with when juxtaposed with a presumed amount of personal courage in the narrators' effort to express the unsayable, to tell the risky story of oppression.⁶

When it is the autobiography of a person from a minority group, questions of political and emotional bias are still more difficult to deal with. For literature written by minority groups is often a site of contestation, a cry for legitimacy and therefore acknowledgement as a counter-history. However, the reading of *My Place* offered by this paper does not call for "the generic constrictions of events and character, the rhetoric of fiction" to be ignored. Rather, it welcomes a deconstructive reading as one that highlights the covert use of similar devices in the writing of all histories.

A deconstructive reading of official Australian history is facilitated by Foucault's notions of historiography, as exemplified in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. For Foucault, historiography "disturbs what was previously considered immobile;...fragments what was thought unified;... shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself." This understanding of historiography affirms knowledge (the foundation of history) "as perspective," concerned not with 'objective' truth but rather with disrupting centralised or unitary understanding of dominant Australian history and recognised culture.

Foucault's notion of history can thus be deployed to explain the 'effective history' of Australia - challenging official white histories that have previously been assumed to have historical legitimacy. Foucault's history is opposed to the extant order in all respects, it is:

...parodic, directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition; dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition; sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge. They imply a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory - a transformation of history into a totally different form of time.⁷

The counter-history argued for in this paper is parodic in that it challenges the reality of a white Australian history. It is dissociative, and forces us to re-think the totality of a central or unified Australian identity, and opposes history as a linear account of British occupation of Australia since 1788. It is sacrificial, directed against the dominant discourse, and therefore seeks to challenge and supplement official history as truth, for it is the knowledge of the dominant discourse that is privileged as history while Aboriginal knowledges are subjugated and in some cases deemed invalid.

Turning now to a specific text, it is evident that Sally Morgan's *My Place* foregrounds a search for identity, for a place within Australian history, that does not have white as its hidden agenda. The life-stories of

Arthur, Daisy, Gladys and Sally are striking contributions to counter history. Morgan says:

I want to write the story of my own family...there's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it's like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of our history we can't even get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won't release them. You take the old police files, they're not even controlled by Battye Library, they're controlled by the police. And they don't like letting them out, because there are so many instances of police abusing their power when they are supposed to be protectors of Aborigines...our own government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people...8

Arthur Corunna, Morgan's uncle, asserts a similar desire to make his history known.

I want my story finished. I want everyone to read it. Arthur Corunna's story!...You see, it's important, because maybe they'll understand how hard it's been for the blackfella to live the way he wants. I'm part of history, that's how I look on it. Some people read history, don't they? (my emphasis; a potent question in a 'counter-historical sense').9

By acknowledging her use of the Battye Library and the appropriation of official documents in researching her own life story Morgan highlights the interconnectedness of history and autobiography:

It's a history library. Western Australian history. I wanted to read up about Aborigines...I found out there was a lot to be ashamed of...Aborigines were considered sub-normal and not capable of being educated the way whites were. You know, the pastoral industry was built on the back of Aboriginal labour. Aboriginal people were forced to work, and if they didn't, the station owner called the police.10

In *My Place*, Morgan confronts the injustices to her ancestors and publicly exposes the repeated atrocities that Aborigines have been subjected to, providing examples of imperialist hegemony. Paternalism is one such injustice. Paternalism, like colonialism, relies on a sense of superiority and therefore the right to look after those 'less able' to look after themselves. Paternalism ensures that the government and its representatives manage the country and its people as would a 'father.' Individual responsibility and freedom to make at least a limited number of possible choices about one's lifestyle are consequently usurped.

Paternalism takes on a dual meaning for many Aboriginal people and specifically for the Corunna's. Station owners having control of what was historically Aboriginal land, were deemed to be protectors or caregivers - this 'care' often extended to fathering the children of Aboriginal women. "On the basis of a belief in white superiority, children with fairer skin were then taken from their parents and raised in institutions."11 Explanation for the institutionalisation of these children foregrounded their ability to be trained and educated, as a result of their white blood. Such children were thus denied the right to co-habit with or visit their family and to speak the language of their Aboriginal family.

In *My Place*, political legal and economic control is exercised by white people, such as Howden and Alice Drake-Brockman, the police, missionaries and educators. Alice, Daisy, Arthur and Gladys Corunna were coerced into accepting white assessment of themselves as 'inferior' and therefore as subordinate. The exercising of white power in the lives of the Corunnas is pervasive throughout all facets of their lives: the sexual use and abuse of their bodies; the enforced denial of family rights; restricted use of their language to English and restricted communication with family members.

Morgan's grandmother, Daisy, was born on Corunna Downs Station, in the North of Western Australia. Daisy's mother was Annie and her father (the text indicates) was Howden Drake-Brockman - the station owner. It is also implied that Daisy's daughter, Gladys, was also fathered by Howden Drake-Brockman. However, the legitimate children of the Drake-Brockman family deny the existence of any illegitimate

siblings from their ancestors. For Daisy, as for many Aborigines, sexual violation of cultural codes was constitutive of being part of a subjugated people. There were no forms of protection from such a personal violation. There was no social or legal recourse to protect their personal rights or their sense of personal dignity.

Arthur and Albert (also indicated as children of Howden Drake-Brockman) and Daisy were named or designated half-castes, through white paternalism. As a result of this process, Daisy was taken from the Aboriginal camp but instead of the usual practice of sending half-caste children to a mission Daisy went to work in the station's main house. Within the structure of her white family Daisy was given no status of daughter, rather the paternalistic status of servant to white daughters/sisters.

Through the status of half-caste, and the subsequent removal from their Aboriginal communities, these children were precluded from participation in ceremonies. Arthur, through his removal from the station, was denied initiation rites by his elders. At the same time, he was denied access to white society in terms of acceptance, education, and rights of inheritance. His removal to the Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission forced Arthur into 'no-man's land'. He was ab/originated.

We are not dealing merely with linguistics here. The relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, as explicated by Memmi, is such that the language of the coloniser dominates while the languages of colonised people are undervalued. Not only were Aboriginal languages given no official status, they were denigrated and the denial of their use worked as a strategy of alienation. This denial of the right to speak in their community language effectively prevented colonised speakers naming themselves as 'I' or 'we' in their own language. This, together with the introduction of the term 'Aborigine', re-inforced the subjugation of Aborigines to the hegemonic white discourse.

This strategy of alienation is evidenced through the experiences of Arthur and his brother Albert, who had restrictions placed on their use of language. They were forbidden to "talk blackfella" after Arthur and Albert had been given English lessons. During the time of Arthur's childhood, when whites were segregating the half-/quarter-caste children and teaching them (but not their parents) to speak English, the use of English forced Aboriginal children to lose their links to defined Aboriginal community status. The white language designations half-/quarter- also disqualified them from membership in the white/English/ dominant discourse.

Arthur Corunna talks about his experience of economic exploitation.

There's so much the whitefellas don't understand. They want us to be assimilated into the white, but we don't want to be. They complain about our land rights, but they don't understand the way we want to live. They say we shouldn't get the land, but the white man's had land rights since this country was invaded, our land rights. Most of the land the Aborigine wants, no man would touch. They don't want to live on that land themselves, but they don't want the black man to get it either. Yet, you find something valuable on the land that Aborigines has got and whites are all there with their hands out.¹²

White society conceives of land rights in terms of economic viability, therefore ownership. As such, 'land rights' is always a white man's term. For Aborigines ab/origination has denied them any legal claim to land. Aboriginal 'land rites' pre-1788 was not a question of economic viability. It was (and is often still) a question of spirit, of 'rites' that rely on particular sites - sacred sites. In the 1990's Aborigines are demanding that these sites and their importance to Aboriginal culture be acknowledged. White society, concerned with 'progress,' economic returns and with preserving the hegemonic status quo of the coloniser and the colonised, is fighting to ensure that Aborigines remain ab/originated.

In My Place, Arthur validly claims that white people have had land rights since this country was colonised in 1788. Land has been given to farmers, it has been bought from white Australian governments and it has been usurped. This fundamental right to land has most often been denied to Aborigines. Land has become a commodity which has been captured by the colonisers, a commodity which has re-inforced inequalities

and denied any other concepts of ownership which indigenous people who do not 'own' may feel or believe in. The Arthur Corunna section of the text is a powerful expression of an oppositional viewpoint that challenges this situation of inequality.

My Place is the story of but one family and their experiences of colonisation. Glenyse Ward, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Mudrooroo Narogin and many other Aboriginal people are also involved in recording their life-stories. Collectively these histories provide some understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal people post-1788. They act as a counter-memory, as a record of displacement and deculturation, as opposed to official Australian accounts of settlement and civilisation. Most importantly, texts such as My Place, Glenyse Ward's Wandering Girl, Colin Johnson's (Mudrooroo Narogin's) Wild Cat Falling, and the increasing number of other texts by Aboriginal authors are interventions directed towards opening up the space for self-determined representations.

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Notes

1 Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), p.81.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Albert Memmi, *The Colonised and the Coloniser* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), p.viii.

5 The Collins Dictionary defines 'ab' as meaning: "away from; off; outside of; opposite to," therefore ab/original would mean away from or outside of the origin. Thus the term 'Aborigine', when used as a name, displaces Aborigines from their original land. It puts them into a free-floating, deterritorialised space where they are not seen to belong to or as 'owning' any land. In this way the term 'Aborigine' itself reinforces the ways in which Aborigines have been deprived of land and status.

6 Stephen Muecke, "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis", *Southerly*, Vol.48, 1988.

7 Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p.160.

8 Sally Morgan, *My Place*, (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987), p.163.

9 Ibid. , p.213.

10 Ibid., p.151.

11 Eve Fesl, "How the English Language is used to put Koories Down, Deny us Rights, or is Employed as a Political Tool Against Us", (Monash: Monash Univ. Press, 1989).

12 My Place, p.212.