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## ***Wandering Girl: who defines 'authenticity' in Aboriginal literature?***

Sonja Kurtzer

The idea that Aboriginal literature represents a site where Indigenous Australian writers have achieved freedom in self-expression is challenged by Stephen Muecke in 'Aboriginal literature and the repressive hypothesis'.<sup>1</sup> Muecke argues that Aboriginal literature, rather than being a place where the desire to speak is liberated, is a site of multiple constraints. The desires of Indigenous authors to speak on their own behalf, with their own stories and their own histories, simultaneously meet with, and are constrained by, the desires of the hegemonic 'white culture'. A process of negotiation takes place between the desires of 'white' Australians and those of the Indigenous population: the result is that some authors with particular kinds of stories to tell, who are able to express their stories in particular kinds of ways, find that these stories are readily received by 'white' audiences. Aboriginal literature meets the desires of the hegemonic culture to hear 'authentic' tales of the 'other'. 'White' audiences, however, also seek to contain these stories to those images already possessed in relation to 'otherness'. A further constraint is placed on the Indigenous author by the Indigenous community and its desire to have Aboriginality 'authentically' represented to the hegemonic culture. This essay will examine how, in Glenyse Ward's autobiographical novel *Wandering Girl*,<sup>2</sup> the desires of the hegemonic culture and those of Indigenous Australians compete for expression. It will also examine the Indigenous response to such texts in the light of an Australian Indigenous writer's conference held in Brisbane in April 1996. The intention is to reveal the enormous amount of contestation that surrounds Aboriginal literature and the notion of 'authenticity', and how such issues constrain the Indigenous writer.

Indigenous Australians have in the past been silenced. Their stories have been appropriated by 'white' Australians and as such have represented the fears and desires

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<sup>1</sup> Muecke, 'Aboriginal literature and the repressive hypothesis'.

<sup>2</sup> Ward, *Wandering Girl*.

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of the oppressor rather than any 'real' Indigenous world view.<sup>3</sup> The concept of Aboriginality did not even exist before the coming of the European. Rather, Indigenous Australians identified themselves and others according to kinship groups, skin groups, or on the basis of their relationship to totems, the Dreaming or particular tracts of land. Since colonisation, Indigenous Australians have experienced such catastrophic effects on their lives that there has been little time to theorise these changes or ask questions relating to identity and what Indigenous Australians want, now that their entire way of life has been altered. Instead it has been the oppressor who has sought to define Aboriginality. Aboriginal literature and books such as Ward's *Wandering Girl* are part of the process by which Indigenous Australia speaks back to the hegemonic culture regarding Aboriginality. It is a foreign process for a culture based on oral traditions, where stories were told only to people who knew the story-teller. Such texts represent an opportunity for Indigenous Australians to explore issues of identity from their own perspective, and to seek to reclaim an identity from the images of 'Aboriginality' manufactured and circulated by the hegemonic culture. In the world of publishing and marketing, the issue of reclaiming an identity is, however, constrained by many factors, including existing public ideas in regard to Aboriginality.

Identity is an elusive entity. Homi Bhabha describes the creation of an image of the self as a production process whereby one seeks to bring into existence that which was previously invisible.<sup>4</sup> He claims that language is used to create and identify the self, and views human identity as an image of 'mystic prestige'. Once the image is created, it stands for the 'Real me'; later this becomes a haunting question: is this the 'Real me?'<sup>5</sup> Bhabha also claims that the created image, in which the subject recognises itself, may also alienate and confront the subject because the image as identity is always threatened by lack.<sup>6</sup> This is even more so when images of self are created by others, and become so overpowering that it is impossible to speak of self without taking into account the prevailing images.

The European autobiographical text evolved primarily as a white male genre which depended upon a strong sense of self. Women are, however, more likely to question and decentre the autobiographical subject.<sup>7</sup> Teresa de Lauretis argues:

What is emerging in feminist writings is ... the concept of multiple, shifting and often self-contradictory identity ... an identity made up of heterogenous and heteronomous representations of gender, race and class, and often indeed across

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of a 'real' worldview, or 'truth', is contextually based according to who speaks for whom and for what purpose, in line with Michel Foucault's ideas on truth and power. See Foucault, 'Truth and power'.

<sup>4</sup> Bhabha, 'Interrogating identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative'.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.49

<sup>6</sup> Bhabha, 'The other question: difference, discrimination and the disconcert of colonialism', p.164

<sup>7</sup> Longley, 'Autobiographical story-telling by Australian Aboriginal women'.

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languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy.<sup>8</sup>

A similar dilemma confronts the writer of Indigenous texts. Some of the traditional limitations of the genre are extended to allow for the expression of cultural difference. In other ways, however, the writers are constrained by the genre.

Glenyse Ward's autobiographical novel *Wandering Girl* could be viewed simply as a story of a young girl overcoming adversity. As such it would fit with other Australian battler stories such as Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*.<sup>9</sup> When Indigenous Australians attempt to speak in relation to a dialogue previously the sole domain of the hegemonic culture, the stories become part of a process of reclaiming an identity. The problem is that this desire to reclaim an identity is not free. It is constrained by both the autobiographical genre of the text within a Western canon, and by the competing desires of the hegemonic culture and its understanding of Aboriginality.

At the time *Wandering Girl* was published in 1987, 'white' Australians had already received challenges from Indigenous Australians regarding notions of Aboriginality and prevailing versions of history.<sup>10</sup> The success of Sally Morgan's *My Place*, also published in 1987, had shown that 'white' audiences would indeed embrace certain kinds of stories told by Indigenous authors. But, while there was some move on behalf of 'white' Australians towards a desire to hear Indigenous Australians tell their own stories, there was a limit to just what kinds of stories 'white' Australia would accept as 'authentic'.

In 'The other question', Bhabha examines the role of the stereotyped image of the colonial subject and the function of colonial discourse which, he states, is predominantly to create a space for a subjected peoples through the production of knowledge under surveillance. He argues that one of the means of controlling the threat of insurrection from the colonised, 'a way of harnessing the ambitious life-instinct of the natives' is to increase surveillance.<sup>11</sup> The 'other' then becomes entirely knowable and visible. As Bhabha (quoting Edward Said) argues:

An archive of images of the other is built up and, to give the images some unity a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing ... it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Frankenburg and Mani, 'Crosscurrents, crosstalk: race, postcoloniality and the politics of location', p.304

<sup>9</sup> Facey, *A Fortunate Life*.

<sup>10</sup> Of particular importance were the challenges to the dominant culture by Indigenous Australians in the build-up to the 1988 bicentennial celebrations.

<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, 'The other question', p.156

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159

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When Indigenous writers participate in the dialogue regarding images of Aboriginality, the coloniser attempts to contain these images to those which accord with established views and to minimise any threat.

Ward's *Wandering Girl* is a text that accords with previous images of Aboriginality and is non-threatening. Despite admitting that much Australian history involves 'real sadness', Ward claims she is not bitter about her experiences.<sup>13</sup> Whether Ward tailored her story to meet the demands of 'white' audiences, or whether *Wandering Girl* is the story Ward wanted to tell, is not the issue. What is significant is that Ward's story, presented in autobiographical form, meets the demand to hear particular kinds of stories from Indigenous Australians.

Ward claim that *Wandering Girl* is her story, the one she wanted to tell by looking back at the past to see the 'funny side'.<sup>14</sup> She tells of her life from the age of sixteen, when she left Wandering Mission, her 'home' since the age of three, to work for a white family in the rural districts of the south-west of Western Australia during the 1960s. Ward uses the opportunity of telling her story to create an image of herself as someone who has survived an unpleasant past without any bitterness or hostility towards 'white' Australians.

In interviews Ward has been at pains to explain her position in writing the text. In *Aboriginal Voices*, she states:

If we bring up our kids the right way and set them in the right frame of mind and let them know that we're all the same—that there's no-one different in this world, that we're all the same whether black or white—then if we can get that through their heads and everyone else's that we should all live as one race ... well, that would be a good thing now, wouldn't it?<sup>15</sup>

Many writers from subjected groups would argue that such disavowal of difference is anything but a good thing. Ward's text reveals what Bhabha claims is an ambivalent attitude generally expressed on the part of the oppressor towards recognising difference in subjected peoples. He points out that colonial discourses are 'an apparatus of power which turn on the recognition and disavowal of racial, cultural and historical differences'.<sup>16</sup> Stereotypical images of the other, created by the coloniser, are based on notions of difference and otherness. Such differences then become a justification for controlling the other. In Australia, differences posited by whites in relation to Indigenous Australians brought about policies of segregation, integration, assimilation, and accompanying practices such as forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families, and removing entire groups of people from their traditional lands to places unwanted by white Australia. Bhabha claims that the coloniser is also filled with anxiety

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<sup>13</sup> Payne, 'Glenyse Ward hits home'.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> ward, 'Glenyse Ward: writer', p.23

<sup>16</sup> Bhabha, 'The other question', p.154

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in regard to 'otherness', so simultaneously seeks to disavow the differences.<sup>17</sup> Ward's text can be viewed as an ambivalently positioned response to previous discourses which sought to identify Aboriginal difference in order to justify discriminatory policies and practices, while simultaneously wishing to disavow difference—to see Indigenous Australians as the same as other Australians, only slightly different. Ward's text limits images of difference to those which do not threaten the hegemonic culture.

Ward's desire to tell her story from the 'funny side' at times conflicts with her descriptions of the harshness of her life working for the Bigelow family. Sometimes Ward resolves this conflict but at others it stands out as unresolved. Ward presents her story through the eyes of a 16-year-old, very naïve girl, even though she was thirty-seven at the time of writing it. I am not arguing that her book should have been written in any other way, simply that this construction of the story through the eyes of a young mission girl more closely meets the requirements for a non-threatening story. The racism experienced by the fictional Ward at the hands of her employer, Mrs Bigelow, for example, is claimed not to be understood by the naïve narrator. It is, therefore, left to the audience to decide that Mrs Bigelow is a racist. When Ward makes the mistake of thinking that Mrs Bigelow's guests are interested in her, and takes the initiative to introduce herself, she is told by the guest, 'Oh dear, I didn't think you had a name'.<sup>18</sup> Mrs Bigelow then politely removes Ward from the room; she is so surprised by this treatment she thinks her 'luck has changed'.<sup>19</sup> Once outside, however, she is scolded by Mrs Bigelow and is so confused by all this that she begins to wonder 'what could be so bad about me?'<sup>20</sup> Ward depicts this racist treatment as a new and unfamiliar experience. Similar experiences are, however, all too familiar for many Indigenous Australians.

It is not that the text does not allow Ward to clarify matters on behalf of the reader. She does this often. For example, the morning after the incident described above, Mrs Bigelow says she thinks Ward is very ignorant. Ward comments: 'If there was any ignorance, I felt it was on her part, but in those days it was wiser if you didn't say anything'.<sup>21</sup> This placement of racism in the past also allows a 'white' Australian audience to distance itself from this behaviour. So Ward's text vacillates between the voice of the 16-year-old narrator and that of a more mature and reflective person, but never in a manner that confronts or threatens the white reader. Rather, the construction of the story from the perspective of a young girl elicits sympathy and understanding from a white audience.

Issues which would have proved difficult for Ward to address in ways that would not threaten a white audience are not dwelt on in *Wandering Girl*. The text does not address her feelings on being taken away from her mother, and her family of origin is replaced in the text by her 'family' at the Mission. Ward, the narrator, looks back with

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ward, *Wandering Girl*, p.24

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.25

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.26

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fondness to her time at the Mission and readers are assured that she was cared for as a child. This, incidentally, stands in contrast with the story depicted in Ward's second novel, *Unna You Fullas*, which tells of quite harsh treatment from the nuns and brothers of Wandering Mission.<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that in *Aboriginal Voices* Ward speaks of the destruction and pain the police of removing children from their families brought to her own family.<sup>23</sup> Here Ward tells a story of her mother's alcoholism, a father she never knew, a brother she only saw once before he died. Such issues, had they been included in *Wandering Girl*, would have been problematic in terms of constructing a story which would not threaten a 'white' audience.

Ward uses images based on difference in her construction of the self as an intensely emotional being, as well as someone who believes in the spiritual realm and the manifestation of spiritual beings here on earth. As the other Indigenous Australians in the story share these characteristics, the reader is encouraged to believe that these are Indigenous characteristics against which those of 'white' Australians are contrasted. Ward's weeping and excitement, her tears and trembling, and the times she nearly 'wet her pants' from the intensity of her emotions stand in contrast to Mrs Bigelow's harsh, unfeeling image.<sup>24</sup> While this could also be viewed as a contrast of the excesses of youth versus the bourgeois rigidity of the Bigelows, the numerous instances in which childlike behaviour and emotional excesses are associated with subjected peoples place this image in line with others. The 'Negro', for example, has often been portrayed as emotional and spiritual. Frantz Fanon outlines how such characteristics appear to represent 'an insurance policy on humanness' for the oppressive culture.<sup>25</sup> These characteristics are aligned with the 'other' and yet desired by the oppressor. While such characteristics seems to represent an opportunity for the black man to recognise and define himself, Fanon argues this chance is stolen by the oppressor and further used to constrain. So, too, images that Ward uses to differentiate herself as an Indigenous Australian woman are those with which 'white' Australians are already familiar in relation to the 'other'.

In April 1996 a conference for Australian Indigenous writers and playwrights was held in Brisbane, to address issues relating to writing for production and publication. Issues discussed included how to get works published, issues of copyright, writing for cultural maintenance, maintaining cultural integrity, oral histories, and achieving control in relation to the production and publishing processes.

It is apparent that the Aboriginal life story has become a dominant form of story-telling for many Indigenous writers, particularly those concerned with writing novels. The success of earlier works by Indigenous writers seems to have constrained current

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<sup>22</sup> Ward, *Unna You Fullas*. It may be that an Indigenous writer's first novel needs to be embraced by the dominant culture and therefore needs to be non-threatening. Perhaps the success of the first novel allows subsequent novels to deal with more difficult issues since the dominant culture has already accepted the author as a successful writer.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, 'Glenyse Ward: writer'.

<sup>24</sup> Ward, *Wandering Girl*, see pp.25, 45, 71, 110-11.

<sup>25</sup> Fanon, 'The fact of blackness'. p.232.

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writers in their ideas of what represents 'authentic' Aboriginal literature. Many of the conference delegates spoke of the desire to 'tell their own stories' to 'white' Australians. Particularly, some of the more elderly writers were keen to have the chance to tell their life histories and to have their works published. Delegates were also concerned that when they speak, they do more than just tell about their lives as individuals. Their stories are seen to represent a body of knowledge that is continually added to in relation to Australian Indigenous discourse. As autobiographical texts, the stories are seen to represent the truth. Therefore issues of cultural maintenance and integrity are extremely important to the Indigenous community. This notion of speaking on behalf of others becomes a further constraint upon the Indigenous author. And who is it exactly who determines that is 'authentic' in relation to Indigenous stories?

Sally Morgan and the story she tells in *My Place* reveal how issues of 'authenticity' are differently placed for Indigenous audiences than for 'white' audiences and the literary public. Morgan's novel was extremely well received by the 'white' audience but not so well received by some sections of the Indigenous community. There was concern that her story would be so readily embraced when other stories of despair, devastation, loss, poverty, infant mortality, high imprisonment, were not. Such issues have been addressed by poets such as Kevin Gilbert, and in the 'fictional' stories of Archie Weller, but because the mediums of poetry and fiction are seen as more 'creative' than the autobiographical text with its representation of the 'truth', they may seem less threatening to a white audience.

The reception of Morgan's text exposes the complex process of negotiation between the desires of the Indigenous author and those of 'white' Australians, while also revealing how the desires of the Indigenous community come into play. When the author speaks to a 'white' audience he/she is constrained to speak in terms that the audience recognises as 'authentic' and must also construct a story that will not threaten. A non-threatening story may then, however, raise issues of 'authenticity' for the Indigenous community.

The issue of 'authenticity' is being debated by Indigenous communities. Some younger emerging writers spoke at the Brisbane conference of the difficulty of writing an 'authentic' Aboriginal life story when they had been removed from their families, or grew up separated from their communities. Indeed, this was the experience of Morgan's family. Indigenous authors are having difficulties within their own communities in having their life experiences recognised as authentic and this in part is due to the demand for particular kinds of stories from 'white' audiences. As the less threatening, contained stories of the 'other' are embraced by 'white' Australians, frustration is expressed by those who do not wish to or cannot construct such stories. This frustration would be better directed at the hegemonic culture which seeks to control the manufacture and public circulation of images of Aboriginality, so ensuring that 'white' understandings of Aboriginality are not threatened.

When Aboriginal people contribute to the discourse on Aboriginality they do not do so from a 'free' space. Previous discourse constrains and defines the Indigenous

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response. It becomes a matter of having to speak in terms that 'white' audiences recognise as valid, on matters seen as authentic, and in terms that do not threaten. Of concern then is whether such works really meet the desires of Indigenous Australians to tell their own stories from their own perspective. This may be why some Indigenous story-tellers choose not to have their works published. There is a strong desire on the part of white Australia to appropriate Aboriginality as part of its own identity; in the words of Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, 'the colonised never know when the colonisers consider them for what they are, humans in full possession of a self, or merely objects'.<sup>26</sup> As the Australian Indigenous community seeks to reclaim its voice from the oppressor, notions of authenticity are being redefined. The term 'freedom of expression'; currently has little meaning in the contested arena of Aboriginal literature.

This paper is dedicated to my grandmother, now deceased, and to her eight children who have all in some way been affected by the policy and practice of assimilation. Thanks to Philip Morrissey, University of Melbourne, and Kay Schaffer, University of Adelaide, for their valuable input and feedback.

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<sup>26</sup> Hodge and Mishra, 'What is post-colonialism?', p.401.

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