

# Sally Morgan: Aboriginal Identity Retrieved and Performed within and without *My Place*

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## ABSTRACT

Sally Morgan's auto/biography *My Place* (1987) played an important but contested role in recovering the indigenous heritage for Australia's national self-definition when the country set out to celebrate the start of British colonisation with the Bicentennial (1988). *My Place* is strategically placed at a cultural and historical crossroads that has placated praise as well as criticism for its particular engagement with mainstream readership. Indigenous and non-indigenous scholarship has pointed out how Morgan's novel arguably works towards an assimilative conception of white reconciliation with an unacknowledged past of indigenous genocide, but two decades after its publication, the text's ambiguous, hybrid nature may merit a more positive reading. A sophisticated merging of indigenous and non-indigenous genres of story-telling boasting a deceptive transparency, *My Place* inscribes Morgan's aboriginality performatively as part of a long-standing, complex commitment to a re(dis)covered identity. On the final count, *My Place*'s engaged polyphony of indigenous voices traces a textual songline through the neglected and silenced history of the Stolen Generations, allowing a hybrid Aboriginal inscription of Sally Morgan's identity inside and outside the text.

**Keywords:** Australian Indigeneity, Aboriginal history, identity formation, reconciliation, performance

Sally Morgan: la identidad Indígena recuperada y articulada dentro y fuera de *Mi Lugar*

## RESUMEN

La auto/biografía *Mi Lugar* (1987) de la mestiza Sally Morgan jugó un papel importante aunque polémico en la recuperación de la herencia Indígena para la autodefinición nacional australiana cuando el país celebró el bicentenario (1988) del comienzo de la colonización británica. *Mi Lugar* ocupó un lugar histórico-cultural estratégico que generó tanto admiración como rechazo por su complicidad con la cultura blanca dominante. Críticos Indígenas y no-Indígenas advirtieron como el texto pudiera fomentar un concepto asimilador del pasado obviado del genocidio Aborigen, pero quizás la auto/biografía se merece una lectura más positiva ahora. Siendo una mezcla sofisticada de géneros occidentales y Indígenas que proyecta una transparencia engañosa, *Mi Lugar* redescubre y articula la identidad Indígena de la autora como un compromiso duradero y complejo con la causa Aborigen. Al final, la polifonía de sus voces Indígenas canta el camino hacia la historia silenciada de la Generación Robada, y permite la inscripción híbrida de la identidad Aborigen de su autora tanto dentro como fuera del texto.

**Palabras clave:** identidad Indígena australiana, historia Aborigen, formación de identidad, reconciliación, articulación

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction. 2. Critical reception. 3. Generic hybridism. 4. Ghosts and guardians. 5. Sally's 'success' story.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) forms part of a tradition of auto/biographies in Australian literature describing the lives of 'ordinary Australians,' which in the case of Aboriginal women writers would take definitive shape as of the late 1970s. Morgan's auto/biography would far surpass the success of a host of other autobiographical narrations written in the 1980s, and go down as a landmark text in indigenous-Australian literature. It has maintained that reputation until today, as national sales over 500,000 copies within a decade of its publication, widespread distribution in English and non-English speaking countries and ongoing critical interest show. Precisely because mainstream reception was unequivocally positive and sealed its commercial success, *My Place* would nevertheless occupy a rather disquieting place in the Australian literary panorama. The smoothness of its acceptance by non-indigenous Australians would raise a series of critical questions regarding the text's articulation of Sally Morgan's Indigeneity. These disturbing questions on racial identity would strategically connect up with class and gender issues, since Sally Morgan described the circumstances of her life as a woman on the poor urban fringe of Perth and was understood to have benefited professionally and socially from the success of her book. The following paper will consider how Sally Morgan negotiates a hybrid identity between essentialism and performance in her inscription of race, class, gender and genre in *My Place*, and how her auto/biography occupies a discursive space in a larger configuration of Indigeneity as descent and lived experience.

## 2. CRITICAL RECEPTION

*My Place*'s publication in 1987 coincided with the preparations for the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations of the white discovery and settlement of Australia, which indigenous Australians generally conceive of as a process of invasion and genocide. Thus, under pressure from indigenous protest movements, a new political awareness in the nation foregrounded a sense of "collective bad conscience" and "white guilt" regarding the neo/colonial plight of Australia's indigenous population (Ommundsen 1993: 252). This tied in with the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*'s research, which in 1987 had started investigating the experiences of imprisoned indigenous-Australians. It would find the extreme overrepresentation of Aboriginal inmates in the total prison population and their high death rate traumatically linked to the official policies of mixed-descent child removal imposed on Aboriginal families in the period 1930-70 (Whimp 1996; Neill 2002: 146, 227). This silenced episode of the country's racist past was subsequently addressed in the official investigation into the *Stolen Generations*, which fleshed

out in the *Bringing Them Home* report of 1997. It concluded that one to three out of ten children had been forcibly removed from their indigenous families and communities into public institutions and white foster families, so that “not one indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (quoted in Haebich 2000: 15).

Sally Morgan’s family circumstances were structurally embedded in this assimilation policy, and Morgan’s autobiographical search for her Aboriginal past in the 1980s became at the very moment of publication part of a wider discussion of Australianness that “touch[ed] at a raw nerve of the national consciousness” (Ommundsen 1993: 251). *My Place* cleverly appealed to mainstream readership with an acceptable message that glossed over present injustices while projecting its anger towards the past (*ibidem*: 255). The latter is not surprising: Morgan’s recovery of aboriginality is primarily locked into the past because *she* had not suffered directly the moment of family rupture and displacement, despite the traumatic consequences she and her siblings had to cope with. She had been instructed by her mother to tell her classmates she was Indian, a ‘white lie’ which created the uncanny identitarian void Sally felt as a poor suburban ‘immigrant’ girl (Morgan 1988: 38).<sup>1</sup> The latter had to be filled with a search necessarily focusing on her mother and grandmother’s past: “How could I tell her it was me, and her and Nan ... The feeling that a vital part of me was missing and that I’d never belong anywhere” (106). Thus, *My Place* digs into the all too common strategy of racial ‘passing’: Sally’s ‘half-cast’ grandmother Nan and her ‘quarter-cast’ mother Gladys had managed to reunite after a long separation imposed by earlier racial legislation<sup>2</sup> and lived their white li(fe) in post-war suburban Perth, locked into a self-defeating circle of shame, fear and silence about their Aboriginal roots. Says Sally, “I feel embarrassed now, to think that, once, I wanted to be white” (305). The received character of Sally’s displacement offered her the chance to avoid her grandmother’s bitterness and to maintain her optimism about cultural belonging (234), but her understanding attitude would also allow white readers of *My Place* to gloss over the issue of white responsibility for the Aboriginal plight (Ommundsen 1993: 255). The accommodating nature of the text would explain the great success of *My Place* over comparable auto/biographical works by indigenous authors describing “despair, devastation, loss, poverty, infant mortality, [and] high imprisonment.” Understandably, while *My Place* was hailed by mainstream readership, in indigenous communities its reception was controversial (Huggins 2003; Kurtzer 2003: 187).

As of the late 1970s, the genre of ‘life-writing’ was embraced by indigenous women so as to offer their testimony of race and gender oppression in Australia (Elder 1992: 16). A female auto/biography staged as life-writing, *My Place* was cushioned by feminist mainstream support, whose celebration of feminine

<sup>1</sup> Further references to *My Place* in page numbers only.

<sup>2</sup> The 1905 Western Australian *Aboriginal Protection Act* and its corollaries had empowered the federal state to take children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal mothers.

subjectivity in response to mainstream politics of oppression / repression universalised as well as subsumed all of woman's experience under the common marker of patriarchal oppression (Moreton-Robinson 2003: 69). The Feminist readership would respond positively to this *Bildungsroman's* successful quest for female subject formation in the face of the racialised gender violence perpetrated against the older indigenous women in the text. Indeed, the matrilineal aspect of *My Place* is grounded in the frontier custom of white male settlers of relieving themselves with 'black velvet', a politically incorrect term for the (imposed) sexual availability of Aboriginal women to white males in earlier settler days (Collingwood-Whittick 2002: 53), to which Sally's grandmother's personal experience significantly testifies: "Now there was plenty of stockmen up north, then, and they all wanted girls" (328). The resulting politics of separation, assimilation and shame meant that the white paternal line was generally silenced and lost. In Sally's case this situation was compounded by the incest committed by her white great-grandfather, who was at pains to hide his biological traces and separated Sally's mother, Gladys, from her grandmother, Nan. Sally's genealogical search, therefore, negotiates between the invisible and visible, Indigeneity and whiteness, the female and the male.

However, to a certain extent this couching feminist response to *My Place* obscured the racial problematic of what white Australia was willing to authenticate as a 'true' indigenous-Australian (hi)story and identity (Kurtzer 2003: 183). Judith Brett's opinion in the *Australian Book Review* was symptomatic of the comforting empathy the text had raised in (female) white readership:

Because these oral narratives are framed by Sally's need to know about her family's past, they have a tremendous dignity. *I felt none of the unease* about the relationship between the teller and the stranger/recorder, no matter how well-meaning, which I've so often felt when reading collected oral material ... this book's debt to Aboriginal story-telling traditions positions the reader as a receiver of gifts more explicitly than most (1987: 10, my emphasis).

But is this disinterested criticism? Significantly, Brett illustrates her assessment with the following quote from the episode when Sally establishes kinship connections in the Pilbara district of northern Western-Australia. Then, a tribal, 'full-blood' Aborigine confesses, "You don't know what it means, no one comes back. You don't know what it means that you, with light skin, want to own us" (1987: 10; she quotes from Morgan 1988: 228-9). This amounts to a disquieting reversal of the ritual of acceptance into the indigenous community; it sees aboriginality reach out to the I-persona (and by extension, the reader) and enables white readership to position itself favourably towards a non-threatening politics of assimilative 'reconciliation', to use that controversial term, of aboriginality to the mainstream.

Soon, further disquieting readings of the textual articulation of Morgan's Aboriginal identity and the way it affected white-reader positioning were produced

(Muecke 1988, Newman 1992, Hills 1997, Huggins 2003, Grossman 2006). Suspicious of the “ease of acceptance” with which white reviewers and critics read the book, the non-indigenous academic Stephen Muecke observed that Morgan’s ‘authenticity’ as an Aborigine had not only been mediated for mainstream readers by the confessional truthfulness the autobiographic genre purportedly projects, but also by a wide variety of mainstream filters. These took the shape of Christianity, New Age spirituality and ‘well-meaning whites’ such as an encouraging friend, an understanding publisher and supportive reviewers (1988: 415-6), which facilitated non-indigenous assimilation of the text’s historical and political implications. Muecke takes a Foucauldian approach by asserting that definitions of aboriginality are discursively inscribed in anthropological, medical, legal knowledge and so on, outside of which it is difficult to establish Indigeneity. Muecke’s poststructuralist proposal is to understand the novel not as “a place where the desire to speak [the truth about aboriginality] is liberated [but] as a site of multiple constraints pertaining both to form and contextual relations” (*ibidem*: 417). It is therefore in the identification of these discourses that one may perceive how meaning and identity are (re)negotiated beyond an essentialist Aboriginal subject position in the text.

Similarly, the indigenous scholar Marcia Langton notes that most white Australians construct images of aboriginality through colonialist stereotypes rather than actual contact with Indigenes, and that as such stereotypes are strategically inserted in discursive fields, they hinder the effective renegotiation of identity (1993: 33-5). The problem with *My Place* is whether Morgan has achieved an articulation of aboriginality that goes anywhere beyond an essentialist notion of blood lines. If not, ‘truth’ would become genetic truth rather than social practice, and aboriginality archetypically inscribed in stifling immutability rather than a performative field of subject positions. Thus, Langton writes that “*My Place* demonstrated to the nation, the problem is not so straightforward. Morgan ‘found’ her ‘aboriginality’ in adulthood, by suspecting a deceit” (*ibidem*: 29-30). The crucial objection here is that Morgan moved from a non-indigenous into an indigenous identity as a mature person, so that the first third of the novel almost reads like any suburban person’s life in Australia and impressed the indigenous scholar Jackie Huggins as “the life of a middle-class Anglo woman” (2003: 62). While this structurally works to package the secret and surprise effect contained in the story (Collingwood-Whittick 2002: 43), it also reveals Sally’s insertion into the mainstream, and the cross-generational effectiveness of the politics of assimilation both as external and internal pressure on identity formation.

The issue of authenticity plays a salient role in such a context of praise and resistance towards the novel. If Sally Morgan’s configuration of Indigeneity is debatable, where does that leave the numerous hybrid victims of yesteryear’s policies of absorption and assimilation? Is their ambiguous insertion in mainstream society always and forever suspicious? Is assimilation a one-way street, and are there no protocols to reverse the path? Sally is obviously tormented by these questions, torn between notions of identity as biological determinism or as socio-cultural performance:

Had I been dishonest with myself? What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I'd never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me? (141)

*My Place* apparently resolves these problems *deus ex machina* in invoking immanent Aboriginal essence. The family's journey into the motherland, the Pilbara, turns into a genetic assimilation of aboriginality, as they are to be accepted into the local Aboriginal kinship system with no apparent social demands on their indigenous 'belonging', which is precisely what indigenous criticism has found fault with (231-3). Legally and culturally, Indigeneity is nowadays understood as "more social than racial: an Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal" (Langton 1993: 29). This leads to the critical question of whether Morgan has left performative traces of indigenous subject formation in the text. As *My Place* is an account of broken silences, the negotiation of their uncovering through a strategic rewriting of genre, gender, race and class is crucial in establishing an answer.

### 3. GENERIC HYBRIDISM

In its mediation of race and gender-imposed silences, *My Place* adapts a range of white literary genres into an Aboriginal story-telling mode recognisable as life-writing. This is an important site where interests in more traditional, 'authentic' forms of communication productively merge with experimental, 'inauthentic' approaches towards indigenous expression that develop synchronically and diachronically in contact with mainstream culture. As Michele Grossman states:

... life-writing has constituted a dynamic form of historical intervention that both revises colonial historical narratives and also challenges, in its articulations as 'history from below', the generic paradigms in which such histories may be inscribed and represented, and by whom ... [T]he range of texts that may be defined under the banner of 'life-writing' is instructively diverse, spanning and collocating genres including both conventional and experimental auto/biography, oral history, testimonial writing, ficto-memoir, biography, essays, and auto-ethnography (2006).

Wenche Ommundsen thus points out that *My Place* borrows elements from the detective genre (a secret to be uncovered), the quest for romance (a search for the Aboriginal self), the battler genre (success in the face of multiple adversities) and

the founding story (a lost identity) (1993: 253).<sup>3</sup> This blend allows the author to employ the written text as a “counter-memory of ... violence and deculturation” (Trees 1992: 55) that turns the “crucial knowledge” of which Sally had been deprived as a child (Wright 1988: 94) into an indictment of the former policies of segregation and assimilation wielded against the indigenous population.

As a result of her Western training, Morgan resorts to scientific method, such as the use of documentary evidence and indigenous informants in her re/search, in order to invest her account with the academic weight of objective fact, but substantial amounts of indigenous Western-Australian history remain policed and silenced. This forces her to gather the necessary information at the homestead but meets with her mother and grandmother’s resistance to relinquish the intimate details of the family’s past (164). Thus, the narrative acquires a psychologising slant by concentrating on the family’s emotional economy and drifts into the female Gothic, a sub-genre which reveals patriarchal—and in our (con)text: racial—constraints, but which “rarely moves towards conclusions” (Turcotte 1995: 83). The latter paradox is also staged in *My Place*: although Sally exposes the ghost of racialized gender oppression at home, her articulation of aboriginality is often perceived as lacking political engagement. As Nan/the text refuses to unveil the deepest secret of the family’s past—reiterative incest—Nan’s death turns into the narrative’s conclusion *in medias res*. Thus, the terrible dark (or white?) secret haunting the narrative stages conflict in the female, domestic setting, but Sally’s attempt to break out of this Gothic trap also turns the text into a decolonising project of re-inventing storytelling where the indigenous transmission of knowledge has been interrupted.

Thus, *My Place* turns into a self-referential text, not only in tracing its own steps in the process of writing, but also in addressing ways of incorporating indigenous forms of storytelling and authorship. Breaking the silence is the very key to storytelling, but silence is also, ironically enough, that feature of aboriginality that “represents most surely the traditional Aboriginal heritage that Morgan wishes to uncover and convey” (Elder 1992: 17-19). That is, the transmission of knowledge is based on custodianship and secrecy, and authorship is thus inscribed in a shared communal tradition rather than individual creative effort. Crucially, the *historical* truth of Aboriginal oral narrative is configured by scrupulous respect for its guardians, as “the listener is ... linked, personally and in a ‘line’ of custodianship, via previous narrators ... back to the actual event ... The ‘white’ history thus relies on the gaze ... while the Aboriginal history relies on *the word*” (Muecke 1992: 71). It is therefore “a serious transgression of Aboriginal ‘copyright’ to speak unlawfully a text which ‘belongs’ to someone else” (*ibidem*: 86) so certain information cannot be revealed unless Sally’s grandmother herself chooses to reveal it (158).

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<sup>3</sup> The battler genre is “a common form in white writing” (Broun 1992: 24) and deals with individual (male) success by stamina in the face of adversities, and is, as such, associated with the bush myth

This also implies a firm inscription of the text into the Aboriginal Sacred, a realm of cultural knowledge governed by secrecy, taboo and strict rules of custodianship and initiation. Nan's female experience is 'sacralized,' as it is disturbingly enveloped in multiple layers of silence and secrecy precisely because of the immense damage inflicted on her by white culture, which has *desacralized* her very sexuality in the act of interracial rape and incest. In the (con)text of *My Place*, indigenous female experience is tainted by a Western patriarchal-racist secret, a white male sin in the Aboriginal Garden of Eden upon which the narrative slowly encroaches, turning Nan's protective/defensive silence into the text's most outstanding indigenous feature (Elder 1992: 17). Thus, "Nan maintained a position of non-co-operation, insisting that the things she knew were secrets and not to be shared with others" (163). Silence, shame and fear all form part of a Gothic return of the Aboriginal sacred which inscribes 'truth' (and spiritual health for that matter) in the indigenous transmission and custodianship of sensitive knowledge rather than in Western psychotherapy. <sup>4</sup>Logically, a minimally successful construction of Sally's Aboriginal Place must involve a "deferment of (narrative) authority" (Muecke 1988: 415), which sees Morgan increasingly relinquish her own voice to favour others as indigenous silences are broken along the chain of custodianship.

While Jackie Huggins claims that Sally's narrative frames and assimilates Aboriginal voices (2003: 63), I would argue it reflects a growth process that shows her struggle with divergent, often incompatible discourses. The narrative eventually refuses to subsume Aboriginal into Western experience, and consciously makes way for the voices of indigenous custodians of the past to arise; Sally progressively fades out as o/Others fade in for the narrative to unfold correctly. In a Bakhtinian instance of polyphony at the service of Indigeneity, this succession of voices traces a songline into the realm of indigenous History. The 'true' journey into the dark, repressed side of her family history starts off with Sally's account, then her Uncle Arthur's, next her mother Gladys's and finally her grandmother Nan's, as silences are slowly unravelled and take readers into Other understandings of the world. What personal data Sally delivers towards the second half of the book only serve to pave the way for the emergence of Aboriginal voices who entrust to Sally the missing parts of a part-general, part-biographical tale of indigenous oppression. While her storytelling ambiguously straddles different genres and parades as Western autobiography, it is in line with indigenous notions of sharing and guarding knowledge, which, together with its air of colloquial Aboriginal English, inscribes it in the Aboriginal oral tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Morgan holds a postgraduate diploma in psychology by Curtin University.

#### 4. GHOSTS AND GUARDIANS

*My Place* relies on the “quasi-documentary or historical truth effects” (Muecke 1988: 409) of autobiography as well as on the testimonial custodianship inherent to Aboriginal storytelling in its attempt to incorporate contact histories into Contact History. Thus, o/Other truths may arise in the discursive liminalities of the text and its generic promiscuity may counter the insidious effects of white patriarchal policing of knowledge. *My Place*’s use of the Aboriginal Sacred denounces Freud’s theory of the origins of Western civilisation in the successful management of the incest wish with a subversive racial twist; it is not the Oedipal son who desires and begets his mother by subverting paternal authority, but the father who reinforces his control over available female stock through cross-racial incest. This unspeakable racial and gendered secret can only be managed by inscribing the family’s genealogical structure into indigenous matrilinearity. Marcia Langton therefore writes that *My Place* deals with “concealing not the ‘aboriginality’ of the family, but the origins of the family in incest” (2003: 117) and Wenche Ommundsen concludes that the lack of closure that haunts the text and its author’s identity has its roots in this sexual taboo:

The theme of incest is ... central to the narrative momentum in ... *My Place* ... linked to the quest for identity. The failure of resolution, moreover, signals a turning away from definitions of identity along Oedipal lines. Sally Morgan decides to abandon her quest; the shame of the fathers has no place in her newly found individual and communal self ... [R]eal Australian readers of [*My Place*] are invited to search for their identities elsewhere: outside masterplots of European civilization, outside the sins of their white Australian fathers, outside, finally, the narrative structures which locate identity within the sexual vagaries of family history (1993: 262-3).

Crucially, the painful and shameful incest question that riddles Morgan’s origins is never fully answered, but this need not be so long as the Aboriginal heritage is safeguarded and further emotional damage avoided. Thus, Nan ends up acknowledging that Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, the white upper-middle-class class patriarch, is her own father, but refuses to reveal Gladys’s biological origins in incest. Yet, lack of closure-as-genetic-inauthenticity has vexed Morgan’s articulation of Aboriginal identity inasmuch as it is “forged through the creation of the text rather than the reverse” (Bain Attwood quoted by Huggins 2003: 61). Indigeneity as transcendental spirituality manifests itself in her Pilbara epiphany and dream visions, premonitions and the Aboriginal bird motif that punctuate the narrative, introducing important changes. Thus transcendentalism bridges the gap between genetic belonging and a lived experience inherited from her older family members. Indigeneity is therefore nostalgically embedded into the notion of death that looms in the narrative: both Arthur and Nan, the main witnesses to the indigenous past, soon pass away after giving testimony of their life (hi)stories.

Thus, *My Place* may signal stasis rather than political engagement. Death’s “apolitical otherness,” as Edward Hills writes, gestures towards society’s negation of

“the change that should result from the details of their stories ... bury[ing] the past with the dead ... reinforc[ing] conformity to a generic and cultural status quo” (1997: 108). Death in this vision is stiflingly unproductive, the absolute end for aboriginality. It offers mainstream society the ‘doomed’ race’s generous and long-awaited gesture of disappearing from Australian (textual) territory in its pernicious ‘pure’ forms, and allows lighter-skinned Aborigines of ‘mixed blood’ to be de-Aboriginalised by assimilation into the white mainstream. This would effectively see the guardians of the past as ghosts locked into that past, and would turn Morgan’s text into a Gothic project that slots comfortably into a whitewashed celebration of the Australian Bicentennial Nation; *My Place* would disturbingly read as a return to the appeased conscience of Our Mainstream Place, well accompanied by the generosity and lack of bitterness Arthur, Gladys and Sally display:

In talking to Alice [Howden Drake-Brockman’s second wife], it dawned on me how different Australian society must have been in those days. There would have been a strong English tradition amongst the upper classes. I could understand the effects these attitudes could have had on someone like Nan. She must have felt terribly out of place. At the same time, *I was aware that it would be unfair of me to judge Alice’s attitudes from my standpoint in the nineteen eighties* (170, my emphasis. See 210, 213 for Arthur, and 306 for Gladys).

However, as a text embedded in the ambiguous, disquieting socio-politico-historic context of Australian nation-building in the 1980s, engaged readings are possible too, born out of the agency conferred by the ‘hybrid’ Aborigine’s existence in the liminality of a “cultural hiatus” (Anderson 2003: 46).<sup>5</sup> From this decolonising borderline space in which *My Place* inscribes itself, ghosts may still haunt the mainstream conscious as guardians of indigenous historic memory. Sheila Collingwood-Whittick points out that “at the time when *My Place* was published, the issues the author was raising about inter-racial sex, and the forcible assimilation of the mixed race progeny that resulted from it, had yet to be openly acknowledged in the public arena in Australia” (Collingwood-Whittick 2002: 48). Thus, it can be argued that Sally Morgan’s inscription of very sensitive subject matter at a crucial moment of national self-awareness was an early though troubled attempt to reveal to the nation what it refused to accept publicly, and to find a common ground for its treatment.

The problematic management of the Ab/Original Sin in the Australian Garden of Eden has been evident in the debates seeking to establish *My Place*’s uncertain location. Morgan’s articulation of aboriginality in *My Place* may be questioned for its double inscription in indigenous and non-indigenous discourse, or “doubly consecrated since the author is seen to speak not only from the authority possessed by the white texts she has consulted in the Battye library, but also from the sworn, first-hand, oral testimony of her Aboriginal kin” (*ibidem* 2002: 48). It seems that

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<sup>5</sup> He takes his cue from A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* 1979 (1961): 379-83.

these matters will never be satisfactorily settled as long as one remains within the immediate context of the production of Morgan's autobiography. With some hindsight, one should recognise that Morgan's text, despite its lack of closure, takes a meritorious though ambiguous lead in addressing the painful, conflictive issue of Aboriginal mixed-descent at a moment of postcolonial transition in Australian multiculturalism which ambiguously embeds post-assimilation discourse in notions of *post-* as historically *after* and conceptually *beyond*.

## 5. SALLY'S 'SUCCESS' STORY

Jackie Huggins wonders whether Sally Morgan has served herself rather than her newly-acquired community with the popularity, status and financial benefits gained from her book: "[h]as she set up any enterprises that might advance our causes, for example, a writer's trust fund, charities, encouraged and promoted other black artists etc.? Or has she distanced herself and individualised her own gain? This is the criticism that many Aboriginal people have made of her new-found identity" (2003: 64). On the re-issue of Huggins' essay in 2003, Michele Grossman noted that Morgan had indeed made such a commitment with the indigenous cause in the fifteen years that had passed since *My Place*'s first appearance. While involved in school workshops with Aboriginal children at an earlier stage (Bird & Haskell 1992: 22), in 1997 an indigenous lobby including Sally and her sister Jill, an educationalist, managed to land the necessary state funding to set up the *Centre for indigenous History and the Arts* at the University of Western Australia, which is managed by an indigenous staff and headed by Morgan herself. Its main focus of research being Aboriginal oral history and arts, the Centre has been instrumental in breaking down the barriers between Aboriginal people and university, helping *Stolen Generation* victims to trace their descent and engaging in indigenous environmental issues and the protection of Aboriginal intellectual property rights in the field of the arts (Laurie 1999). At present the Centre is run as part of the School of indigenous Studies on campus at the University of Western Australia. Morgan has also remained active in the field of indigenous literature as a university professor and writer, and has recently participated in the publication of an anthology of indigenous-Australian writing entitled *Speaking from the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country* (Freemantle Arts Press 2007), which she co-edited with Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina.

Morgan's life is a(n urban-Aboriginal) middle-class success story, but in the light of the above not necessarily the disquieting sell-out to the mainstream suggested in the wake of *My Place*'s publication. Particularly Mudrooroo's criticism of her autobiography as an individualist battler story has a disquieting essentialist ring of urban Aboriginal people as "culturally bereft, 'fake', or 'part-Aboriginies'." By scaling aboriginality, it disturbingly harks back to theories of the absorption and assimilation eras that "expected" the Indigenous "to authenticate their aboriginality in terms of percentages of blood or clichéd

‘traditional’ experiences” (Dodson 2003: 28). This is unproductive in that it would leave people like Morgan, and many others who have descended from the *Stolen Generations*, in an identitarian no-man’s land. In *Nowhere People*, the historian Henry Reynolds criticises the stifling political climate generated by Australia’s racial divide as follows:

What [my family’s] story suggests is the need to accept that many Australians are of mixed ancestry and that elsewhere in the world today we would simply be known and accepted as mestizo. That would seem to be obvious enough, but in Australia the intellectual, political and moral pressure has been to preserve a clear distinction between black and white and to rigorously police the no-man’s land between the two camps (2005: 238-9).<sup>6</sup>

It seems better, therefore, to assess how over the years Morgan has performed on an agenda of social practice and commitment. Indeed, she has managed to employ the multiple, more or less beneficial changes arising from the elaboration and publication of *My Place* so as to articulate a race, gender and class identity that has brought her to strategic positions of influence and power in Australian society.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, allows her to feed back into the indigenous community the advantages that come with her status as a successful female indigenous artist, writer and academic. Foremost, such a performed rather than retrieved reconfiguration of identity has been made possible by a re-inscription into aboriginality as process rather than into the essentials of the incest issue, whose white lie and shame could have destroyed her and her family. This may explain why Morgan’s family has never taken up the DNA challenge waged by the paternal line of the Drake-Brockmans, in current thinking the Oedipal answer to the incest question simply lacks importance about identity formation by indigenous intellectuals. They articulate aboriginality as a practice rooted in choice and descent, not in the biological-determinist sense of the word but as “the historical connection that leads back to the land and which claims a particular history ... not necessarily lead[ing] to the exclusivity or the incapacity to celebrate [other configurations of identity]” and that is therefore “reluctant to assimilate or disenfranchise other identities” (Morrissey 2003: 59).

Over the years, Morgan has effectively engaged in the process of closing the painful multiple gaps her autobiographical narrative left open in the terrains of race, class and gender, which have haunted her narrative inscription so long and insistently. These ambiguities were born out of the aftermath of assimilation policies and the advent of more equitable multiculturalism, which dislocated the

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<sup>6</sup> Although Reynolds does not claim an indigenous identity, one should note his long-standing professional commitment with the Aboriginal cause and his outstanding reputation as a humanist scholar.

<sup>7</sup> . Already in December 1991 Morgan said that “[*My Place*] completely changed my life and the lives of everyone in my family...you always have difficulties that go with change, it’s a two-edged sword...I don’t know what I would be doing now if I hadn’t made those connections [to Aboriginal kinship, culture and land]. I’d be pretty screwed up, I think” (Bird & Haskell 1992: 20-1).

text and its author as both in and out of place in postcolonial Australia. But if identity formation is based on social practice rather than individual essence, the testimony that Sally Morgan's writing offered in 1987 should not be read in restrictive, determinist isolation: *My Place* surely deserves merit as an important step-up to later developments in her life. This would also offer and interpretation her hybrid articulation of aboriginality, straddling the traditional and modern, as no less valid or 'authentic' than traditionalism and primitivism. As long as identities are defined as exclusionary categories, the descent of the *Stolen Generations* is likely to be riddled by uncanny questions about their identities, interests and motivations in contemporary Australia. Morgan, however, seems to have come a substantial way towards formulating her/*My Place* as a strategic position of engagement with the indigenous cause in Australia's multicultural land and text-scape.

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