

Sally Morgan and *My Place* from an American's point of view: The Game of Navigation*

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ABSTRACT: Sally Morgan published her dominant work, *My Place*, in 1987. Almost from its dissemination, there were those (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike) who were more than critical—even suspicious of the work and its author. The angst centred on questions of authority and legitimacy. Yet a re-examination of the proof—past and present—shows those concerns as misplaced now as then. The second reason for the uneasiness resides in not knowing from what highly-regarded category of literature to critique *My Place*. However, *My Place* occupies at least one much respected category: the spiritual biography

It has been almost thirty years since *My Place*, Sally Morgan's journey 'for her true place within the present and past Aboriginal culture,'¹ was published. The text's influence grew, becoming 'a very personal counter-version of traditional post-contact Australian history.'² The story's methods are oral and literal; transcribing family interviews. The side more prominently featured is her maternal, Aboriginal heritage. The text filled a need to create a connection between a past that has been partially erased and/or silenced, and a present which did not seem to be accorded space. This is a compromised position. *My Place* attempts to fill that void beginning with the dedication. 'How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as a whole people. We would never have known our place.'³ The concern is over being able to flourish holistically, instead of existing on the margins. Seen in this manner, the text has provided a historical and spiritual location for her family.

* Portions of this article are in my 2014 Dissertation: 'Three Contemporary Australian/Australia-exposed Thinkers: Mudrooroo, Sally Morgan, and Epeli Hau'ofa,' University of New England. Her chapter deals with questions of legitimacy and authenticity if one is not perceived as belonging to an accepted, defined category.

¹ Rhonda Ozturk, 'Sally Morgan's Discovery of True Identity and Black History from Minimal Lore,' *Australian Folklore: A Yearly Journal of Folklore Studies*, 10 (1995), p. 61

² *Ibid.*

³ Sally Morgan, *My Place* (1987; Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988), p. 5.

Encapsulated into two sections, the first can be titled 'Not My Place,' for it chronicles a young Sally living in a household fearful of being discovered as Aboriginal. This worry is validated by uncompromising Western institutions. Sadly, such contestations must (and still) happen globally. Here is one example, from the great Samoan writer, Albert Wendt, who wrote of similar sentiments when dealing with Western edifices, saying *papalagi* [of European descent] architecture had invaded Oceania:

the super-stainless/super-plastic/super-hygienic/super-soulless structure very similar to modern hospitals, and its most nightmarish form is the new type tourist hotel—a multi-stories edifice of concrete/steel/chromium/and air-conditioning.⁴

Not being satisfied with her non(e)-status, in the second section, here titled '(Re)Creating My Place,' Morgan claimed her Aboriginal lineage as a destination not to be shied away from, and formally explored it.

The narration in *My Place* follows first Morgan's journey from childhood to adulthood, then the gradual development of her identity through her slow understanding of herself, in relation to her family and their place within the Aboriginal kinship network at large and, finally, importance of the Aboriginal culture within Australia at large.⁵

This wider context leads to a doubling back to an oral and revised understanding of Australian history and Aboriginal people. 'Morgan feels that she needs to go back to the beginning, to delve into the history of the Aboriginal people, if she is to discover her true identity.'⁶ The inadequacy she felt is freely admitted. 'The feeling that a very vital part of me was missing and that I'd never belong anywhere. Never resolved anything.'⁷

But Morgan's 'discovering' of her Aboriginal roots created questions concerning motivations. The remnants can still be gleamed: 'There are huge challenges associated with re-entry into the Indigenous world, and it takes a lifetime of hard work, unlearning, and relearning.'⁸ One like Sally Morgan, who travels back and forth then, is thought of with suspicion—is she authentic enough?

⁴ Sally Morgan, *My Place* (1987; Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988), p. 5

⁵ Albert Wendt, 'Towards a New Oceania,' *Mana Review* (1976), p. 56.

⁶ Ozturk, 'Sally Morgan's Discovery,' p. 66.

⁷ Morgan, p. 134.

⁸ Woorama's worry is with how effectively one can live within White Australian society with Aboriginal ancestry. Also, the possibility of returning to the Aboriginal world, without first being scrubbed clean of European/Australian strains. 'Native Right To Self-Identify: Reclaiming Indigenous Heritage Can Result In Anglicised Packaging Of Aboriginal Identity And Culture.' *Suite101.com*. n. pag. 18 Oct. 2012. Web.

Though Woorama's criticism is very polite, as opposed to responses soon after *My Place*'s initial publication, it also followed that particular legacy—the leeriness of the work and of its author. The first resides in the manner she learns of her Aboriginal lineage. This, though others, like Mudrooroo,⁹ have received accolades. The second is the simplistic format/style of the text.

The central controversy revolves around Morgan's legitimacy and authenticity to write *My Place*. This stems from her not exclaiming her 'Aboriginalness' from birth. Odd, much of the criticism conveniently dismisses or downplays her admission of not being told. She 'found out' who she was in her adulthood by suspecting 'a deceit'¹⁰ Still, such re-accountings are viewed dubiously. 'At the back of all these critiques of *My Place* lies the question of authenticity.'¹¹

There is an odd synergy with the harsher criticism—comprising non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal writers. Male and female. Therefore, Bain Attwood, in criticizing Morgan, stands as a solid template for the Aboriginal writer and thinker, Jackie Huggins. They share a similar view of Morgan and her text. Yet Huggins' critique seems suspect (itself) when she defensively uses Attwood's criticism to ground hers. 'Foremost I detest the imposition that anyone who is non-Aboriginal can define my Aboriginality for me and my race.'¹² The admission is curious, for 'There are no books written by non-Aboriginals that can tell me what it is to be Black as it is a fiction and an ethnocentric presumption to do so.'¹³ Nevertheless, she endorses his position.

Having said all this, [Bain] Attwood's argument is the only deconstruction of Aboriginality that I have found even remotely interesting and makes some poignant remarks which need addressing.¹⁴

Yet such an acknowledgement means an astute person can have insightful ideas concerning Aboriginality.

He [author's emphasis] has allowed me to crystalize my long-felt doubts, fears and opinions regarding Sally Morgan's *My Place* and express them in a public way. For I too agree that 'Morgan's

⁹ Though Mudrooroo's origins are contested, his body of work concerning Aboriginality is still influential. However, his viewpoints are used here to show a fair amount of caution should be exercised when attempting to legitimate or delegitimize a work and its author.

¹⁰ Marcia Langton, 'Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation,' *Race and Class*, 35.4 (1994), p. 97.

¹¹ Annabel Cooper, 'Talking About My Place / My Place, Feminism and the Other's Autobiography,' *Southern Review*, 28 (1995), p. 149.

¹² Jackie Huggins, 'Always Was Always Will Be,' *Australian Historical Studies*, 1 (1993), p. 459.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Aboriginality is forged throughout the creation of the text rather than the reverse.¹⁵

Or at the very least, in opposition to an 'Aboriginal' text.

Unlike other Aboriginal writers who have been conscious of their Aboriginality (defined in terms of a particular historical experience which they have in common), Morgan was unconscious of her Aboriginal background and only becomes fully cognisant of her 'Aboriginality' through the telling of the history of various members of her family.¹⁶

This framing dismisses the bewilderment felt by a young Sally in institutionalized Western spaces such as school buildings and hospitals:

By the beginning of second term at school, I had learnt to read, and was the best reader in my class. Reading opened up new horizons for me, but it also created a hunger that school could not satisfy.¹⁷

Morgan always saw herself as an Other. Even in the beginning. 'One look and I was convinced that, like The Hospital, it was a place [public school] dedicated to taking the spirit out of life.'¹⁸ These were not her places. 'They were the spick-and-span brigade, and I, the grubby offender.'¹⁹ These feelings are not outside the parameters of what several Aboriginal peoples have experienced, as in this, from Larissa Behrendt: 'I remember being reprimanded for wearing small symbols of my Aboriginality to school. I encountered a third grade teacher who told that 'you people' never amount to anything.'²⁰

Like other Aboriginal people, she 'knew' she was not thought of as a Western/Australian citizen—at the very least had incredible misgivings. Also, her grandmother would teach her how to appreciate the natural world.²¹ Without having an academically (or Aboriginally) approved term, then, her observations still told her something was amiss.

Another of Attwood's points (oddly, there is almost unanimity of the criticisms), argues Morgan's new identity was solely created via an exercise, and therefore she is not a 'real' Aboriginal person. This while

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Attwood, 'Portrait,' p. 303.

¹⁷ Morgan, p. 17.

¹⁸ Morgan, p. 15.

¹⁹ Morgan, p. 28.

²⁰ Larissa Behrendt, 'At the Back of the Class. At the Front of the Class: Experiences as Aboriginal Student and Aboriginal Teacher,' *Feminist Review*, 52 (1996), p. 28.

²¹ One early example, in *My Place* (pp. 10-11), Nan wakes a young Sally for a nature lesson. Outside they wait to hear a bullfrog and Nan's 'special bird' song.

being raised by Aboriginal women. Regardless, all identity is forged via some conduit. More philosophically, even the term 'Aboriginal' is problematic, as Mudrooroo wrote: 'What is this word but an ideological construction which is part of the historical process of the naming of the Other in Australia?'²²

This term is one from the colonizers to categorize Indigenous people.

In the journals of those on the First Fleet, and Captain Cook before them, the Australian Other were discussed as 'Indians' if not 'savages', sometimes modified by 'noble' or 'abject'. We then became 'aborigines' with a small 'a', as well as 'natives'.²³

Re-naming, and being re-named are examples of power leveraged over the colonized by the colonizer. A former slave who inspired others in the United States had the same experience: Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa (1745-1797). 'Equiano initially identified himself as Igbo, but gradually developed an identity as an African after he came into contact with Americans and Europeans who labeled him as such.'²⁴ But this did not stop him from creating a remarkable image of himself that he could proudly claim. Creating agency and becoming spiritual, then, is not a trick, but a process, and there is precedent.

The coming-of-age/discovery of one's agency has a long history. Another former slave in 1800s America, Sojourner Truth's *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*, and Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, are only two. Both follow Equiano's template for the redemption narrative.

Equiano's Narrative became a model for future writers of slave narratives. Following Equiano's pattern, the authors wrote of their birth and childhood, including a struggle for literacy (in most cases slaves were not allowed to learn to read), and ultimately of their escape from slavery. This basic literary structure holds true for virtually all slave narratives, and Frederick Douglass's classic nineteenth-century autobiography has both a plot line and a title similar to Equiano's: Douglass titled it *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*.²⁵

²² Mudrooroo, *US Mob: History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1995), p. 7

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Robert J. Allison, introduction, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself*, by Olaudah Equiano (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), p. 21.

²⁵ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), p. 28.

As always, there was attention paid to keep the readers' attention and sympathies.

'Written by Himself' emphasized the autobiographical nature of these narratives, as it was essential to a slave narrative's reception that readers believed that the author had endured all the hardships it described.²⁶

Though in the declarative, Equiano's text was not the first published 'spiritual biography' meant for uplift.

The spiritual biography—an account of one person's struggle to preserve or to find his or her religious faith—was one of the oldest literary genres in Christian Europe, tracing its roots at least back as far back as St. Augustine's *Confessions* (ca.400).²⁷

The power of the personal voice of St. Augustine's *Confessions* is its ability to be personalized by the reader. 'The book is indeed intended as universal history, with autobiography serving as a means to communicate this history.'²⁸ The structure of the narrative is fairly simplistic and in many regards, humble. Book One of *Confessions* has this lament: 'Grant me, Lord, to know and understand which is first, to call on Thee or to praise thee?'²⁹ Later, in Book Ten his pleas: 'Let me know Thee, O Lord, Who knowest me: let me know Thee, as I am known. Power of my soul, enter into it, and fit it for Thee, that Thou mayest have and hold it without 'spot or wrinkle.'³⁰

Yet humility (perhaps presumed) is one of the reasons to attack Morgan's work; its lack of overt aggression. 'For Mudrooroo, Morgan's *My Place* was weak precisely because it did not shout at its white readership; in fact, he felt it 'mirrored their concerns as to their place in Australia.'³¹ The construction then is not dynamic enough; too flat to be considered worthy of contemplation. Worse yet '*My Place* can also be likened to a detective novel in that, according to its conventions.'³² Attwood writes,

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

²⁸ Marjorie Suchocki, 'The Symbolic Structure of Augustine's *Confessions*,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 50.3 (1982), p. 365

²⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions, The City of God, On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey, Marcus Dods and J. F. Shaw. ed. Eobert Maynard Hutchins. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1952. p. 1.

³⁰ St. Augustine, p. 71. The phrase, 'As I am known' comes from 1 Corinthians 13.12. 'Spot or wrinkle' from Ephesians 5.27.

³¹ G. Turcotte, 'Vampiric Decolonization: Fanon, 'Terrorism' and Mudrooroo's Vampire Trilogy,' Faculty of Arts—Papers (2005) < <http://works.bepress.com/gturcotte/4>>, p. 13.

³² Bain Attwood, 'Portrait of An Aboriginal as an Artist; Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality,' *Australian Historical Studies*, 25.1-2 (1992), p. 305.

it is, in other words, rendered in terms of her capacity for growth and self-knowledge. This romantic view of an individual life not only characterises autobiography, but also the classic realist novel.³³

That is true, but then the spiritual biography has a similar weakness—but if that were true, why the academic appreciation? The reason is the works' progress toward a type of enlightenment.

What also intrigues so many is that this type of journey can be attempted by anyone. Equiano wrote with the same perspective. 'I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor tyrant. I believe there are few events in my life, which have not happened to many.'³⁴ Yet with his life, he says, 'I regard myself as a particular favourite of Heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life.'³⁵ Another facet, of not cursing one's fate, seen in *My Place*, is also one A.B. Facey wrote. 'I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back.'³⁶ Back to *My Place*, Gladys, Morgan's mother, also does not see herself as a victim of Australia's racist policies. She is proud of her life.

What I've always hated is people feeling sorry for me, and I would hate that to happen, because when I think of it, I've really had a fantastic life. I've managed just lately to be able to talk about where I was brought up; up until now I haven't been able to, so it's good.³⁷

Such affirmations, though seemingly incredible are important to literature and societies. 'Every culture needs a pilgrim. John Bunyan was to Puritan seventeenth-century England what Albert Facey is to secular twentieth-century Australia.'³⁸ It is a wonder such points were not taken into account in regard to *My Place*.

Young Sally is displayed as someone rejected and rejecting of the confines of hegemony. Not too unlike Mudrooroo's perhaps most famous character, Wild Cat.³⁹ She lives existentially apart from it, for it is not her

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Equiano, p. 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Albert B. Facey, *My Fortunate Life* (Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981), p. 331.

³⁷ Mary Wright, 'A Fundamental Question of Identity: An Interview with Sally Morgan,' *Kunapipi*, 10:1-2 (1988), p. 97

³⁸ Jan Carter, afterword, *My Fortunate Life*, by Albert B. Facey (Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981), p. 333.

³⁹ *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) is Mudrooroo's first novel, and perhaps most celebrated, though part one of a three book series. The story is of a disaffected, misanthropic, largely unnamed youth (Wild Cat and then Wildcat) and his travails with the law, himself and realization of his Aboriginality. It is also something of a spiritual biography, for Wild Cat is outside of his culture, lost and suffers in the world of white Australia, primarily represented by gaol. Ultimately he finds 'salvation' and attempts to help others he calls

space. From there she pieces together a narrative that leads her and her family to enlightenment. Such proves the ability to rise above hegemonic confines, a difficult, though possible result. This occurs as Indigenous people have little other choice. If they do not find alternative definitions of themselves, and instead perform as written by their colonizers, they are at best, mimic men.⁴⁰

In fact, there is acceptance in navigating the worlds of the colonizer and colonized. 'Mudrooroo explicitly states that the Black Australian author must act as a mediator between the Aboriginal past and future while existing in the largely non-Aboriginal present.'⁴¹ Also for the Aboriginal writer—perhaps most minority/Indigenous writers and people, navigation is a requirement. 'In fact, whatever the past position, it is impossible for *Us Mob* [Indigenous peoples] to remain in or reconstruct a splendid isolation, for now our very beings and cultures are part of Australia and the world.'⁴² Though not a proud statement, the Indigenous is forced into open markets.

An important point is that there is not an attempt to rehabilitate traditional culture as such and which, after all, might be an impossible project; but to utilize our traditional storytelling content and structures in an effort to gain a wider readership.⁴³

But Morgan is considered the tourist. This does not make sense. Why is she and her work scrutinized for not being doctrine-like, if cultural terms are agreed upon, compromising, social constructs?

This is why it would seem impossible, or nearly, for anyone to write the perfect Aboriginal novel. 'Aboriginal' culture, originally, was not literal, but oral. Plus, the novel is thought of as a Western, contemporary construct. If there are inviolable, fixed boundaries and criteria, then an endeavour such as writing an authentic Aboriginal novel is impossible (or nearly).

his 'mob,' a term used as the title to Mudrooroo's critical text: *Us Mob* (1995). The 'mob' is also spoken about in *Doin Wildcat* (1988), the second publication. There Wildcat reflects on being in prison and attempts to become a screenwriter. *Wildcat Screaming* (1992), the third instalment, recounts Wildcat's prison life.

⁴⁰ The reference here describes second-class citizenry; perhaps best described by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1835). He categorizes a cadre of Indian peoples equipped with a colonial education, creating 'a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect.' The text is titled the 'Macaulay Minute on Education,' *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (1958; New York: Columbia UP, 1964), p. 601.

⁴¹ Adam Shoemaker, *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1993), p. 2.

⁴² Mudrooroo, p. 6.

⁴³ Mudrooroo, 'Maban Reality,' *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, 12.1-2 (1998), p. 230.

The opposition does not concede that, or the equally problematic search to find a 'pure' Aboriginal person. There are also potentially devastating consequences not fully realized in the eagerness to castigate Sally Morgan and *My Place*.

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.'⁴⁴

Not only dangerous, '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.'⁴⁵ A position she and others find themselves in because of colonization. True, there is untidiness to the text—but not from a lack of conviction. Ideas, terms such as race and tribe can only be definite from a distance. When examined reasonably close, biases and artificial categories constructed by the powerful are detected. One example is the one-drop rule.⁴⁶

Reflecting on one's life (in a memoir setting) to explain a present position is a common enough device, but not disingenuous, despite what some, like Stephen Muecke, argue—

It is a literary form which could be called occasional [author's emphasis]; it functions in relation to specific events in one life and a set of lives, it does not aspire to a universal literary condition, and it makes a specific political move (recuperation of untold stories) in the realm of documentary history.⁴⁷

It is dangerous to assume a writer's or text's intentionality—all of them/us wear personae. Yet Morgan has given clear reasons: 'My first motivation was anger—I get angry at injustice, and I thought, 'Somebody

⁴⁴ Martín Renes, 'Sally Morgan: Aboriginal Identity Retrieved and Performed within and without *My Place*,' *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, 18 (2010), pp. 87-88.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ This idea is well explained in 'Who is Black? One Nation's Definition' by F. James Davis. Though centred on the United States, the policies (and others like it) were used to prove who was respectable, thus white, versus the Other, savage. Davis writes, 'The nation's answer to the question 'Who is black?' has long been that a black is any person with any known African black ancestry. This definition reflects the long experience with slavery and later with Jim Crow segregation. In the [American] South it became known as the 'one-drop rule,' meaning that a single drop of 'black blood' makes a person a black. It is also known as the 'one black ancestor rule,' some courts have called it the 'traceable amount rule,' and anthropologists call it the 'hypo-descent rule,' meaning that racially mixed persons are assigned the status of the subordinate group. The division went to 1/32nd. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html>>. n. pag. 9 Oct. 2012. Web.

⁴⁷ Stephen Muecke, 'Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis,' *Southerly*, (1988), p. 414.

should put this down, people should know about these things'.⁴⁸ This course of action is reasonable and subversive to the hegemony that seeks to narrow, reduce her significance. 'The novel explicitly and openly suggests that the ethnic and cultural identities of the narrator and her family are multiple.'⁴⁹ Such a stance does not kowtow to existing power structures—instead it struggles against it. *My Place* is a spiritual biography. Minders like Muecke, then, a 'kind of non-Aboriginal guardian,'⁵⁰ do a disservice to the group and movement they supposedly ally. Odd, that in keeping the text grounded in literal and largely colonial terms, those who dismiss the work and author, though seemingly pro-Aboriginal (in terms of) rights seem to be very closely tied to the colonial administrative way of conducting business. In another thirty years, it will be interesting to note if the same criticism is any more reasonable then, than when originally published.

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⁴⁸ Wright, 'A Fundamental Question,' p. 93.

⁴⁹ John Docker, 'Recasting Sally Morgan's *My Place*: The Fictionality of Identity and the Phenomenology of the Converso', *Humanities Research*, 1 (1998), p. 8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

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