RECASTING SALLY MORGAN’S MY PLACE: THE FICTIONALITY OF IDENTITY AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CONVERSO

‘Aboriginality’, therefore, is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create Aboriginalities’...
Marcia Langton, Aboriginal art and film...

In the last quarter of this imminently ending century contemporary Australian Aboriginal visual and performing artists, film-makers, and musicians (as with Yothu Yindi) have gained a world wide reputation and acclaim. The cultural critic and leading Aboriginal spokesperson Marcia Langton suggests that traditional Aboriginal visual and oral expression, along with multilingualism and dance, were always more elaborate than the material culture used in everyday life. Langton argues for continuity between old and new, that in recent art and music the non-Aboriginal world is continuously incorporated into the Aboriginal worldview and cosmology. What is made available for the West to appropriate in Aboriginal painting, for example, is only exterior decorative features, not the body of hidden meaning and sacred secret knowledge that remains inaccessible behind the abstraction (secret knowledge which is in any case restricted within Aboriginal society).

My Place (1987), the autobiography of Western Australian writer and artist Sally Morgan, evoking the upbringing of a young woman told by her mother and grandmother from childhood that she was Indian not Aboriginal, also has earned a worldwide reputation and remarkable sales, becoming a bestseller. Yet its scholarly reception has been rancorous, angry, passionate and bitter. Success with a national and international readership has been matched by hostility from many critics, non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal (including Marcia Langton). As is not unusual in the history of literature, particularly in the modernist construction of popular genres as the low, other and female, its very popularity appears to have provoked, in many cases, immediate suspicion, patronizing disdain, cold dissection; repudiation was accompanied by lofty speculation on the motives and intentions of both the writer and her readers.
I encountered the international reputation of *My Place* in mortifying circumstances in the early 1990s, while talking as a guest to a university class taking Australian Studies in Budapest. What, the students eagerly asked, did I think of *My Place*, which they'd all read and enjoyed and felt moved by. I will never forget, and always regret, the shadow of disappointment that passed over their young faces when I admitted I hadn't yet read it.\(^6\)

I think I hadn't then read *My Place* and caught up with the surrounding acrid controversy because I hadn't seen ways of connecting the text and its reception to my own research and theoretical interests in exile and diaspora—exile suggesting the omnipresent weight of pain of displacement from one's own land, of being an outsider in a new; diaspora indicating belonging to more than one place and time, more than one past and future. Exile and diaspora suggest both lack and excess, of enforced loss and separation, yet the continuing imagining of unconquerable countries of the mind.\(^7\)

I'm trying to develop such perspectives in the book I'm writing, currently and tentatively entitled *The Poetics of Diaspora*, an argument concerning the implications, for the history of European and Western notions of ethnic and cultural identity, of a utopian desire (which I share) to re-imagine and recover a medieval pre-1492 Judeo-Islamic trading and social world of plurality and *convivencia* that stretched from Moorish Spain to India and China.\(^8\)

I've now realized that Sally Morgan's *My Place* does indeed connect closely to these themes. Concepts of exile and diaspora are now being productively deployed in relation to Aboriginal histories of dispossession and displacement.\(^9\) Here I would like to explore notions of diasporic sensibility in relation to *My Place* as a literary text; I would like to draw in and spread out surprising analogies to European and Jewish cultural history. By so doing, I wish to alter the terms of the debate so far.

It's worth reprising the historiography of the debate at this distance to observe the pattern and shape it assumed. In an early shot replete with influential moves, the ethnographer and cultural theorist Eric Michaels consigned Sally Morgan and *My Place* to a certain tradition of popular textuality, especially that of television serials like *Return to Peyton Place*, *Dallas*, and *Dynasty*. In Michaels' view, such serials are a variation on the *roman à clef*, because their narrative strategy, driven by genealogies of kin and exchange, constantly reproduce gossip and revelation which lure the reader/viewer into a detective novel kind of relationship, attempting to match characters with identities in a community. Michaels urges that we avoid the trap set by this subgenre, of being drawn into treating characters as if they have documentary reality, rather than viewing them as constructed and interpreted. In another formative move, Michaels sees no point in distinguishing between Sally Morgan and her text: to talk
of one is simultaneously to be talking of the other. In these terms, *My Place* is a journey of discovery that culminates in her ancestral country: 'she traces relatives there and completes the picture'; she claims the 'discovery' of an 'authentic, lineally descended Aboriginal identity'. In contrast, Michaels reminds us of the capacity of the ethnographer always to be suspicious of an informant's words as data—a capacity for and training in forensic detachment of which a popular readership is apparently incapable. Michaels will unmask *My Place* by pointing out that we should pay attention to non-documentary features like its Peyton Placeish narrative frame and its literary conventions, features which textually invent identity. Then we will see that *My Place* is constructing a modern autobiographical notion of personhood that is culturally syncretic. It is Christian and more precisely Protestant, as well as drawing on elements of theosophy and New Age astrology. In terms of Aboriginality, such individual literary invention can be contrasted to Western Desert oral traditions of story telling that are collective and culturally constrained.¹⁰

In classic modernist fashion, Michaels makes a comforting distinction between an avant garde of theorists like new-style self-reflexive anthropologists, and a credulous popular readership that innocently takes *My Place* as documentary realism; a popular readership about whom he can readily psychologize. Oddly, he asserts *My Place* to be part of generically akin to work like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, which he says do not observe 'any classical form of plot'. Michaels is himself innocent of a large cultural studies body of work theorizing the history and aesthetic of melodrama and serial fiction as genres which aim for the reverse of realism; genres calling attention to themselves as melodrama and fantasy, as a poetics of excess.¹¹

In a 1988 essay and again in his *Textual Spaces* (1992) cultural critic Stephen Muecke took upon himself the burden of advising and admonishing on behalf of the other. Travelling in Eric Michaels’s tracks, Muecke praised *My Place* in Bakhtinian terms as polyphonic, because the inclusion of the directly told stories of Arthur Corunna, Daisy Corunna and Gladys Milroy made the book into an occasion of collective narration, thus deferring to traditional textual conventions, where there is deferment of narrative authority to the correct custodians of parts of stories. Here, *My Place* is open, Muecke approvingly nods, to Aboriginal or Aboriginalizing readings. But, he feels, in too many other ways, the book is over-determined by available reading strategies of a European kind: as quasi-documentary autobiography promising historical truth-effects; its detective narrative; its romance of overcoming repression of identity in self-expression and self-discovery; and in its pursuit of the grandmother to confess, while Daisy herself resists such importuning as Aboriginal people in general must resist missionaries and
anthropologists and suchlike who try to secure confessional knowledge from them. Muecke recommends to writers like Morgan, and to practitioners of Aboriginal literary politics in general, that they pursue an Aboriginal discursive strategy of non-disclosure, and an observance of traditional Aboriginal genres.¹² For Muecke, writers, if they wish to be truly Aboriginal, should abide by their own traditions, of which he is a kind of non-Aboriginal guardian, a supportive scholar at the gate of authenticity, a watchful cultural guide armed with canonical criteria of indigeneity.

In another important intervention the historian Bain Attwood in 1992 acknowledged and followed Eric Michaels and Stephen Muecke in suggesting in Foucauldian fashion that Morgan’s Aboriginality is really but an assemblage of effects of European discourse. Like Muecke, Attwood is drawn to the trope of over-determination: Morgan’s book ‘mirrors’ pretty well everything that surrounds her, the bourgeois individualism of the age in general as well as institutional frameworks, epistemologies such as traditional anthropology, radical and oral history and behavioural psychology, numerous literary genres (not only detective but classic realism, quest, autobiography, family saga, Gothic novel, family history, genealogy, genesis story, and Aussie-battler), and the counter-culture of the 1960s and 70s.¹³

Amidst an agitated wave of responses, Tim Rowse pointed out that Attwood identifies My Place with the presumed biography and subjectivity of the author, which Attwood claims to know more intimately than she does. Attwood’s magisterial rhetoric and reflectionist methodology (‘mirrors’ indeed!) are moved by a desire to master Morgan and her text, to explain her biography and her consciousness and unconsciousness totally, to leave her and My Place no mystery, no refuge, no freedom, no dignity; no place beyond the contexts he has chosen.¹⁴ Indeed, throughout Attwood’s panoptic analysis there is a faint but discernible tone of near-derision of Morgan for being a kind of second-hand European, a predictable simulation, a mere Same.

In her impassioned testimonio Jackie Huggins, writing as one of those who ‘never ceded their identity no matter how destructive, painful or bad the situation was’, substantially agreed with Attwood in doubting Sally Morgan’s claim to Aboriginal heritage, values, and identity beyond a genetic inheritance. My Place, Huggins feels, reads like the story of a middle class Anglo woman, and its only strength lies in the family testimonies, which should have been placed at the front. Writers like Morgan have jumped on the bandwagon, naively thinking they can instantly acquire Aboriginality. They are individuals who have not earned the right through years of sensitivity, hard work, effort and attention to protocols and ethics, to be accepted back into the
community. The greatest weakness of My Place, Huggins writes, is that it presents Aboriginality as something that can be easily understood by a white audience and white literary world. It therefore represents an act of passing which is a horrendous crime in Aboriginal circles: 'We vindictively remember those who have passed and... can never forget nor forgive these traitors'. Sally and her mother and grandmother have cooperated with the enemy. Jacky Huggins is also disappointed that overseas readers assimilate My Place to a North American slave narrative and also that Alice Walker could acclaim it as representative of the oneness of all Australian Aboriginal people: 'It might', Huggins responds, 'be the oneness of slaves and Afro-Americans but how do the Native Americans deal with My Place?'

Subhash Jaireth took issue with earlier contributors to the debate like Attwood and Huggins for what he saw as lack of attention to the textuality of My Place. He quotes Bakhtin to the effect that even in autobiography the author is other to the 'I' who is constructed in the text, who belongs to narrative not biography. He also agrees there is a certain degree of heteroglossia in the independence of the testimonies from the principal narrator. Nevertheless Jaireth's judgement is firm: My Place is not polyphonic because her voice is a monologic force that frames and controls the text. There is insufficient difference between the consciousness of the author and the subjectivity of the principal character, who is created as one who discovers herself during the course of the narrative as complete, rounded, and essentialized.

It was an interesting debate, revealing perhaps how debates flow and ebb, their start-stop rhythm, their tidal movement. The controversy seemed to settle in the sand because its participants and contestants agreed that My Place is occupied by the desire for and uncovering of the principal narrator as a homogeneous, unitary and unified subject; the apparent heart of the book is her quest for her true identity, her authentic Aboriginal heritage, a pilgrimage towards her real self, an absurd return to her original being while ontologically she belongs to European modernity. The debate was also freely prescriptive, anxious to tell Sally Morgan what she should have done. Eric Michaels felt she should have 'more frankly' acknowledged the duality and contradictions of her story and history, she should have described the part played by the whites in her ancestry, upbringing, and present life. Sounding like a Marxist of old, Stephen Muecke also felt her work should have dealt with 'social contradictions', in particular, to confront European agency. Attwood, too, believes she should have addressed her white heritage, for she only discusses her past in terms of the prism of Aboriginality. Huggins called on Morgan to pay recompence to her community rather than being a self-centred self-serving ego. Jaireth asked her to pay heed to the messy
fragmentary nature of one's subjectivity
and to the necessity of a more ruptured
narrative. The debate also agreed that,
moreover, the inserted stories of Arthur,
Gladys and Daisy, text and author, *My Place*
and Sally Morgan, are substantially one;
hers particular use of autobiography had
closed off the possibility of disjunction and
so of decentring and polyphony in the
main narrative.

The question I'd like to ask the participants
is: why did they marginalize the non-
Aboriginal narratives in the text? In what
follows I will deploy Walter Benjamin's
allegorical method, fragmenting the
object of analysis to reconstitute *My
Place's* narratology as dispersed, complex,
and densely intertextual. The novel
explicitly and openly suggests that the
ethnic and cultural identities of the
narrator and her family are multiple, and
here *My Place* can reprise by analogy the
historical experience of forced
assimilation and conversion in Europe of
Moors and Jews, especially in the history
of the conversos and marranos of
medieval and early modern Spain,
Portugal and Holland; and in European
colonizing across the globe, beginning
with the Catholic Spanish in the
Americas. I do not see the novel's generic
connections and literary conventions as a
sign of the failure of her alleged claim to
authentic Aboriginal identity. Rather, such
textuality and intertextuality constitute a
major part of its interest and richness as an
autobiographical novel, a novel which is
no less a novel for referring to actual
names, a novel which foregrounds and
highlights rather than attempts to mask
and conceal cultural syncretism.

A NEW LOOK

Since the narrator of *My Place* grows up
conscious of herself as a storyteller and
artist, the novel is a kind of *künstlerroman*,
where the text maintains a more or less
gentle distance from the narrator.
Certainly Sally Morgan is the author and
she is the principal narrator of her
childhood and growing up and of
interactions with various characters and
events. Even so the novel is not necessarily
to be equated with her consciousness: in
Bakhtin's terms, there cannot be a
coincidence of author and hero, they
belong to different moments of time and
space, and they represent different
constitutive aspects of the text. Sally,
for example, more than once tells us
that as a child she was an outsider figure
who missed school if she could. To her
surprise in her last year at primary level, in
Grade Seven, she wins the 'coveted Dick
Cleaver Award for Citizenship': The whole
school', she notes with surprise, 'voted,
and, for some reason, I won.' Sally sillily
wonders if her sister Jill has bribed
someone. The novel is suggesting that there are gaps
between Sally's perceptions of herself and
the perceptions of others: she can
misperceive, her self-knowledge is
suspect, the explanations she reaches for
can be obviously unsatisfactory. She thinks
of herself when a schoolchild as an idler, a romantic dreamer, and is perplexed when others see her as clever. When she is fifteen, after an outburst from Nan, she finally becomes conscious of her grandmother's colouring. Jill chides her for her naivety in ever thinking they were not Aboriginal rather than Indian. Paul, her future husband, himself the son of missionaries who had been brought up with Aboriginal people, implies to Sally that some of her attitudes 'were very immature'.

My Place, then, in various places offers enough clues to establish that her attitudes, opinions, and self-knowledge can be questioned: she is not a wholly reliable narrator.

Narratives abound in My Place of white people who are recognized as significantly influencing Sally's formation and character, not least her father Bill the returned soldier. There are descriptions of visiting him in his long stays in hospital; his aversion to killing anything including the chook for Christmas (Nan would have to do it); his not caring what the neighbours or anyone else think; his drinking himself to an early death, and his suicide. Sally's mother Gladys says that Bill was 'more worldly' than other men she'd met when she was young. Bill will never tell Gladys all that happened to him during the war. He'd have nightmares: 'He'd scream and scream at night'. In better times he enjoyed mixing with and talking Italian with the Italian market gardeners in Perth, often doing plumbing jobs for them free of charge.

In terms of a narratology of stories within stories—recalling eighteenth-century decentred narration rather than the narrative of unified self-becoming of the nineteenth century bildungsroman—Gladys's testimony interpolates an account of Bill's wartime experiences contructed from what he had told her. Bill, it appears, fought in the desert in the Middle East, was captured at El Alamein, and survived a torpedoing to the ship that transported him to Greece and Italy, where Allied prisoners like him were publicly humiliated. In Italy Bill escapes, hides out with a family supportive of the partisans, and learns to speak Italian fluently and drink vino while trying to keep out of sight of the Germans. He is captured and handed over to the SS who question and torture him for days, and then is transferred to Germany to camps where he is again mistreated. In the end Gladys realizes that the Nazis had broken not his spirit or will to live but his mind: 'He had a sensitive side to him; they'd destroyed that, degraded him.... He couldn't escape from his own memories.' Unless it was the shock treatment the doctors in Perth hospital gave him.

Compared to the public timidity of her grandmother and mother, where does Sally acquire her boldness, independence, forthrightness, lack of dread in relation to society? In her childhood Sally more than the other children feels an affinity with her father, an affinity he recognizes even in her speaking back to him, as do Gladys and Nan. When he has drinking bouts that
sometimes end in rages with the family fleeing to a neighbour's house, it is Sally who is sent to talk to him.26

The portrait of the father involves sympathy and empathy, for Sally feels he is part of her; she entwines aspects of her father's will and spirit into her will and spirit, though she rejects his drinking. At school Sally regards the teachers as akin to the army officers her father disliked; like him she feels herself to be a nonconformist opposed to regimentation, comparing herself to her more conventional sister Jill. She listens eagerly to his stories of precarious life with the partisans in Italy and his friendship with the Italian family that sheltered him; she learns to share his tastes that were a wartime legacy, a love of seafood and vinegar. Bill teaches her to sing the Communist anthem in Italian, and she later stuns her teacher and class not only by singing 'The Internationale' in that tongue, but by her 'sudden show of theatrical talent'. She feels cursed for being a girl and not being able to be a soldier, but she is proud that she can defy authority just as her father defied the Gestapo, not telling them anything. As Gladys says of Sally and her father: 'In some ways, they were similar, they were both rebels.'27 It was because of the public insouciance and worldliness Sally absorbs from her white father that she feels impatient with the timidity of her mother and grandmother and is so confident in launching her quest for knowledge of her Aboriginal ancestry.

Sally may also have derived from her father some of her theatricality, her desire to dramatize her story as a theatre of fragmented identities. Her talent here suddenly emerges when she sings 'The Internationale' in class. Sally and the other children also love going to the local outdoor theatre to see films; on television they are fascinated by 1920s, 30s, and 40s movies. Enraptured by the magic of performance, Sally at high school had 'very romantic notions about running away to join a circus'. Jill and her mother think that Sally is always being 'dramatic', she 'should have gone on the stage', so excited does she become by her new awareness of an Aboriginal heritage.28

Other white people, the wealthy 'upper class' colonial pastoralist family the Drake-Brockmans, are major obstacles in Sally's path towards knowledge of that which she seeks, the history of her body. The female Drake-Brockmans, Aunty Judy in Perth and Alice in Sydney, whom Sally talks to about who might have fathered Nan and Gladys, construct for Sally an imaginary kinship involving a cook called Maltese Sam and an Englishman called Jack Grime. The Drake-Brockman women brutally disavow any kinship with Sally, though the strong suggestion emerges through the various stories and evasions, feints and lures, that the owner of Corunna Downs station in the north of Western Australia, Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, both fathered Nan and later when she was a teenager forced incest on her to produce Gladys.29 Here is a story
common in the history of European colonialism and its associated literature, a continuation in new situations of aristocratic desire for the low and other, their female servants, yet explosively intensified in colonial situations of an erotics of the exotic.

*My Place* is part of a contemporary literature that explores how fictional kinship can be in human societies, how much it involves silences, gaps, creation of kin, hierarchy, exclusions, violence—that kinship is always torn, always wounded. What wounds Sally is that in her family it is not only the white women who refuse knowledge but her immediate matriliney, her mother and grandmother. Her mother is reluctant to find out who fathered her, while Daisy insists on withholding unto her death what she regards and guards as her secrets, presumably the horror of incest, rape, and sexuality with and by her own father.

**SCOTT'S IVANHOE**

In Sally's consciousness, it is the women in her family, black and white, who should maintain, preserve and transmit genealogical knowledge. As Sally says to a reluctant Gladys: 'You're as bad as Nan, sometimes! You've got to help me, you're my mother, it's your duty.' Yet race and racism have created in *My Place* a tension between women as bearers of family history, and women forced to conceal kinship connections or create false genealogies. Curiously, it is uncle Arthur who provides crucial genealogical information, not Sally's female line.

Daisy's withholding of such knowledge suggests an interesting intertextual relationship with Walter Scott's historical romance *Ivanhoe* (1819), set in the late twelfth century at the time of the Crusades. In *My Place*, the name Ivanhoe occurs often; it refers to 'a grand old house' in Claremont on the banks of the Swan River in Perth where Daisy as a young girl of fifteen or sixteen is taken by Howden Drake-Brockman and where she spends most of her working life as the family nursemaid, servant and cook, feeling like the white family's captive and slave: the family that was also her family but was never acknowledged as her family. One might hazard that it was because of the remarkable popularity of Scott's *Ivanhoe* in the nineteenth century, in literary imitations as well as paintings, dramatizations and operas, that it spread as a house name across the British Empire. Scott's *Ivanhoe* is a predecessor novel concerned with invasion, colonial relations of domination and subordination, race, and destructive desire for the other; a novel which has already had a long history of response and influence in both English and American literary history. Recall in *Ivanhoe* Sir Reginald Front-de-Bœuf's castle to which the Jewess Rebecca and her father, and Wilfred of Ivanhoe and the other Saxons, captured in the forest, are led by a party of
predatory Norman knights. In the castle is an old servant called Urfried. Urfried tells her story, briefly to Rebecca and later more fully to Cedric, the Saxon patriot still smarting under Norman rule. Urfried says that in a previous generation the Norman invaders had stormed this castle, and after killing all the Saxon male nobles had raped the women, including herself, who was once a Saxon noblewoman. Urfried is the Norman name the invaders gave her; once she had a Saxon name, Ulrica, the daughter of Cedric's old friend the Thane of Torquilstone. But once her beauty had gone, she was no longer the sport of her masters' passions and was treated henceforth as servant and slave, object of their contempt, scorn, and hatred; she in turn despises the Normans, and hates and despises her wretched self. Cedric the Saxon is repulsed by her story of 'horror and guilt', that she should have survived and slept with the enemy while her male relatives in the very same castle had been brutally slain. He reviles her, tells her she should have killed herself, that she deserves the 'hate and execration' of 'each true Saxon heart'. He can only look upon Ulrica, in her guilt, wretchedness, and despair, with 'abhorrence' and 'disgust', accusing her of possessing a 'leprosy of soul'. He must get away from her presence. In a moment of high melodrama, Ulrica will die having set alight the accursed castle with its encrypted stories of spilt blood and shameful secrets.35

In My Place it would appear that Howden Drake-Brockman the white station owner took Daisy to Ivanhoe in Perth for his sexual pleasure, even though he'd also fathered her back in the north where Daisy had been born with and was known by her Aboriginal name Talahue. There is mention, too, of Daisy giving birth to another child who died, possibly also fathered by Howden. Daisy at the end of her life warns Sally to be watchful of Sally's daughter Amber: 'Some men can't be trusted. They just mongrels. They get you down on the floor and they won't let you get up. ... You watch out for Amber. You don't want her bein' treated like a black woman.' Howden may have had affection for Daisy. We recall that he insisted on holding his and Daisy's daughter Gladys just before he died; Howden had also promised money to Daisy and her brother Arthur, and sent photos to Arthur.36 Does Daisy formerly Talahue fear that she can never face her Aboriginal kin back in the north nor her daughter and granddaughter in Perth, with a narrative of sexuality that will repulse and disgust them as Cedric the Saxon was repulsed and disgusted by Urfrried formerly Ulrica? Isn't her grumpiness and temper when Sally and her siblings are growing up reminiscent of Urfrried in the castle? Does she, like Urfrried, despise herself?37 Daisy appears to fear her story will blight them, will extinguish hope in and bring horror to their young eyes. She can't seem to believe that Sally her bold young granddaughter, who has already heard her father's war stories, will not at all be horrified.
CONVERSOS AND MARRANOS

As historical romance Scott's *Ivanhoe* draws on both Gothic and melodrama, related genres that evoke allegories of desire in relation to secret knowledge, in stories that strain both to conceal and to release the repressed into open theatre and theatricality; the kind of melodrama that Sally and her family relished in transformed form in Hollywood movies on television. Gladys relates that in her schooling (her mother Daisy had never been taught reading and writing), she had fallen asleep while the teacher read Jane Austen to the class. Gladys recalls that the same teacher, whose fiancé had been killed in World War One, becoming tearful as she read out 'old romantic novels, especially *Wuthering Heights*'.

Indeed, rather than in Jane Austen's gentler narrative toning, Gladys' narration does construct key moments of crisis in her life in heightened ways reminiscent of the Gothic melodrama of that incest novel *Wuthering Heights*, with its fantastical happenings and uncanny visions. Such is especially so in the nightmares she reports having about her future with Bill before she marries him, and his own nightmare attempted stranglings of her later when, suddenly a terrifying stranger, he screams 'SS, SS' with his hands around her throat, imagining she was a particularly brutal Gestapo officer. The year before Bill dies, Gladys wakes suddenly, seeing a light in her bedroom, which she interprets as the spirit of Christ, His arms outstretched as though He'd come for someone: 'I screamed and told him to go away, I knew I was looking at death.' Later the following year she thanks God for giving her and Bill extra time together, feeling that God was preparing her for his death. After he dies she begs God to tell her where Bill had gone. She closes her eyes, and opens them to see herself surrounded by light, and then notices Bill being beckoned by Jesus in a long white robe to join others seated on a lawn: 'When that vision finished, I was surrounded by a glow of pure love, I was so happy. I knew Bill was all right.'

If in Scott's *Ivanhoe* there's a prominent Jewish narrative concerned with the exclusion, violence, and othering faced by Rebecca and her father Isaac in medieval Christian England, in *My Place* there's also a Jewish narrative, though one threaded through scattered references, and apparent also in certain similarities—so in any case I'm now going to argue—to a particular diaspora, the conversos of sixteenth and seventeenth century Catholic Portugal. The conversos, descended from the Sephardic Jews of Spain expelled in 1492, had come to Portugal where they were forcibly mass-baptized in the late 1490s; for the next several generations, now formally Catholic and frequently rising to high positions in the society (until discriminated against as New Christians), the conversos could also be marranos, or secret Jews. Because, however, of the watchful care with which the Inquisition policed identities, the marranos possessed only fragmentary,
distorted memories of Judaism, and they often mixed Jewish with Catholic beliefs and cosmologies in individual, distinctive, idiosyncratic, hybrid, imaginative ways. The marranos experienced a double consciousness, both Catholic and Jewish, both participating in and conforming to the society about them yet sustaining a secret consciousness of difference. They were suspicious of any institutional authority, religious system, and church bureaucracy, trusting to their own inner journeys of thought and reason, their own inner awareness, one's own spirituality, your own path, however eccentric.

Marrano consciousness prefigured modernity in many ways. Their subjective individualism was a prelude to Protestantism. Proto-modernist outsider figures, they were simultaneously both inside and outside the society and any cultural context. Justifiably afraid of persecution, they were ever cautious and prudent in their accommodations to the society they found themselves in. At the same time, they sustained an interiority of independence and skepticism, a secret consciousness that could be multicontradictory; could be confused, dissonant, ambivalent, paradoxical, incomplete, doubting, self-doubting, potentially and actually heretical. Marrano culture emphasized disguise, a play of masks, a multiplicity of personae; the leading of a double life, always negotiating the dualities of public and private, outer and inner.

I wish to set into play a metaphoric relationship between converso and marrano diasporic culture, a culture that was neither Jewish nor non-Jewish, and Sally Morgan's family history and upbringing, that was neither Aboriginal nor non-Aboriginal. Nan surprises Sally one day by saying to her: 'You don't know nothing, girl. You don't know what it's like for people like us. We're like those Jews, we got to look out for ourselves.' Sally feels she knows 'a lot about the Jews because of the war and Dad'. Some of Bill's wartime stories concerned being in POW camps near Jewish concentration camps, and his also teaming up with a POW who was 'half-Jewish' and was badly treated by the Nazis. In response to her eccentric grandmother's outburst of affinity Sally thinks to herself that there 'was no possible comparison' between Jews and her family. The novel as a whole, nevertheless, does create Sally's matriliny as comparable to the culture and consciousness of the conversos and marranos.

Sally's mother and grandmother had led lives of fear and caution, always attempting to conform to the white colonialist society around them in Perth so that the Inquisition-like government would not declare them to be Aborigines who would be subject to curfew, surveillance, and apartheid-like restrictions. They wish to be whites, to succeed in the society, and for Sally and the other children to go well at school and
university, which indeed they will do, qualifying to become part of the professional middle class (in psychology, medicine, law). Yet their attempted conformity never quite works, reminding us of the conversos, who even when they disavowed the Jewish religion and sincerely sought to assimilate into Christian society, found they were still discriminated against because of their ancestry and taint of blood, however much they might attempt to conceal their own history. When as a teenager Sally, after a vision of God, becomes a churchgoing Christian (though she dislikes the regimentation of church), and joins a local youth group, she is told by a friend’s father, one of the deacons of the church, to stay away from his daughter: ‘I don’t want her mixing with you’, says the deacon with a quiet sinister smile, ‘in case she picks up any of your bad habits’. On one occasion at school Sally ingenuously tells one of the girls in her class how ordinary her family is. Her classmate bursts out laughing, happy to confide to Sally that she has ‘the most abnormal family’ she’d ever come across: ‘Don’t get me wrong, I like your mother, I really do, but the way you all look at life is weird.’

Gladys shares a converso and marrano interest in masking and personae: ‘Mum always worried about what to tell people. It was as if the truth was never adequate, or there was something to hide ... She had been inventing stories and making exaggerated claims since the day she was born.’ Gladys’s Christianity, seeing Christ as both a frightening figure of death and a deliverer of Bill her suicide husband into paradise, has the idiosyncrasy of marrano religious phenomenology. Nan, brought up as a child in her own people’s country, though forced to be a ‘house native’ separated from the ‘camp natives’, maintains notions of what she feels are Aboriginal beliefs, in her love of nature and her non-perspectival drawing skills (that Sally learns from her for her own conceptions of art that will scandalize her teachers).

Yet Nan mixes such memory and imagining of traditional knowledge with other kinds of consciousness. Sally observes that Nan is suspicious of any kind of authority, including that of doctors, and that her ‘view of the physical world was a deeply personal one’; in particular, her obsession with observing the weather revealed Nan’s ‘rather pessimistic view of the frequency of natural disasters’.

Daily, she checked the sky, the clouds, the wind, and, on particularly still days, the reactions of our animals. Sometimes, she would sit up half the night, checking on the movement of a particular star, or pondering the meaning of a new colour she’d seen in the sky at sunset.

Nan’s consciousness here, her fear of storm and earthquake, a fear that terrifies the children when young, is akin to a strand of Jewish messianic consciousness. I’m thinking of Adorno’s comment on Benjamin: ‘Sadness ... was his nature, as
Jewish awareness of the permanence of danger and catastrophe ...

It is also akin to the philosemitic radical and romantic millenial culture towards the end of the long eighteenth century that Iain McCalman discusses, in enthusiasts and seekers ranging from Joseph Priestley to William Blake. Appearing dangerously deranged to their conservative opponents, millenarians focussed on apocalyptic biblical prophecies that the end of days would come with the restoring of the Jews to Palestine, though they agreed that the millenium would not arrive without cataclysm and violence. Millenarians would devote much time to studying the world's phenomena for allegorical hints, equivocal figures, enigmatic signs.

It's her grandmother's fear of history as the nightmare that is always near that Sally fights to overcome, finally insisting the rest of the family, though Nan tries to sabotage the trip, travel north to find their Aboriginal relatives (the Mulbas of the Port Hedland/Marble Bar area of Western Australia). Just how much the family had lived as conversos and assimilados becomes clear when Sally reports that her children were convinced that 'going north was as adventurous as exploring deepest, darkest Africa'. It is during this journey that Sally makes the annunciatory statements that have so angered her critics, that she instinctively knew her kin, that she and her family had come home, that they now had a sense of place and belonging: 'We had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it.' They would have survived, 'but not as whole people'.

Sally, we might say, is as granddaughter influenced by Daisy's messianic consciousness, though in an apocalyptic way. Out of disaster—the disaster of her family history, with its forced removal, forced sexuality, forced separation of mother and child (Gladys from Daisy), forced conformity, white relatives who refuse to be kin, incest, suicide, and deception—may come annunciations of the new. From such disaster may come rebirth in the journey to the north and knowledge of her Aboriginal genealogy, just as English radical dissenters like Priestley looked for signs of catastrophe followed by hoped-for rebirth in Palestine. In this reading the north of Western Australia is her redemptive Palestine, her New Jerusalem, with which, living in the city far away, she will now have a diasporic relationship.

Sally, I suggest, can be compared to the marranos who—like Spinoza's parents—managed in the seventeenth century to leave Portugal, coming to a newly liberalised Amsterdam, where they attempted to rejudiaicize, becoming known as New Jews. But it was a process more tortuous than smooth. Some of the returning marranos posed problems for Amsterdam's Jewish community and leadership, concerned to assist the
marranos recover their torn religion and a stability of faith and identity rooted in daily observance of the ancient customs of Israel.50

Some marranos, however, wished both to rejoin the community yet continue, if with difficulty and anguish, their independent thinking, their individualistic rationalism and skepticism, their own inner journeys, their distinctive consciousness. Such marranos, or child of marranos like Spinoza, were excommunicated by the community. Here is the wording of the herem (ban) on Spinoza, then aged twenty-four:

By the decree of the Angels and the word of the Saints we ban, cut off, curse and anathemize Baruch de Espinoza ... Cursed be he by day and cursed by night, cursed in his lying down and cursed in his waking up, cursed in his going forth and cursed in his coming in ... We warn that none may contact him orally or in writing, nor do him any favour, not stay under the same roof with him, nor read any paper he made or wrote.51

Now think of the excommunicatory harshness of Jackie Huggins' response to My Place, accusing Sally Morgan of cooperating with the enemy and a traitorous individualism, a refusal to observe continuing ancient custom and tradition, acts that will be neither forgotten nor forgiven.

CONCLUSION

I believe such harshness involves a misreading of the textual movement of My Place. Like the marranos in relation to their receding Jewish heritage, Sally at the beginning of the novel knows little to nothing about Aboriginality and Aboriginal people: 'What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? ... I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian.' Like the marranos, she distrusts the authority of state institutions. Yet she has what the marranos had, confidence and pride in her own capacity to think independently. Like the marranos, she grows up in a family that, she learns, puzzlingly mixes Christian beliefs and visions with other beliefs and visions that suggest hidden histories. Like the marranos, she knows that pasts are being kept secret because of a fear of racism and state surveillance. Like the marranos, she experiences ruptures of identity, now Indian, now New Aboriginal.52

Launched on her quest, she is moved by finding her lost ancestry, discovering much about the Aboriginal history of her family. It brings her great joy. She makes excited, exaggerated claims. But such excitement and knowledge is not the telos, the consummatory end, of her journey, the acclamation of a rounded essentialized Aboriginal identity. The joy and genealogical knowledge is a vital addition to her identity in process, as process; her identity as a verb not a noun (to adapt Judith Butler). In terms of the novel as a whole Sally develops a complex diasporic sensibility that is not centred on recovering a single totalized ersatz Aboriginality. She continues to belong to more than one place, more than one
chronotope, more than one history, more than one genealogy. The textuality of the novel does precisely what Eric Michaels and its other critics said it should do. It creates Sally's identity as always involving the exploring, probing, negotiating of multiplicity. It creates the autobiographical theatre of observing diverse contradictory elements and fragments of herself. Sally Morgan the author looks with great interest at the 'I' called Sally Morgan—someone who is at once both Same and Other, someone who is Many rather than One, someone who is always between the Many and the One.

*My Place* raises in disturbing ways the difficult, baffling issue of the relationship between notions of biological or genetic inheritance and constructions of cultural identity. In 1990s Australia the relationship has been brought to public notice and controversy by the suggestion that the prominent Aboriginal writer, critic and dramatist Mudrooroo (born Colin Johnson) has no Nyoongah ancestry and kin. According to a newspaper report, Mudrooroo's sister has publicly stated her belief that their grandfather was an American migrant from North Carolina, apparently of African-American descent. The same report quotes Mr Robert Eggington, the co-ordinator of the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation in Western Australia, expressing his anger at Mudrooroo's long-held claim to Aboriginal identity: 'His deception is an example of the on-going and continued spiritual colonization of our people ... a continuation of genocide'. Mr Eggington felt that any determination of Aboriginality must include analysis of bloodlines as well as acceptance of the person by the elders (whom, he suggests, Mudrooroo was unwilling to face). 'Unless you've got Aboriginal blood, you can't claim to be Aboriginal ... I, as an Aboriginal person, with English blood as well, can't declare myself to be Japanese.'

In his turn Mudrooroo has suggested that his identity had always been textually created by others, a designating by whites and the white government ('I had to go along with that'). He feels that the Nyoongah people who now repudiate his Aboriginality and call on a language of blood are speaking in the violent accents of Western race classifications that culminated in Nazism. In this defence Mudrooroo comes perilously close, I think, to constructing a victimological narrative, claiming the status of a passive victim. Such a claim is all the more odd given that in his past critical writings Mudrooroo has appeared very actively, not least in disdainful comments on Sally Morgan's *My Place*, to be policing the white/black borders of who was truly authentically Aboriginal, who had the right to speak; the claiming of certain knowledge of essential Aboriginality by which he could judge, evaluate, and condemn degrees of Aboriginality in others. As an act of self-making he also very actively constructed a Nyoongah genealogy of descent and cultural knowledge transmitted matrilineally ('It was from my mother that
I got most of my culture ...'). Mudrooroo's sister, however, claims that their mother comes from a family of white settlers who arrived in Western Australia from Britain in 1829.

In further destabilizing incidents it has been publicly claimed that the writer Archie Weller, born into a Western Australian pastoralist family, also apparently bases his claim to Aboriginality on a photo suggesting that his paternal great-grandmother may be Aboriginal (his mother Helen Weller has said that she used to think the great-grandmother in the photo was Malaysian). Controversy has also been inspired by the elderly white artist Elizabeth Durack's creation of an Aboriginal painter, Eddie Burrup, in whose name she has chosen to exhibit.

There is also the very interesting autobiography An Australian Son (1996) by Gordon Matthews, an Australian diplomat. As he tells it, Matthews was adopted as a baby, brought up by a white professional family, and educated in middle-class schools in Australia and England. Dark of skin, he was subject to racist abuse when young, and grew up thinking he must be Aboriginal; he was so believed, and became part of the Aboriginal community. In his early thirties, however, he discovered through a genealogical search that his father was Sri Lankan. Matthews's memoir is in many ways a tragic story of the effects of colonialism, of how brutal and disruptive and dislocatory its racism can be.

Matthews no longer feels he can call himself Aboriginal; he wishes actively to acknowledge that his ancestry on his father's side is Sri Lankan (his mother is white Australian). Torn and tortured, Matthews nevertheless does not retreat into claiming the status of victim. Rather, more in the spirit of Benjamin's allegorical method, he fragments his relationship to identity in terms of various histories, genealogies, and tense tentative perhaps failing relations with his biological family that he has discovered living in the United States: his identity is now the writing of the narrative.

In this context of revelation and controversy, of identity as performance and adventure, of vigorous claim and counter-claim, of hurt and bewilderment, amidst heated media attention, in a nervous febrile fin de siècle, Sally Morgan's My Place remains a flashpoint and a challenge, not only to local Australian arguments concerning the body, ethnicity, and identity, but to the wider unresolved centuries-long post-1492 colonial and post-colonial histories of conversion and assimilation, exile and diaspora.

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REFERENCES

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9 ‘Aboriginal art and film...’, pp.89-93.


12 For another account of this journey to Hungary, see John Docker, ‘Rethinking Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism in the _fin de siècle_’, _Cultural Studies_ 9 (3), 1995: 419-422.


9 Cf. the video documentary _Dhuway: an Australian diaspora and homecoming_ (1996) concerning the forced dispersal of the Yiidhuwarra people of Cape York from their homelands, and their desire to return. See also Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Rupture and the ethics of care in colonized space’, in Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (eds), _Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the humanities and the public intellectual_ (MUP, Melbourne, 1996), and Ann Curthoys, ‘Entangled histories: conflict and ambivalence in non-Aboriginal Australia’, in Geoffrey Gray and Christine Winter (eds), _The Resurgence of Racism: Hanson, Howard and the race debate_ (Monash Publications in History, Melbourne, 1997), and ‘Who were the nomads? Expulsion, exodus, and exile in white Australian historical mythology’, in Margaret Jolly and Nicholas Thomas (eds), _Race, Person and Gender Beyond Europe_ (Duke University Press) forthcoming.


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7 Michaels, p.168; Muecke, pp.126, 129; Attwood, pp.305-8; Jaireth, pp.126, 129; Huggins, p.461.

8 Michaels, p.169; Muecke, pp.315, 318; Attwood, pp.305-8; Jaireth, pp.70, 77; Huggins, pp.460; Rowse, 466.


10 Cf. Ella Shohat, 'Taboo Memories and Diasporic Visions: Columbus, Palestine and Arab-Jews', in Jennifer Fink and Mary Joseph (eds), *Performing Hybridity* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997).


14 *My Place*, pp.31, 33-5, 52, 275, 277, 288.


16 *My Place*, pp.31-2, 44, 135.


21 *My Place*, pp.149, 173.

22 *My Place*, pp.149, 152, 158-9, 247, 263, 267, 325.


25 *Ivanhoe*, chs.XXIV, XXVII, XXX.


31 *My Place*, pp.105, 283.


35 *My Place*, pp.96, 99, 135, 323.

36 *My Place*, pp.61-3, 67, 74.


My Place, pp.214, 217, 224, 227, 229-230.

Spinoza and Other Heretics..., pp.12, 64-5, 67, 71.

Spinoza and Other Heretics..., pp.3-6, 42-50, 57-80, 178.

My Place, pp.100, 102, 112, 134, 139, 259, 296, 336, 341.

The following thoughts on Mudrooroo and also on Gordon Matthews owe a great deal to discussions with Gerhard Fischer, and reading of his essay 'Imagined Identity: On Mudrooroo's dilemmas', shortly to be published in Germany (Yearbook of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English).

_The Weekend Australian_ 5-6 April 1997.


On the importance of a victimological narrative in white Australian history, see Ann Curthoys, 'Who were the nomads? Expulsion, Exodus, and Exile in white Australian historical mythology'.