

Sue Thomas: Aboriginal Subjection and Affirmation

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Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987: RRP \$12.99)

Sally Morgan's *My Place* had sold 110,000 copies in Australia to November this year. In October, *My Place* was published by Seaver Books in the United States and Virago in Britain; foreign-language publishers have also expressed interest in translation rights. The size of Morgan's audience is a testimony to the book's timeliness, and would be gratifying indeed to the two elderly members of her family who died while the book was being researched and written. Arthur Corunna's comment on his own story could well stand as a comment on the larger book: 'It's important, because then maybe they'll understand how hard it's been for the blackfella to live the way he wants. I'm part of history.' (213)

My Place can be seen as tapping white middle-class interest in Australian history and genealogy, which has been fanned by the bicentenary of European colonisation. While operating as a collection of individualised histories and as part-resolved genealogical mystery tale, the book places itself and its stories in the political debates about Aboriginal self-determination.

My Place traces a family heritage marked by the psychological, social and material impact of racism. As Morgan suggests in her epigraph, the process of recovering her Aboriginal heritage has been a regenerative one for her family. Without it, 'We would have survived/but not as a whole people'. The process of recovery allows Morgan to develop a critical perspective on Aborigines' collective history of racial subjection and repression, and on their individual history of subjected and repressed aboriginality. This critical perspective leads members of Morgan's family to place themselves within positive discourses of aboriginality, to discover a sense of racial pride. The racial politics exposed and inscribed in the text are thus expressed in competing discourses of aboriginality.

Black women's autobiographies usually contain a recognition scene, an incident that makes the authors conscious of their blackness and its significance.¹ For Sally Morgan (*née* Milroy) this incident occurs at the age of fifteen, when her grandmother, Daisy Corunna, whom Sally has thought to be Indian, confesses her blackness and accuses her grandchildren of wanting a white grandmother. Sally and her sister, Jill, then discuss the discourses of aboriginality current in 1966. To be Aboriginal is to be called a 'Boong', to be denied a place in discourses of social acceptability and friendship and to be thought a contaminating influence on one's peers. Jill does not want to subject herself to this by publicly acknowledging her part-aboriginality. Sally can only tentatively recall some positive things said about Aboriginal people: that they like animals and feel close to the earth. Later, Morgan recalls a visionary memory of her grandmother's handing down traditional knowledge of animals, but admits that she was too ignorant to appreciate its significance. Morgan's response to this incident signals the tentative beginning of her efforts to disinter the past that her mother and grandmother have buried and resolve the mystery of why the family's aboriginality was denied. In the process, Morgan learns what it is to be an Aborigine in twentieth-century Australia. New discourses of aboriginality emerge, securing pride in race and making it possible for Morgan's mother, Gladys, to tell her story. Eventually, even Daisy Corunna discloses a smaller part of her own life.

Racist discourses of aboriginality in Australia are organised in terms of the colonialist manichean allegory, which Abdul JanMohamed has described as the 'central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation'. The manichean allegory is 'a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object'.² Other terms could be added to this list — productive and lazy, clean and dirty. Racist discourses present aboriginality as the absence or negation of white ethnocentric values — intelligence, rationality,

productivity, discipline and cleanliness.³ For Aborigines socialised in a colonial or neocolonial white Australian culture, the sense of racial identity is structured by these racist discourses. Any identification with the black object of these discourses entails the internalisation of white cultural norms and the acceptance of skin colour as the determining factor of life. As Arthur Corunna remarks about Daisy, his sister, 'They make her feel 'shamed, that's what white people do to you.'(148)

Daisy's shame at her aboriginality is compounded by fear of a discriminatory law. In Western Australia as elsewhere, discourses of racial difference were used to justify the enactment of repressive legislation, allegedly to 'civilise the savage' by intervention in and destruction of black culture. Western Australian legislation permitted part-Aboriginal children to be removed from the care of their black mothers and placed in institutions or white foster-homes. This law dispersed the family of Morgan's maternal great-grandmother, Annie Padewani, and threatened subsequent generations as well. In now-discredited eugenic terms, the legislation aimed to repress aboriginality in the children and to cultivate in them the perceived virtues of white civilisation. The law implicitly excluded Aboriginal women from conventional discourses of motherhood that stressed the natural and proper tie between mother and child.

Racial discourses based on the manichean allegory are products of superstition, of fetishisation, of an ethnocentric failure to perceive the integrity of cultural difference, and of the projection of western culture's inverted self-images, fetishisation and habits of binary thinking. Furthermore, as JanMohamed comments, these discourses commodify blacks so that they can be 'exploited more efficiently by the administrator'.⁴

Positive discourses of aboriginality take as their starting point the assertion, justification, publicising and celebration of the 'presence' of cultural originality or cultural difference. Negation is countered by affirmation. Projection, which is a central mechanism of racist discourse, may be challenged when members of either race achieve an understanding of common humanity and viable cultural difference. A new and competing knowledge of aboriginality is produced. At first this knowledge will be marginal, but its marginality may diminish with the emergence of Aboriginal political lobbies, media coverage that raises racial consciousness and the acceptance of positive discourses in intellectual circles, which in turn influence educational curricula and institutions such as the law. From a black point of view, though, there is a large and frustrating gap between white liberal racial attitudes and the political resolution necessary to institute an effective land rights policy.

In setting out to produce a different kind of Australian history, Morgan does, not shirk the task of representing her mother's and grandmother's distressing sense of racial inferiority. Daisy's inferiority complex is manifest in her attitude to successful or proud blacks. Of successful blacks, she says, 'Just look at them, showing off. Who do they think they are. They just black like me.'(138) Her brother objects when Daisy calls him a 'silly old blackfella' to deflate his 'showing off':

One day, he said to me, 'Daisy, don't talk to me like that when we out. I'm your brother, you've got to show me some respect.' Hmmp, the way he carried on you'd think he was a white man. (339)

Daisy persuades her daughter, Gladys, to conceal her own part-aboriginality and that of her children, because she 'didn't want the children growing up with people looking down on them'(305). In Daisy's eyes, to be 'treated like a black woman' is to be the object of sexual abuse, disrespect and rape (337). Daisy's shame at her Aboriginal heritage is apparent, too, in her comment when her daughter and granddaughter insist on going to Corunna Downs: 'All you'll be looking at is dirt.'(214)

Gladys, too, resists identification with a menial black 'subject' position. In the white Drake-Brockman household where Daisy works as a servant, Gladys's rejection of a gift of a black Topsy doll dressed in a servant's outfit becomes a family joke. Gladys wants to be a blonde, blue-eyed princess. As Morgan discerns, her grandmother equates 'being white with the power of God'; whites are free to 'do anything'(107). Gladys, too, equates being white with pride, social acceptance and the freedom to achieve that is integral to discourses of bourgeois individualism (279). This last equation exposes the complicit imperialism of such discourses. For Morgan's largely educated, middle-class audience, Gladys's implied criticism of capitalist ideology would probably be defused by the successes of her children. Those successes, though, are achieved almost entirely in the context of a denial of aboriginality.

The exception is Arthur Corunna, who seemingly has always taken pride in his race. He challenges racist discourses that brand Aboriginal people unproductive and lazy by pointing to his own success as a farmer and to the importance of Aboriginal labour in the Western Australian pastoral industry. He comments positively on his family's spiritual inheritance, an inheritance that often finds expression in healing powers. Arthur's personal confidence and pride as an Aborigine derive from affirmations of his social worth in a pioneering white masculine world. Arthur records many instances in which his steadiness and hard physical work have been accorded social recognition, ranging from acceptance as a mate(193, 210) through a good reputation as a worker(198) to promotion(191) and eventually to gaining a profitable price for land he improved. He especially values the solidarity conferred by equal mateship with 'good' men or 'white blackfellas'. His stature is confirmed by his ownership of land, having a cheque book, employing other men, being free of debt and 'makin' history'(208) as owner of the first truck and header in the Mukinbudin district and pioneer of Corriedale sheep farming(210). He can buy services that are normally available to whites only; going by train or staying in a hotel make him feel 'important', 'like a king'(202, 204). Arthur's sense of personal and racial worth is thus affirmed by the fact that he can situate himself in nationalistic discourses that celebrate the role of the battling pioneer in white Australian settlement. At the same time, he can legitimately situate himself in discourses that condemn racist victimisation of Aboriginal people.

In the course of the book, Daisy and Gladys Corunna also make efforts to resituate their senses of identity within positive discourses of aboriginality. These processes begin when Morgan publicly acknowledges her Aboriginal heritage by applying for an Aboriginal scholarship. After her daughters acknowledge their aboriginality Gladys feels she should do so too, though she admits to repeated public failures of courage. She responds with pride to Arthur's story with its positive emphasis on the spiritual side of aboriginality and the inheritance of healing powers, both of which she detects in herself. Gladys Corunna's story situates her as a victim of racism. The trauma of victimisation is principally associated with the disruption of her family life, but also with a racial inferiority complex of which she now feels ashamed. Gladys's 'spiritual and emotional pilgrimage' to the north (233) imparts to her, as to Sally, a sense of belonging in a tribal family network — in sociological terms, a *Gemeinschaft* rather than the *Gesellschaft* of white Australia.

Daisy also responds to Sally's acknowledgement of her aboriginality. She begins to take a special interest in television news coverage of blacks, and develops a strong sense of the shared historical oppression of black people around the world. Her story shows her situating herself as victim of lies, double standards, maltreatment and repression. Nevertheless, she conceals the traumatic details of her sexual life and most of the pain of her enforced separations from her children and family. Daisy opens up a little when her daughter and granddaughter tell her about the lives of her mother and half-sister after Daisy had been removed from Corunna Downs. She notes that her sense of belonging to her family, her 'people', used to make her feel important (334).

Daisy's decision to tell a small part of her history is partly triggered by hearing Morgan's daughter read bedtime stories about Aboriginal children in the Western Desert. Daisy begins to tell her great-granddaughter autobiographical tales, placing herself as an Aboriginal child in the outback. In her story, Daisy reveals her tribal name, offers details of her childhood and her mother, and finds positive value in Aboriginal spiritual awareness and in the healing powers that she has inherited(344, 346–7). Daisy's separation from her tribe severs her education in its cultural traditions. She does not understand the concept of land rights; she associates it with the material right of the individual Aborigine to purchase and own property rather than with cultural autonomy, communal self-sufficiency and the restoration of communal entitlement. Daisy's last words to Morgan on the subject of her race reaffirm her inferiority complex: she speaks of herself as 'Just a dirty old blackfella'(352).

Unlike Arthur, Daisy is unable to win economic independence by her hard work as a servant in the Drake-Brockman household. Alice Drake-Brockman's account of Daisy's role depicts her very much as a black mammy figure, devoted to her mistress's family, contented, loyal and self-sacrificing. Alice places Daisy in a discourse of family, based on affective ties rather than self-interest. This discourse seems to have been used to justify the fact that Daisy was paid only in kind, an arrangement that restricted her self-determination and facilitated emotional blackmail to guarantee Daisy's service and her acquiescence in the arrangements made for Gladys. Daisy's bouts of understandable disaffection with her daily round of constant

hard work are demeaned as evidence of a racial tendency to want to go walkabout, to lack steady application to a task and to need constant administrative supervision(169). Daisy herself recognised the reality of her position as servant: 'I never ate with the family. When they rang the bell, I knew they wanted me.'(334)

Racial discourses based on the manichean allegory construct blacks as embodying moral disorder, having rampant 'primitive' or 'animal' sexual desires. This racist fantasy is a moral convenience, as Barbara Christian points out: 'The rape of black women by white men or the use of their bodies for pleasure could be rationalised as the natural craving of the black woman for sex, rather than the licentiousness of the white man.'⁵ Hence, too, the white fantasies about black male sexual potency and aggression and, in a common inversion, white romanticisation and celebration of allegedly unrepressed black tribal sexual expression — a romanticisation based on ignorance of cultural differences in ideas of sexual modesty and practices that legitimate sexual relationships. Alice Drake-Brockman projects her own fears of the 'barbarism' of Aboriginal men onto Daisy's own mother, Annie, when she claims that Annie had allowed her daughter to be taken to Perth because 'I don't want my daughter to grow up and marry a native'; Daisy's version of the story is that Annie allowed her to go so that she could get an education. Daisy is secretive on sexual matters; she has been traumatically affected by racist discourses of Aboriginal female sexuality and her sexual exploitation by white men. The little she does say about interracial sexual relationships reveals a disturbing tendency for casual sexual interest by white men to be masked as a 'privilege' for the Aboriginal woman (336), a 'privilege' that could result in separation from the children produced by such liaisons. Arthur Corunna's account of sexual attitudes among whites in the early twentieth century implies that white men's refusal to acknowledge sexual relationships with Aboriginal women and responsibility for part-Aboriginal children was bound up with culturally specific prudery and a discursive association of dirt, a Christian sense of evil, sex, blacks and contamination.

At one point, Sally Morgan questions the integrity of her own claim of aboriginality:

I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and 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)

The stories of Arthur, Gladys and Daisy and the trip to Corunna Downs provide Morgan with a sense of what it is to have an Aboriginal family heritage. Her strengthening awareness of aboriginality allows her to recognise and affirm what now appears to have been distinctively Aboriginal in her upbringing and experience. So Daisy her grandmother's sharing of her ties to nature with her own initiation into a magical realm that contrasts sharply with the dismemberment and sadness of the repatriation hospital in which Morgan's father is periodically institutionalised. Morgan's spiritual sense and experiences are shown to be a product of Aboriginal heritage, even if many of her family's spiritual experiences now involve Christian iconography rather than the iconography of the Dreaming. Morgan is able to place her family's experience squarely within newly emerging positive discourses of aboriginality associated with relationship to the land, spirituality and social relations characteristic of a *Gemeinschaft*.

The value of *My Place* as family history lies in its giving shape and substance both to the traumatic consequences of racist subjection of Aborigines and to the self-affirming force placing aboriginality within a positive cognitive framework that celebrates Aboriginal subjectivity. In this way *My Place* challenges and extends European Australian consciousness of what it is to have an Aboriginal family heritage. The sales of *My Place* are heartening; it is to be hoped that the book will generate the kind of respect for cultural and colour difference that Daisy Corunna desires, and the kind of self-respect in aboriginality that she never finally achieves.

It is difficult to measure the potential impact of Morgan's stories as a currency in racial political debate. The land rights campaign has suffered setbacks with the shift to the right in both Liberal and Labor Party politics. Electoral pragmatism has led the Labor Party to abandon its policy commitment to land rights. The audience of *My Place* is largely drawn from that very group of white, middle-class swinging voters now being wooed with right-wing policies and economic pragmatism. At the very least, *My Place* should help confirm liberal racial attitudes based on a sense of common humanity; historically, though, those attitudes have been used to support assimilationist and integrationist racial policies that fell far short of offering land

rights as a measure of compensation and a means of Aboriginal cultural preservation and self-determination. It remains to be seen whether Morgan's quiet exposure of the shortcomings of bourgeois individualism has any radicalising impact on liberal political thinking.

NOTES

1 Regina Blackburn, 'In Search of the Black Female Self: African-American Women's Autobiographies and Ethnicity', in Estelle C. Jelinek (ed.) *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1980) p. 134.

2 Abdul R. JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, 12, 1985–6, p. 63.

3 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth, 1967) p. 32.

4 JanMohamed, *op.cit.*, pp. 64, 62.

5 Barbara Christian, 'Shadows Uplifted', in Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (ed.), *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture* (London, 1985) p. 190.

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