



“A Memory for the Society”: The Art of Story-telling as a tool of Resistance in the Autobiography of Isabel Flick



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Abstract :

The confessional narrative or ‘autobiography’ has been seen as one of the key modes of Australian Aboriginal literary writing. Inherited from a strong oral tradition, the art of story-telling has become one of the greatest legacies of Australian Aboriginal women writers, and the oral transmission of history and culture became one of the many forms of resistance strategies that the Aboriginals employed against the colonising forces. It also acts as an important space to which writers often turn in their quest for reclaiming and re-creating their

lost history and cultural memory. The auto/biographical work, Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman also captures the tradition of orality and the art of story-telling so beautifully that the text in turn becomes a “memory of and for the society”.

Keywords : Aboriginal Autobiography, Isabel Flick, Memory, Resistance, Story-telling

Research Paper :

The confessional narrative or ‘autobiography’ has been seen as one of the key modes of Australian Aboriginal literary writing. It provides an important space to which writers often turn in their quest for the reclaiming and re-creation of a lost history and cultural memory. It also accords the greatest opportunity to combine various perspectives by telling the true story of a person who has travelled a different path; it examines and affirms the protagonist’s role in the society and results in an unconscious unfolding of the self in the process. Very often the writers of autobiography have been able to carve a niche for themselves through it.

The key aspects of the Aboriginality of women’s autobiographical narratives include their oral nature and their roots in specific communities. Here, story-telling is principally a performative practice. The stories told are part of larger repertoires that the tellers draw upon and adapt according to their various purposes and the needs of different audiences. As Davies observes, stories exist “in multiple forms, not necessarily locked into writing as a finite form in the way we see it in the academy” (Davies 8).

Inherited from a strong oral tradition, story-telling is one of the greatest legacies of Australian Aboriginal women writers. Orality has been observed as an important aspect of Aboriginal culture as well. Stories and songs played an important or a crucial role in traditional Aboriginal culture. As Catheine H. Berndt has pointed out:

. . . because Aborigines were traditionally non-literate, fundamental instructions and information about [the land and its resources] came through words, in word-of-mouth transmission—not so much through drawings, cave paintings and visual symbols, but predominantly through words, spoken and sung: stories and songs were a major means of transmitting and sustaining Aboriginal culture. (93)

Contemporary Aboriginal culture is also characterised by orality. Margaret Somerville relates that, while working with Patsy Cohen on her life history, many of the Aboriginal people they interviewed attested to the importance of orality by insisting that “Aboriginal culture was what their elders told them” (Huggins and Tarrago 140-47), and that the oral transmission of history and culture “was one of the many forms of resistance strategies that Aboriginals employed against the colonising forces” (Huggins 89).

It has been suggested that neither traditional oral narrative nor contemporary autobiography foregrounds factual information. Walter Ong, for example, states that “in functionally oral cultures the past is not felt as an itemised terrain, peppered with verifiable and disputed ‘facts’ or bits of information” (98). This is a point that John Murphy also emphasises: “Oral recollection inclines towards the figurative rather than the specific, to tropes rather than to facts” (164). Bell Hooks commenting on her own autobiographical writing says: “I felt that I was not as concerned with accuracy of detail as I was with evoking in writing the state of mind, the spirit of a particular moment” (“Writing Autobiography.” 1038). However, the narrative, in their culture, acts as a powerful mode of familial and social bonding, linking together strands from the past, present and future in a continual struggle towards the realization of the individual and collective self.

The changing factors in contemporary Aboriginal culture have obliged women increasingly to take on the role of parenting in Aboriginal families. They therefore play an important part in the maintenance of contemporary culture by passing on information that traditionally has been transmitted orally. Jacques Le Goff (quoting Georges Baladier) describes how in preliterate societies there are memory specialists, custodians of knowledge who are “the memory of the society” (56). To some extent Aboriginal women play this role in contemporary culture. The autobiographical work, *Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman* by Isabel Flick and Heather Goodall can be labelled as ‘the memory for a society’. The activist Barbara Flick comments in her essay “Colonization and Decolonization: An Aboriginal Experience.” that:

It has only been recently that the Murri women’s contribution to the maintenance of our culture and existence in the face of the destruction of our communities has been recorded . . . We struggle for the rights of our children to their own culture. They have the right to learn about our religion and our struggle and they need to be instructed by us in the ways in which this world makes sense to us. (65)

“Our history as Murri women”, she adds, “lives and thrives in our own oral history tradition” (66). KetuKatrak—quoting BuchiEmecheta—makes a similar point about the role of women in Nigerian society: “Women are born story-tellers. We keep the history . . . we converse things and we never forget. What I do is not clever or unusual. It is what my aunt and my grandmother did, and their mothers before them” (174).

The art of story-telling and the value of personal narratives are beautifully captured in the auto/biographical work, *Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman*. It captures the form of an oral text, or at least one that was conceived orally. The oral inscription of Flick’s narrative is quite striking. We notice (as readers) that the narrator often addresses the reader or listener directly, as for example in the last sentences of the narrative: “There’s a lot of Aboriginal members in the RSL club now. Some of my family are members. But I still remain one that . . . you know, I think that it wasn’t good enough for my Dad, so I don’t think they’re good enough for me” (I. Flick 80). The direct address (‘you know’) occurs elsewhere in the book; it points to the act of telling, and invokes the reader or listener repeatedly. Companionship is an important aspect of story-telling. The sense of exchanging experiences rather than simply information—and therefore of giving counsel—is evident in almost all narratives. As Walter Benjamin records, story-telling is an essentially social act which rests upon “the ability to exchange experiences” and to offer counsel to the listener (83-86).

While the dialogic process of interviewing and collaboration has been formally foregrounded in some recent transcriptions of Aboriginal story-telling, like that of *Muecke’s Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* by Paddy Roe, texts packaged as autobiographical narratives generally have the format of the interview process (apparently) erased. However, the traces of the oral genesis of the text remain untouched. The oral or ‘telling’ aspect of autobiographies can be uncovered by focusing on the relationship between the narrator and, in the first instance, the listener. This auto/biographical work of Isabel Flick is also an outstanding example of collaboration between its subject, Isabel Flick, and her chosen interviewer, adviser and editor, Heather Goodall, in which it remains Isabel Flick’s autobiography despite her death halfway through the process. Before she died, Isabel Flick asked Goodall and her family to complete her story. The result is a multi-layered accounts of her many lives which accurately reflect the circles of family, friends, communities and political organisations that Flick sustained and within which she worked. *Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman* does what a good biography or autobiography does: it tells the story of a life, and through that life it tells the story of a family, a community, a series of networks, and a nation. The dynamics of the act of telling reveals something about the social and cultural positioning of the narrative.

Many recent autobiographies by Aboriginal women that are derived from transcripts of oral narratives are narrated to either a member of the ‘author’s’ family (as in the case of Daisy and Gladys Corunna in *My Place*, and Rita and Jackie Huggins in *Auntie Rita*), or another Aborigine (as in *Mum Shirl*), or else a close white friend (as in *Ingelba*). The frequent use of the vocative form of address evokes a sense of intimacy and trust, as well as the immediacy of the listener, whose presence is as palpable as in speech or conversation. The anonymous white reader ‘overhears’, as it were, this ‘conversation’ between an Aboriginal narrator and her family and friends. Sometimes this places the reader

in the position of a voyeur. But always our attention is drawn to the specifically social nature of the language acts which constitute the original oral narrative. These invoke the communal bond between teller and listener, and reinforce an awareness of language as social interaction.

A striking feature of Isabel Flick's narrative is the repetition of phrases such as "when I look back", "looking back on it", and "looking back now" (I. Flick 23, 36, 38). These phrases differentiate Flick's speaking position (the present) from the events (the past) about which she speaks. The narrative mode is recollection: a (re) reading of the narrator's own life, it is often punctuated with a sense of amazement and disbelief at the injustices she and other Aboriginal people endured. She re-evaluates the past from the perspective of a present, marked by changed and changing conditions for Aboriginal people. Even as a child she has shown extraordinary courage and strength, and as an adolescent and struggling mother she now speaks as the progenitor of a hundred children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Story-telling is principally a performative practice. Since their own relationship to the past is complex, story-tellers mediate between their present circumstances and the desire to communicate an experience of that past (P. Hamilton 131). The 'truth' and 'authenticity' of such memories will depend on the social and political specificities of the speaker's own enunciative position. These stories do not necessarily reveal the past "as it actually was". As Paula Hamilton suggests, "the invention of the particular self in the oral form . . . [is] a form of acting; a fictional performance of self" (ibid. 130). However, story-telling and the narration of life histories have an important role within the family. The telling of the past is necessary for several reasons. They see the book as an important documentation of the past both for their family's sake and for the rewriting of history. This book by Flick has many voices in it. Flick had loved talking over her memories with the family and friends she had grown up and lived with all her life—all of them checking, discussing and comparing their versions of the events they had shared. There were gaps in her recorded memories on deeply important issues; perhaps those silences were deliberate. But her sudden death meant that her voice had been interrupted far earlier than it should have been.

Aboriginal women who produce autobiographical narratives, however, insist that they address the black community, and most immediately their own families. Marnie Kennedy, for example, writes: "[My] story is for my grandchildren and for [all] Aboriginal children. They cannot know the history of our people before the white man came, but they should know this part of their history" (1).

Many Aboriginal families in the west have treasured their family keepsakes—photos, cards, children's reports and trophies, baby images and toys—and kept them safe against the odds in lives full of movement but with few other possessions. Isabel Flick was not too different; but her collection had, alongside all those things, the minutes of meetings in her own hand, eviction notices, notes for speeches, drafts of letters she had written to politicians and public servants, cards from funerals, meetings, diaries and the re-read, deeply worn letters to her from those she loved, as well as some of her own many letters to others which had found their way back to her. Some were handled so much they were held together with sticky tape. Others had been torn to pieces and then carefully gathered together and placed in envelopes to be saved. Together, all these photos and minutes and toys and letters form pieces in the jigsaw of a woman's activist life.

Some commentators play down the importance of tradition in contemporary Aboriginal literature (Ariss 131-45); but in many Aboriginal women's autobiographical narratives the narrators see themselves as custodians of knowledge that must be recorded and passed on. Although the main recipients of such knowledge would appear to be young people in the extended family and the wider Aboriginal community, the education of white people is also on the agenda.

Because most Aboriginal women's autobiographies are narrated by grandmothers, they focus necessarily on the past. It suggests that the injustices they portray are seen by most white readers as belonging to a period of history before their time. As a result, the shock experienced by many white readers is cushioned by relief that "things are not like that now". A sense of outrage at past iniquities does not necessarily open the eyes of a white community to the continuing prevalence of racism, and to the dispossession and injustices that Aboriginal people suffer today. As Ruby Langford Ginibi suggests, life stories such as her own are "probably the only information that a lot of students get that puts the Aboriginal point of view" (129); many other Aboriginal women writers and story-tellers emphasise their professional educative role (e.g. Torres 103). The proliferation of Aboriginal autobiographies has had a discernible effect on white cultural amnesia.

However, these stories are not only to a white audience. It is important to take into account the oral nature of these narratives and the fact that the original enunciative act of oral story-telling from which these written texts evolve is framed by both Aboriginal and white listeners. Such stories provide an "education" for a contemporary generation of Aboriginal people who have not lived through the times these grandmothers speak out, and who in some cases did not even know they were of Aboriginal blood until late in their childhood. Many Aboriginal writers aim their texts quite consciously at a white market. Roberta Sykes comments that although black writing "is very important, it is equally important that whites read it" ("Five angry women with many wrongs to write." 83). Now that Aboriginal women have come to occupy a focal position in the family, their leadership is manifest also in the general community, where women are prominent. Clearly they write and speak from a position of social prestige and achievement, and their work is a conscious articulation of an oppressed history.

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