‘You are writing a gospel…’: ‘life writing’ and the lives of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes in the Adnyamathanha community.

You are writing a Gospel
A chapter each day,
By deeds that you do,
By words that you say.
Men read what you write,
Whether faithless or true;
Say what is the Gospel
According to you?1

This paper seeks to explore the construction of an hybrid life-writing text similar to the genre of ‘gospel’ and incorporating ‘parable’. The text produced for the project ‘White Lives in a Black Community: the lives of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes in the Adnyamathanha community’ seeks to narrate historic lives, through a postmodern and postcolonial hybrid text, in order to engage the contemporary reader in a critical response to Indigenous – non-Indigenous relationships in Australia.

The prime subjects of the project ‘White lives in Black communities: The Lives of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes in the Adnyamathanha Community’ are two English immigrants to Australia in the early twentieth century. Rebecca pursues her goal to marry an Aboriginal man, has a family with him, is widowed but chooses to remain living with the Adnyamathanha community for the next thirty years until her death never the less. Jim comes to the Adnyamathanha community a missionary during the period of establishing a permanent camp and mission station for the Adnyamathanha. He is well liked by the community, but suicides there six years after his first arrival. Decades later, Rebecca will choose to be buried next to him. Later still, her

1 Verse on the Children’s Page, The United Aborigines Messenger 1 June 1929, p15
Adnyamathanha grandchildren will erect a headstone for her describing her as a ‘true friend and companion of Adnyamathanha people.’

Marlene Kadar has argued for the widest possible definition of ‘life writing’ as ‘texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who does not pretend to be absent from the [black, brown or white] text himself/herself. Life writing is a way of seeing...it anticipates the reader's determination on the text, the reader's colour, class, and gender, and pleasure in an imperfect and always evolving hermeneutic - classical, traditional or post-modern.’

Kerryn Goldsworthy has observed Kadar’s ‘definition’ is ‘a term coined precisely in order to signify defiance of attempts at generic classification’, and thus is capable of encompassing personal genres like letters and diaries, but also ‘metafiction’. Kadar, like Sidonie Smith, attends to ‘the fictions of self-representation’ employed by the author in life writing, as well as the intention to engage the reader in their own interpretation of the text.

In my ‘post modern’ approach to narrating the lives of two English immigrants, I have combined the genres of historical narrative, oral histories, autobiography, and speculative fiction to create an open ended biographical text for the reader to both position themselves within through the characters (particularly author, narrator and primary subjects), and project themselves into ‘the world in front of the text’ where they can experience their own selfhood in new ways. The stories of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes unfold in a metaphorical or parabolic fashion, juxtaposing images of Europeans in unfamiliar contexts and relationships in order to create new meanings for Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in Australia.

Sallie McFague has taken up the possibilities for theology emerging from this

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6 Elspeth Probyn, ‘True Voices and Real People; the 'Problem' of the Autobiographical in Cultural Studies,’ *Relocating Cultural Studies: Developments in Theory and Research*, ed. John Shepherd and Ian Taylor Valda Blundell Routlege, London and New York, 1993. P110 In arguing for the emancipatory effect of feminist writing, Probyn describes how female readers of female heroines were able to construct literary selfhood in contrast to their actual lives. My text offers several points for identification between reader and character, one of which is identification through the authors self-representation.
7 Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995. p7 Paul Ricoeur’s cross-disciplinary work in literary theory and theology suggests that a subject can experience ‘redemption through imagination’ and that particularly in metaphor and its more discursive form, parable, the unfamiliar juxtaposition of images and meanings that bring life to these forms also create a new ‘world before the text’ which the reader can imaginatively inhabit and so experience their selfhood in new ways through such texts. He describes his term ‘world in front of the text’ on p221 ff.
8 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. P161 'Parabolisation is the metaphorization of a discourse.' In particular, literary forms of metaphor and its extended version, parable, create new horizons for text and reader through the juxtaposition of unfamiliar images and meanings.


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treatment of metaphor and parable in poem, novel and autobiography. She, and many other commentators, holds parable as both the prime literary unit through which new insight can emerge, as well as the primary pedagogical tool used by Jesus. In their original form, Jesus’ parables are characterised by being ‘history-like’, stories related to history but which ignore contemporary distinctions between history and fiction. They are stories and images drawn from life to urge listeners (often opponents) to urgent and decisive action. Jesus parables are embedded in narrative context, along with folk legends, poems, holy writing, and authorial commentary, with the whole piece of literature forming a ‘gospel’, one of the ancient forms of ‘bios’, or writing of ‘Lives’. I argue it is these characteristics that make ‘parable’ and ‘gospel’ appropriate expressions of Kadar’s ‘life writing’ [genre], and particularly appropriate forms of literature for life writing in my project. The stories of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes embed parables of speculative fiction within an interpretive context of historical narrative, along with the voices from Indigenous and non-Indigenous oral histories and autobiographical sections foregrounding the production of source material and text, as well as the development of Indigenous – non-Indigenous relationships through the process of compiling Jim and Rebecca’s stories.

Each of these genres – speculative historical fiction, historical narrative, oral history, autobiography - are ‘fraught with representations and versions of truth, but attempting to make truthful representation of experience or a life’. Authors of hybrid biographies have defended their work against critics arguing that different registers of ‘truth’ can be achieved through fictional representations based on historical research.

Speculative and fictionalised sections are often introduced where material is scant: Modjeska writes that she turned to fiction when writing Poppy ‘because my confidence in evidence collapsed…I pulled at the threads of memory until I found the life, or maybe only the tension in them.’ In my project, little archival ‘evidence’ exists. Oral histories have generated a great deal of material that coalesces around several public events in lives, along with a disjunct collection of details taken from a variety of eras and perspectives. As a project engaging with Indigenous history, the ‘voices’ of Indigenous oral history are privileged according to Indigenous claims for prioritising orality as an epistemology of history against the hegemony of literary ‘evidence’. Indigenous and feminist researchers have argued for the validity of oral

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11 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. P244
12 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*. p159
17 Modjeska, *Timepieces*. p73
history of oppressed or silenced subjects\(^{19}\) where its importance 'lie[s] not in its adherence to facts but rather...[at the points] where imagination, symbolism, [and] desire are evident, and by seeking to work with these 'errors' on the basis that they can 'sometimes reveal more than factually correct accounts'.\(^{20}\) Frequently, oral history material is threaded together in speculative fashion to create historical fiction;\(^{21}\) while at the same time conveying contemporary issues and desires of those making the oral histories.\(^{22}\) The production of such narrative engages with debates in the politics of representation, especially Indigenous representation by white researchers and authors, and authors like Anita Heiss have highlighted the issues of editing, presenting, representing and publishing Indigenous writing (including spoken script).\(^{23}\)

Susan Maushart has written:

'History speaks through as many voices as historians have ears to hear. For the voice of experience, we listen to the oral record, richly textured and bright with detail. Archival sources, the voice of authority, speak in more official accents (and are often more telling in what they omit than what they reveal.). Historical evidence is nothing more or less than the testimony of storytellers. Good history begins when we give them voice, and listen...\(^{24}\)

As this project self-consciously seeks a contrapuntal reading of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources, it elicits a polyphonic 'history' written in a variety of languages: standard English, transcribed Englishes ranging from male bush slang to Aboriginal English, and \textit{yura ngawala}, the Indigenous language of the Adnyamathanha people.\(^{25}\) Ashcroft et al have argued that the use of variant English or language within a text foregrounds cultural difference at the same time as reinforcing the cultural relativity of the variants to the imperial standard.\(^{26}\) Consequently, the text I am producing is an artefact of postcolonialism, and forces the reader to engage with a variety of degrees of difference from standard English and a variety of degrees of

\(^{21}\) For an example of this, see Susan Maushart, \textit{Sort of a Place Like Home} Fremantle Arts Center Press, Fremantle, 1993. P43 'No one is better qualified to tell the story of everyday life at the Moore River native settlement than the children who lived there. This chapter is narrated by two of them, a boy and a girl. Although strictly speaking they are fictional characters, their words are not drama but documentary...monologues have been constructed, like vast jigsaw puzzles, from pieces of eighteen interviews with former children of Moore River. All the incidents described in these monologues actually happened. The language in which they are described is also faithful to original sources. Time sequences have been altered or compressed, some of the names have been changed and certain details have been sharpened or shaded to enhance the accuracy of the whole.'
\(^{24}\) Maushart, \textit{Sort of a Place Like Home}. P207
\(^{25}\) R. S. Sugirtharajah, \textit{Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology} Chalice Press, St Louis, 2003. P16 quoting Said 1993:59 'we...re-read it not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and beyond which) the dominating discourse acts.'

difficulty in comprehension. While devices within the text and footnotes serve to aid these difficulties, the experience of the cultural gaps and silences, and the identification with some languages more than others, will serve to locate the reader culturally within the text, and create the experience of cultural engagement and estrangement which is the major theme of the work.

This project creates a demanding text for readers, and in an effort to minimise their confusion over just what it is they are reading, and how they should interpret its truth claims, I argue that my text requires in-text guides to interpretation, through foregrounding the production of text (particularly of oral history material and the relationships it arose from), footnoting sources, uses of tense, and differentiating font. Historians like Heather Goodall and Susan Maushart, and historical fiction writers like Stephen Kinnane, have adopted these and other practices to achieve transparency in the text and allow the reader access to their own interpretations.27

Historians and anthropologists whose hybrid texts include autobiographical content have self consciously taken a political stance in their work, sometimes called ‘advocacy anthropology’.28 This project situates itself within this tradition, engaging intentionally with contemporary ‘history wars’ debates regarding types of historical ‘evidence’ and complexity of colonial relations in the contact zones where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians meet.29

Finally, the project aims to produce a readable, enjoyable text, that inter-twines Jim and Rebecca’s stories with those of their Adnyamathanha friends and relatives, and with my own story of contemporary relationships with Adnyamathanha people. Together, these create a ‘gospel’ for our time and place.

Works Cited


MacIntyre, Stuart. *The History Wars*.


