Sites of Resistance

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Hilda Jarman Muir

VERY BIG JOURNEY: MY LIFE AS I REMEMBER IT
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N HER RECENTLY published collection of critical writing by indigenous Australians, Michele Grossman notes that ‘[s]ince the early 1980s, the burgeoning interest in and publication of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing … has become increasingly well-established’. This is particularly true when we consider the success of life-writing by Aboriginal women in the last twenty years. Sally Morgan is particularly true when we consider the success of life-writing by Aboriginal women in the last twenty years. Sally Morgan is has become increasingly well-established’. This is particu-
larly true when we consider the success of life-writing by
Aboriginal women in the last twenty years. Sally Morgan is
practically a household name, and even the once-maligned
work of Ruby Langford Ginibi has taken its place on school
reading lists around the country.

Hilda Jarman Muir’s Very Big Journey is usefully consid-
ered in this context. This likeable book reflects a confidence
that seems to derive in part from the recent history and success of other
Aboriginal women writers. For a start, the 83-year-old author seems to know
that this story is an important one, both
for her family and for her nation’s
history. This confident spirit is encap-
sulated in the book’s subtitle — ‘my
life as I remember it’ — which defies
both postmodern theorising about
the fictionality of memory and the
conservative backlash against what
John Howard has called the ‘black
armband’ view of history. The subtitle’s
message is mirrored in the text when
Muir writes: ‘[s]o that’s the end of my
story and if people want to say that’s
not what happened then good luck to
them.’ Though not as cheeky or adven-
turous as Langford Ginibi, Muir demon-
strates a profound determination to be
and to represent herself.

This determination seems to have been hard-won. Muir’s
description of her childhood in the Kahlin home for
‘half-caste’ children is heart-rending, although the author
never displays self-pity. Stating that ‘we were always
hungry’, Muir describes the children’s efforts to ‘scavenge’
food — including potato skins, considered a delicacy — from
neighbours’ bins. Later, her descriptions of being let loose
on the world at the age of fourteen with almost no education,
no understanding of contraception and no knowledge of
‘the world outside’ highlight the absurdity of the notion that
such homes equipped indigenous children for ‘integration’.
World War II and Muir’s experiences of motherhood also
seem to have contributed to her strong sense of self. Evacuated
from Darwin with the first three of ten children in 1942,
Muir arrived in Brisbane a painfully shy young woman. By
the time her husband Bill returned from service in New Guinea,
however, she resented his recalling the family to Darwin,
having established a life and a sense of belonging in the
bigger city. For the next decade, she battled with the loneliness
and labour associated with living on the outskirts of
Darwin and raising ten children. In many ways, her struggles
are representative of a broader community of postwar women,
who, having gained independence during the war, struggled
with its loss when their husbands returned.

Discussing the success of Aboriginal women’s life-
writing, academic Anne Brewster proposes that the
dominance of this genre by women may reflect Aboriginal
women’s assumption of central roles in their homes and
communities. Brewster argues that Aboriginal women’s cen-
trality ‘may be due to a change in the structure of Aboriginal
society … [including] factors such as the disintegration
of traditional family and kinship structures, alcoholism and the
high incidence of Aboriginal men in jail’. The fact that Muir’s
beloved husband was also something of a drinker and woman-
iser seems to support this argument.

More positively, Brewster proposes
that the dominance of this genre by
women can be understood through
notion of the family — ‘a woman-
centred arena’ — as a site of resistance.
Certainly, Muir’s role as a mother, grand-
mother and great-grandmother is of
central significance to her story. She
writes because she wants ‘the little ones
living in Adelaide [to] know that their
grandmother was a proud Yanyuwa
woman … a saltwater woman’.

The significance of a female-centred
indigenous community is also evident
in the book’s history. In the foreword
to Very Big Journey, ATSIC Regional
Chairperson Barbara Cummings writes
that ‘the manuscript was assisted by
Melissa Lucashenko with the advice and
assistance of Jackie Huggins’. Both these
indigenous women are successful authors
in their own right, the latter of Auntie Rita (1994), itself an
innovative collaboration between Huggins and her mother.
Challenging the Western world’s sense of authorship as an
individualistic affair and achievement, this unabashed depic-
tion of the assistance provided by other Aboriginal women is
evidence of how far indigenous writing has come since Colin
Johnson’s (Mudrooroo’s) Wild Cat Falling was published in
1965.

Very Big Journey is Hilda Jarman Muir’s story. Never-
theless, a good deal of the book’s joy lies in the author’s
hearty self-assertion, and how this seems to have been
enabled by a broader indigenous community.