Stolen-Generations Literature

*My Place* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*

**Sally Morgan’s** *My Place* and Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* are examples of texts that have been re-positioned as Stolen-Generations testimonies. The following analysis of the two novels seeks to understand the likelihood of a text’s being incorporated into cultural memory if it is considered exclusively as Stolen-Generations literature. Texts by Aboriginal people who were now considered to belong to the Stolen Generations, and stories that had previously been told orally and locally or read as biographies, were now re-read as testimonies. With the growth of what Bain Attwood calls “narrative accrual,” stories such as those by Morgan and Pilkington were removed from the local sphere into the national sphere; no longer belonging to the individual authors, but now read as belonging to the Stolen Generations, and symbolic of the political issues of reconciliation and compensation.

Biography and autobiography are literary genres and do not seek justice in the legal sense as testimonies sometimes do, but instead offer an alternative view of history with a personal insight that forges a link between the public and the private. A reader familiar with Western literary traditions will usually approach a testimony differently from a work of fiction, even a work of fiction promoted as biography or based on a true story. Leigh Gilmore argues that the autobiography offers an alternative to testimony and is in a sense “inadmissible as testimony.” Others view

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autobiographies as sitting on the boundary between testimony and literature, where they may “disrupt the narrative of history” without standing in for history. The same narrative viewed as an autobiography rather than a testimony serves a different purpose. Readers generally expect autobiographies and testimonies to adhere as closely as possible to what actually happened; however, we do not usually read autobiographies as evidence, nor do we normally consider testimonies to be a literary genre proper.

Testimonies are often regarded as more than a text, variously considered political, ethical, social or educational documents and sometimes all four. Kimberly Nance claims that the testimony is “not only a text” but is also a social-justice project “in which the text is an instrument.” Dominick LaCapra defines testimonies as serving to “bring theoretical concerns in sustained contact with the experience of people who lived through events and suffered often devastating losses.” As political documents, testimonies are an “appeal to a community" to listen and to act. Those working with survivors of trauma do not judge testimonies by their accuracy to historical fact, but by their ability to allow “a reader to glimpse a trauma” – to represent the “essence” of an event.

Historians tend to consider testimonies unreliable because they are “laden with pathos [...] and so dependent on individual memory.” But despite their reliance on memory, many Australian historians, along with those interested in the study of trauma, consider testimonies and biographies from members of the Stolen Generations to be factual, a true representation of events and therefore not open to literary criticism or other

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\(^5\) LaCapra, \textit{Writing History, Writing Trauma}, xiv.


\(^7\) Bernard–Donals, “Beyond the Question of Authenticity,” 1303.

\(^8\) Felman, “The Return of the Voice.”

\(^9\) Young, \textit{Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust}, 163.