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Writing/Reading a Life: the Rhetorical Practice of Autobiography

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This essay examines how the introduction/preface to a non-fiction text is constructed as autobiographical practice – a sort of 'introduction-as-memoir'. The use and autobiographical effects of rhetorical tropes (stake inoculation, metaphor and binary oppositions) are examined in the introduction that prefaces *Massacre myth* (Moran, 1999), a polemic account of the 1926 police massacre of Aborigines that was the catalyst for Australia's 'History Wars'. Using the analytical methods of deconstruction, I tease out how language, structure and a (seemingly) objective account of historical virtues are recruited to the project of autobiography, and illuminate the role of language in the construction of the authorial subject (and Others), and show how these are entangled with broader social, political and epistemological issues. The analysis underlines the dialogic relationship between text, reader and society, and the instability of truth claims and the authorial subject of autobiography.

Introduction

This essay turns the analytical I/eye on the rhetorical construction of the authorial subject in the introduction/preface of a non-fiction book. Attending to Derrida's invocation to put texts *sous rature* (under erasure), this deconstructive (ad)venture unpicks the textual crafting of a particular (novel) form of autobiographical practice – a sort of 'introduction-as-memoir'. Attending to how rhetorical tropes produce the authorial subject, this essay focuses the analytical lens on how a potted memoir is fused with a (seemingly) non-autobiographical account of historical virtues and recruited to the project of autobiography. Illuminating the rhetorical construction and autobiographical effects of text (even when they do not appear particularly autobiographical) exposes the reliance of autobiographical truth on language and the entanglement of autobiographical practice with broader social, historical and epistemological contexts and claims.

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Like other auto/biographical forms, the 'introduction-as-memoir' is a constructed text that is open to multiple readings. This essay offers one (of many possible) readings of the construction of the authorial subject in the introduction/preface to *Massacre myth* (Moran, 1999),[1] a polemic account of the 1926 police massacre of Aborigines at Forrest River in north-west Australia that was the catalyst for a very public and acrimonious national debate amongst historians and in the media – coined the History Wars – about the true history of black and white relations in Australia.

The interest of this essay is not with the arguments presented in *Massacre myth* or with the 'true story' of the Forrest River massacre. These are matters of on-going debate in other forums (eg, Green, 2003a; 2003b; Halse, 2002; Halse and Fraser, 2005; Moran, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2003; 2004; 2005; Windschuttle, 2000a; 2000b; 2000c). But the bickering about who got the facts of the massacre right or wrong has deflected attention from how language has been deployed to give credibility to particular truth claims and to construct different speakers/writers as authorities whose account of the massacre can be trusted as true. This essay makes a start in addressing this omission by teasing out the autobiographical effects of the rhetoric deployed in the introduction/preface to *Massacre myth.*

The essay is structured in three parts: an overview of the theoretical framework of the analysis (*Autobiography as rhetorical practice*); a discussion of the historical and political context that set the terms for the introduction/preface (*Setting the scene*); and a description of the introduction/preface followed by a more detailed deconstruction of the autobiographical effects of three pivotal rhetorical tropes: metaphor; stake inoculation; and binaries (*The rhetorical construction of the writer*).

AUTO/BIOGRAPHY AS RHETORICAL PRACTICE

As *Auto/Biography* exemplifies, contemporary auto/biographical writing has been marked by a broadening of genre and form. The introduction to *Massacre myth* falls into this nebulous, auto/biographical assembly: part personal history and part historiographic critique. In presenting a particular fragment of the writer's life and social world, the introduction takes on the guise of a truncated version of the memoir:

> Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense – childhood, for instance – or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn't possible in autobiography; memoir is a window into a life.
>
> (Zinsser, 1987: 21)

Like the memoir, the 'introduction-as-memoir' that prefaces *Massacre myth* is a referential form of life writing that deploys 'memory, experience, identity, embodiment and agency' (Smith and Watson, 2001: 3). Nevertheless, it presents itself as a realistic and true account of events, of who the author is, and of how the author came to be the sort of person who wrote a certain book in a certain way. The reader is invited (and expected) to believe that the writer's story has been accurately remembered, faithfully reproduced, and that it is a transparent and real picture of the truth.

Herein lies the illusion. Autobiography preserves the fantasy that it provides a 'window into a life' (Zinsser, 1987: 21) by turning a blind eye to its textual construction. Yet critical scholarship has highlighted the fictions of autobiography and challenged the notion that autobiographical texts are referential to life and that the remembered account can resurrect the truth of the past (eg, Aldridge, 1993; Bruner, 1991; Fisher-Rosenthal, 1995; Gergen and Gergen, 1986; Lieblich *et al.*, 1998; Stanley, 1992). The autobiographer cannot artlessly retrieve memories and their original meanings from the past to accurately (re)depict the original lived experience. Memories are always partial and selective; coloured by attitudes, beliefs and values; reconfigured by experience; and fashioned by language (see Bonjione, 2001; Conway, 1990; Josselson, 1995; Rubin, 1986). To paraphrase Rubin (1986: 4), autobiographical memory is more a reconstruction than a reproduction.

Surveying the issues that have concerned contemporary theorizing of auto/biography, Aldridge (1993) draws particular attention to the recognition that 'the self is *constructed* in auto/biographical writing, rather than being fully-formed, and then *represented* (either partially or in total) by the auto/biographer'. Like other forms of autobiographical practice, the truncated memoir that introduces a non-fiction text – the 'introduction-as-memoir' – is a performative act of textual identity construction. Rosenwald and Ochberg underline this point in their description of life writing and narrative: 'How individuals recount their histories … shapes what individuals can claim of their lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are means by which identities may be fashioned' (1992: 1).

Poststructural theory has been influential in unsettling the ontological certainty of autobiography by problematizing the taken-for-granted foundations of humanism: the transparency of language; the stability of the subject; and the rational production of knowledge and truth (St Pierre, 2000a; 2000b). In this frame, the coherent, unitary, writing self is always/already compromised: 'The subject of the speech-act can never be the same as the one who acted yesterday: the *I* of the discourse can no longer be the site where a previously stored-up person is innocently restored' (Barthes, 1986: 17).

In particular, poststructuralism has attended to the constitutive nature of textual practice and to how the subject is brought into being *through* text. The subject 'does not exist ahead of or outside language but is a dynamic. Unstable effect of language/discourse and cultural practice' (St Pierre, 2000b: 502). In Derrida and Ewald's terms:

> There is not a constituted subject which engages itself in writing at a given moment for some reason or another. It exists through writing, *given* [*donné*] by the other: *born* [*né*] ... through being given [*donné*], delivered, offered and betrayed all at one and the same time.
>
> (1995: 279)

Barthes (1986) takes this position further by contending that the writer is always present in a text even when it purports to be an objective, realistic account. For these reasons, he urges us to take the text as the primary analytic focus, rather than the real person who has written it.

This epistemological shift (re)focuses the analytical lens on the deployment of language and structure in texts. But language is not an innocent tool. Its purpose is to persuade and to interpellate readers to take up *and* believe the writer's account of self and the social world. The relative brevity of an introduction/preface to a non-fiction book forces the writer to make delicate and strategic decisions about what aspects of his or her past to include or exclude in order to craft the authorial self, to make particular points, and to persuade readers that the writer's persona and account are exactly as he or she presents them to be (see MacLure, 2003). At the heart of this task is a discursive inter-textual power relationship between text, reader and society that makes autobiography a political project whereby each instance of language incrementally reproduces and/or transforms power relations, culture and society (see Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).

Consequently, like other autobiographical forms, the 'introduction-as-memoir' operates in multiple registers. On the one hand, it presents itself as a realistic and factual story – an artlessly devised and candid account of the truth about the writer and part of his or her life. On the other hand, it is a rhetorical act that entangles the discursive with the real and flickers with illusion. What makes autobiography so seductively persuasive is that it does not seem rhetorical but presents itself as a straightforward, plausible, realist account (MacLure, 2003). For this reason, Barthes (1967: 73) cautions us to be wary of apparently realist writing: 'far from being neutral, it is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication'.

But readers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with a writer's fanciful tales. They have the power to accept, reject or to disrupt the meaning of any autobiographical text: 'We may be textually persuaded, cajoled, led and misled; but we can, and we do, also scrutinize and analyse, puzzle and ponder, resist and reject' (Stanley, 1992: 131). Derrida (1978) urges

us to deconstruct and disassemble texts by putting them *sous rature* (under erasure) and exploring and critiquing their contradictions, silences, and the ways in which what appears be real depends on what is privileged and/or excluded from the text. The analytical work of deconstruction involves unpicking 'the textual means (both content and structure) by which particular kinds of readings are intended, and also silences, the absences from a piece of writing' (Stanley, 1992: 155). This kind of critical practice both disrupts *and* complicates the textual presentation of the unitary authorial self – unsettling what appears to be straightforward and self-evident and "disrupting common sense" about the naturalness or inevitability of identities, values and concepts, thus showing the workings of power and material interests in the most seemingly innocent of texts' (Luke, 1995, cited in MacLure, 2003: 9).

While auto/biographical critique is familiar with the use of rhetorical analysis to tease out the transparency of language and to disrupt the illusion of realism (eg, Bakhtin, 1981; MacLure, 2003; Stanley, 1992; Stronach and MacLure, 1997), it has been less zealous about scrutinizing how the (apparently) non-auto/biographical *also* produces the authorial subject, in contrast to areas like sociology and critical psychology (see eg, Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990). Yet, if we heed the injunctions of Derrida and Barthes, this sort of analytical, textual work is an obligatory consequence of attending to the recent theoretical developments in auto/biographical theory: the ontological challenges of poststructuralism and deconstruction and the epistemological recognition that autobiography (and the 'introduction-as-memoir' as a particular form of autobiography) is a performative act of authorial identity construction.

This essay takes up these conceptual agendas with a deliberately transgressive intent: to provoke autobiographical critique to embrace a broader and more catholic construction of what does and might constitute autobiographical practice (including the introduction/preface to a non-fiction book); to excavate the autobiographical constructions secreted within the language of (apparently) non-autobiographical components of texts; and to illuminate how autobiography is at play, even when the text presents itself as otherwise.

Setting the scene

Massacre myth had its genesis in a turbulent social and political context. According to the accepted historical account, in 1926 a police expedition massacred and burned the bodies of Aboriginals near the Anglican mission at Forrest River in Western Australia. The Reverend Ernest Gribble, head of the mission, reported the rumours of the killings and, in 1927, the Western Australian government established a Royal Commission to investigate the

allegations. The Royal Commissioner concluded that 11 Aboriginals were killed and burned and that four died while in the custody of the policemen leading the party: Constables Denis Regan and James Graham St Jack (Wood, 1927). The constables were charged with murder but the case was dismissed by a committal hearing that concluded that there was insufficient evidence for a successful criminal prosecution.

The conventional wisdom of the massacre has been recorded in history texts, articles, doctoral theses, biographies and popular journals (eg, Biskup, 1973; Bolton, 1981; Broome, 1982; Elder, 1989/1999; Evans, 1961; Fitzgerald, 1984; Goddard, 1978; Green, 1989; 1995; Halse, 1993; 1996a; 1996b; 2002; 2005; Wise, 1985). The story is so entwined in Australia's historical and cultural psyche that it had been woven into historical fiction (eg, Stow, 1958).

In 1994, the established account of the massacre was challenged in a three-page 'Special Feature' published in the 'Big Weekend' supplement of *The West Australian* (8 October, 1994: 1–3), the local newspaper of Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. The author, Rod Moran, was a freelance writer, poet and popular historian, and later a staff writer for *The West Australian* and a regular commentator in the right-wing journal *Quadrant*. Moran alleged that the Reverend Ernest Gribble fabricated the story of the massacre to hide his illicit relationship with an Aboriginal woman and that Constables Regan and St Jack were innocent and falsely condemned by the 1927 Royal Commission. The feature's headlines reflected its tone and subject matter: 'Massacre myth: review of evidence clears police of outback killings'; 'Facts overtake fiction in a big historical injustice'; 'Ungodly verdict on mission priest's work'. One section, headed 'Agony over sins of father', claimed that research by Constable St Jack's son, Terry, had disproved the allegations against his father, and that the 'demonic reputation' thrust on his father by historians caused the family continued suffering and trauma (p. 3).

The feature sparked a four-month debate in *The West Australian* (8 October 1994 to 18 February 1995) with contributions from historians, academics, Aboriginal communities, journalists, as well as the broader community. Of the nine letters to the editor published during the debate, two commended the discussion. The others were critical: 'Forrest River killings happened' and 'Akin to holocaust denial' (15 October 1994, 'The Issues': 62), 'Claims denigrate a revered figure' (24 October, 'The Issues':12), 'Massacre evidence ignored' (18 February 1995, 'Big Weekend': 2). Nevertheless, the bulk of news space was assigned to Moran who published three articles elaborating on his theory and a letter responding to his critics (8 October 1994, 'Big Weekend': 1–3; 19 October 1994, 'The Issues': 15; 28 January 1995, 'Big Weekend': 2; 24 October 1994, 'The Issues': 12).

In the midst of the debate, *The Forrest River massacres* (1995) was published. Written by Neville Green, an academic at Edith Cowan University in Perth and a critic of Moran's arguments during *The West Australian* debate (15 October 1994: 62; 25 January 1995: 12), the book was based on Green's PhD thesis (University of Western Australia, 1989) and his track record of research with the Forrest River Aboriginal community (eg, Green, 1986; 1988; 1989). It adhered to the conventional wisdom of the massacre and was positively reviewed in *The West Australian* as: 'what may well come to be regarded as the definitive version [of the massacre] . . . an impressive testimony of detailed and careful scholarship' (21 January 1995, 'Big Weekend': 3).

Massacre myth was published four years later. It elaborated on the arguments Moran presented in *The West Australian* debate and was based largely, but not exclusively, on a critique of the evidence presented to 1927 Royal Commission and drafts of Constable St Jack's unfinished memoir, provided by the St Jack family. The book revived public debate about the truth of the Forrest River massacre (eg, Green, 2002; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Halse, 2005; Morgan, 2002; Moran, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2002d; 2004; 2005; Windschuttle, 2000a; 2000b; 2000c) and triggered a broader political and ideological imbroglio about white, colonial treatment of Aboriginal Australians – the History Wars – that has been played out in a range of forums, including scholarly publications (eg, Attwood and Foster, 2003; Breen, 2003; Macintyre, 2003; Macintyre and Clark, 2003; Manne, 2001; 2003; Reynolds, 2001; Windschuttle, 2002; 2004).

The mêlée reflected Australia's long struggle with its messy, racial past. Until the 1960s, Australian history was a narrative of British discovery, settlement and subjugation of *terra nullius* (uninhabited land). In 1968, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner (1979: 214) described the deliberate exclusion of Indigenous Australians from Australia's written history as the 'Great Australian Silence'. His rebuke inspired a new generation of historians who 're-cast the moral drama' of Australian history by representing colonization as invasion; Aboriginal responses as resistance; and describing the racism underpinning the violence of settlers (Moses, 2003: 350). The 'new historians of the dispossession' (Manne, 2003: 3) included scholars like Charles Rowley (1970), Henry Reynolds (eg, 1984; 1999) and Peter Read (1999) whose research and writing shaped the legal and political changes in Australian race relations policy during the second half of the twentieth century: the granting of Aboriginal citizenship (1967) and Native Title (1992); the beginning of racial reconciliation (1991); and the investigation into the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families (1997) (Manne, 2003: 3–4).[2]

The introduction to *Massacre myth* played a pivotal role in the declaration of the History Wars. It issued a clarion call to conservatives to revise the work of a generation of liberal historians and set the tone of the battle by publicly challenging, for the first time, the scholarship

of the post-Stanner revisionists.[3] The introduction also laid out the epistemological, theoretical and methodological basis of the conservative take on historical research and writing. Building on the empiricist tradition, the introduction to *Massacre myth* called for a forensic approach to historical analysis that resonated with other writers, including Keith Windshuttle who took up the cudgels and became the most prolific and public protagonist for the conservative case (eg, Windschuttle, 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2000d; 2001; 2002; 2004). The conservatives were christened 'denialists' by their opponents (see Manne, 2003) because they challenged the representation of colonization as a narrative of violence and abuse, disputed claims about the number of Aboriginals killed in frontier clashes, and argued that narratives of white abuse of Aborigines had been fabricated by left-wing intellectuals and historians for their own agendas. Consequently, entangled in the rhetorical construction of the 'introduction-as-memoir' that prefaces *Massacre myth* are broader issues about the textual strategies and intertextual relationships that the conservatives invoked in their campaign to (re)interpret and (re)write Australian race relations history.

THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE WRITER

The relatively lengthy introduction to *Massacre myth* (14 pages) consists broadly of two parts. The first section is a brief, chronological account built around a central epiphany or turning point (Denzin, 1989) that outlines the writer's background; how he came to write *Massacre myth; The West Australian* debate; and the (forlorn) efforts of the St Jack family to persuade members of the Western Australian establishment to alter the historical record and clear Constable St Jack's name.

The second section comprises a thematically organized critique of a series of phenomena alleged to have obscured the truth about the Forrest River massacre and black/white relations in Australia. The first is described as the 'Chamberlain effect' and alludes to a prominent and controversial legal case in Australia in which Mrs Lindy Chamberlain was convicted of the murder of her infant child. The baby's body was never found and Mrs Chamberlain insisted that she was innocent and that the baby was stolen by a dingo (a wild Australian dog). Eventually, after a lengthy series of appeals and a Royal Commission, Mrs Chamberlain was freed. The writer draws parallels between the Forrest River and Chamberlain cases, arguing that both relied on circumstantial evidence, generated powerful public emotions but lacked sufficient evidence to establish a *prima facie* case against the accused (p. xxviii). The second phenomenon is alleged to be the emergence of a cadre of historians and university intellectuals – labelled *l'historien engagé* – who have been captured by the 'Chamberlain effect' and lent their literary skills and moral and intellectual authority to progressive causes and polemic rather

than reporting the facts. The third element is the development of a group of intellectuals alleged to have a psychological need to position Aborigines as victims so that they can take up the role of saviour. The introduction concludes by comparing the Forrest River massacre with the Holocaust and Sandakan Death Marches in north Borneo. In the latter incidents, there were multiple forms of evidence, including eyewitnesses and forensic and documentary evidence that were assessed and judged by the courts. In contrast, the text argues that there was no forensic, ballistics, or eyewitness evidence for the Forrest River massacre and that 'new facts' uncovered by academic research exposes Reverend Gribble as 'a most dubious character' (p. xxxii).[4]

Stake inoculation

The text presents itself as a dispassionate, honest account of the writer and how he came to write *Massacre myth* but the tidy linearity of this 'introduction-as-memoir' is interrupted if we attend to the textual deployment of stake inoculation. This (awkward) technical term is used by discourse analysts to describe rhetorical manoeuvres that seek to persuade readers that a writer's stake in an account is contrary to what might be expected (see Potter, 1996). The rhetorical practice of stake inoculation serves dual purposes: it is a defensive strategy designed to protect the writer from the possible scepticism of readers and an offensive strategy that lays out exactly why the writer can and should be trusted. Thus, the act of stake inoculation takes for granted the inter-textual relationship between text and reader and that the constructed account of a life cannot be disembodied from the interlocutors who constitute the writer's dialogic imagination (Bruner, 1986).

The introduction/preface of *Massacre myth* begins with a potted autobiography that sets out the writer's expertise to write about the Forrest River massacre. He is a journalist, published author and an experienced historical researcher, citing as his credentials a commissioned oral history and a research project on police work in the 1950s. The text asserts a record of writing positively about Aborigines and Aboriginal history, specifically a biography of Tom Gray: 'a remarkable Aboriginal identity ... overlooked by academic social history' (p. xxi), and a newspaper story about the emergence of black literary intellectuals: 'a most important and intrinsically interesting development' (p. xxi). Readers are told that he has mentioned massacres in his previous writing and

> suggested that these victim-stories had to be told because, after all, the last 'mass murder' of Aborigines in WA [Western Australia] had occurred at Forrest River in 1926, within living memory. My view then was, and still is, the victim-stories have to be faced by contemporary Australia as part of black and white reconciliation.
>
> (pp. xxi–xxii)

Language is always embedded in the social, in history, and in politics (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) but autobiography seeks to render this investment invisible to preserve the pretence that what is presented is a true account of what really happened. Attending to the inter-textuality of stake inoculation, the narrative display of the writer's credentials is both and at the same time a rebuttal and a defence against the sort of criticisms levelled in the letters to the Editor during *The West Australian* debate: 'emotional journalism' (Harry Venville, 15 October 1994: 62); 'highly questionable research' (Frank Chulung, 15 October 1994: 62); and 'whitewash the past savagery of colonialism' (Noel Olive, 15 October 1994: 62).

The judicious textual detailing of the writer's advocacy of Aborigines plays a double role by presenting a counter-argument to the charges during *The West Australian* debate of an 'offensive and misleading denial of [Aboriginal] history' (Kimberley Land Council and the Oombulgurri Association Inc., 18 February, 1995: 2) that triggered 'deep distress among Aborigines in the Kimberley and elsewhere' (Frank Chulung, 15 October 1994: 62) and undermined reconciliation between black and white. As one contributor described:

> At best this is in poor taste given that Australian society is reaching for reconciliation between its Aborigines and those who came after. At worst it is analogous to neofascists who today claim there was no Holocaust ... All Australians should accept the evidence of history and learn from it to build a more equitable and democratic society.
>
> (Noel Olive, 15 October 1994: 62)

The introduction lays out, up front and in advance, the writer's connection with the St Jack family: he had met Constable St Jack previously but did not know of his involvement with the massacre; he contacted the St Jack family for help with a different research project (*not* to learn about the massacre); he discovered that Constable St Jack had died; and it was Terry St Jack who suggested that Moran investigate 'the possibility of a false history' of the massacre (p. xxiii). The text assures readers of the writer's concern about the 'gravity of the Forrest River allegations and the demands of intellectual honesty' (p. xxiii), and that he studied the Royal Commissioner's report and archival sources *before* deciding to write about the massacre. The text emphasizes that the St Jack family was 'most helpful and open in the discussion of the allegations that had haunted them for decades' (p. xxiii) and gave the writer 'full access to their material' (p. xxiv), but that the writer insisted on a professional relationship and intellectual independence:

> I made it clear, on the basis of what I had read thus far, while the analysis would be a sceptical one concerning the Royal Commission, if I found

> anything irrefutably implicating either of the police in the killings, then I would have to say so publicly. The family understood this and empahsised [sic.] that they were interested only in the unvarnished truth of the matter.
> (p. xxiv)

Attacked during *The West Australian* debate for his 'apparent intention of clearing the tainted name of the police involved in this murderous affair' (Noel Olive, 15 October 1994: 62), the careful layering of chronology in the introduction/preface inoculates the writer from a stake in the massacre story by asserting/defending the motives of the St Jack family and by constructing a textual argument that the writer stumbled onto the massacre story through a sequence of fateful incidents and at the suggestion of someone else. Similarly, the possibility that the writer's connection with the St Jack family might be read as tainting his independence and integrity is anticipated and countered by asserting his commitment to the 'truth' and by strategically selecting language to position *Massacre myth* as rigorous, objective research and scholarship: 'detailed investigation' (p. xxii); 'critical and sceptical re-analysis of the accepted wisdom' (p. xxx); 'the *possibility* [italics added] of a false history' of the massacre (p. xxiii).

Stake inoculation functions as an autobiographical double move: scripting the writer in a particular light as a particular type of person while simultaneously challenging and erasing other (less desired) constructions that the writer imagines readers might hold. Through these rhetorical manoeuvres, an autobiographical persona is crafted: a writer with the experience, qualifications and integrity to write about the massacre frankly, objectively and truthfully, with concern for Aboriginal Australians and a commitment to racial reconciliation, and whose account of the massacre can be trusted. Of course, readers have no way of establishing the truth or otherwise of this autobiographical persona – understanding is contingent on the relationship established between the writer and the collective reader by/through the text. More pointedly, the textual appearance of honesty and lack of guile disguises the text's own workings as an artful act of textual construction, thereby deflecting attention from how the text produces the authorial self and from the possibility that the truth might be other than as presented.

The journey metaphor

The metaphor of a journey appears in the introduction's title: *The track to Forrest River and the alleged massacres of 1926* and resurfaces in the third paragraph, where readers are invited to learn why the writer 'took the track' to 'the supposed killings' and about the 'wider issues encountered along the way' (p. xxi). The journey is replicated in the introduction's

structure which starts at an unspecified time in the writer's past and progresses to the present:

> The alleged events of 1926 ... had been a vague background piece of my general knowledge concerning the history of WA's far north for many years. I cannot recall where I first encountered the story. But I certainly assumed that it was true and that the events it recounts had been established as fact by competent professional historians.
>
> (p. xxi)

The key events leading to the publication of *Massacre myth* are plotted: a 'simple challenge' from an amateur historian to read the report of the 1927 Royal Commission; the discovery that the report contained 'so many inconsistencies and contradictions in some of the most central evidence that it was unclear ... how a skilled Magistrate could find the case as clear cut' (p. xxiii–xxiv); and further archival investigations that confirmed that the conventional wisdom of the massacre was wrong. Through this textual sequencing, the writer presents what Denzin (1989) describes as an epiphany (a pivotal, personal experience) that changed the writer's understanding and triggered his resolve to correct the public record of the massacre.

The journey metaphor is more than a linear, autobiographical narrative of personal transformation or a guileless textual tool to depict what actually happened in real life. As a well-worn literary device in western auto/biography and an allegory for knowledge acquisition and spiritual awakening in religious writing and spiritual texts, the journey metaphor carries moral insinuations of travelling along a noble and virtuous path. The metaphor also provides a narrative structure of intellectual and moral development that portrays the writer as progressing from a state of innocent ignorance (when he was artlessly unaware of the truth) through a period of searching and discovery (studying the documents and archives) to a state of revelation and enlightenment (when he realized the facts and the truth). The spiritual/sacred inflections of the metaphor – and implicit distancing from the profane – conjure allusions to a confessional act (I was realized I was wrong) and repentance (I discovered the errors of my ways and know better now) and doing penance (I will make amends for my errors by correcting the public record).

The metaphor does autobiographical work by assembling a textual persona of the writer as an honest, virtuous authorial subject: someone who admits his mistakes and works to correct them; who is open-minded and lacking in duplicity; who is driven solely by a noble commitment to the public interest. As MacLure (2003) points out, the power of rhetorical allusions to familiar literary narratives lies in their resonances with readers' socially constructed understandings of the world. These allow the moral

overtones that attach to metaphors to pass unnoticed, seducing readers into trusting that the constructed text reflects what it purports to represent.

Binaries

The manufacture of this 'introduction-as-memoir' is also made possible by a series of binary oppositions that (seem) unrelated to the project of autobiography: primary sources/secondary sources; good history/bad history; good historians/bad historians. Binaries involve an oppositional power relationship in which one side of the binary becomes superordinate by constructing its oppositional other as somehow lacking or deficit (Derrida, 1978). The 'introduction-as-memoir' positions good history and good historical research in a discourse of scientificity that conflates historical practice with notions of scientific and unscientific inquiry. The text configures primary sources (written documents in archives) as good by endowing them with positive attributes: they contain 'nuggets of fact' (p. xxx) and provide 'credible forensic and documentary evidence' (p. xxxi). In contrast, secondary sources (books written by historians) are invested with an array of negative qualities: they use circumstantial evidence (pp. xxviii–xxix); contain 'many errors of fact and/or analysis (p. xxv); and/or engage in polemic (p. xxx).

Classifying historical sources may *appear* reasonable but the 'violent hierarchies' of meaning (Derrida, 1998: 93) that binaries construct do epistemic violence because they structure and constrain thought in oppositional, hierarchical ways that delimit understanding and establish regimes of truth that position particular categories of knowledge (eg, archival records) as worthwhile and discredit or dismiss other (different) forms of knowledge (eg, secondary sources). Through this work, binaries make the introduction's ascription of opposing moral attributes to each side of the binary seem natural, logical and fair: 'belief and knowledge, fact and opinion, appearance and reality' (p. xxix).

Binaries also colonize by affixing themselves to other words and concepts in ways that fashion conflating oppositions. Good history is configured as impartial, disciplined and verifiable: a 'rigorous approach to evidence, analysis and judgement' (p. xxix); 'credible forensic and documentary evidence' (p. xxxi); the search and defence of the 'truth' (p. xxxi) that reputedly involves 'a critical and sceptical' approach (p. xxx); a commitment to 'intellectual honesty' (p. xxiii); the use of primary sources and careful 'sifting [of] the complexities and ambiguities for nuggets of fact which will contribute to the lode of truth' (p. xxx). In contrast, bad history is constituted as failing to provide 'substantive counter-evidence'; 'assertions and statements of belief'; lack of familiarity with the 'wider archival and academic work'; 'errors of fact and/or analysis' (p. xxv); and concern with polemic rather than 'careful weighing of the evidence and reporting on it' (p. xxx).

By inflecting binaries with notions of scientificity, the text assembles a catalogue of historical virtues that lay out the criteria for readers to categorize, evaluate and judge the worth of different historical texts. But positioning in history in a discourse of scientific realism constrains how history is conceptualized and enacted and what is *possible* and *approved* history in the text's moral schema. The text advocates a 'forensic and documentary' (p. xxix) approach to history that privileges written texts: 'arguing . . . from the primary sources' (p. xxiv); the discovery of 'new facts' (p. xxxii); the use of 'rare, original documents', including Terry St Jack's 'extensive archive on the case' and drafts of Constable St Jack's memoir (p. xxiii).

A 'forensic and documentary' (p. xxix) approach to evidence summons the discourse and language of the courts and the positivism of science. In this rubric, Aboriginal oral accounts are eschewed as 'rumour' or 'reports' – unless confirmed by other documentary or eye-witness evidence (p. xxxi). By subjecting oral and written testimony to the same evidentiary criteria, the forensic method erases their substantive differences and makes a case for excluding the personal insights, perspectives and information that are only available through oral accounts. Excluding Aboriginal oral testimony from the repertoire of approved sources available to historians is more than a methodological manoeuvre. It has political consequences because it reinforces the cultural and historical hegemony of colonization and the white colonizers. As Gwyn Prins (1992: 137) describes: 'without access to such resources, historians in modern, mass-literate, industrial societies, that is, most professional historians, will languish in a pool of understanding circumscribed by their own culture'.

Invoking a discourse of scientificity also alludes to, but does not engage with, a lengthy debate about the identity of history and the nature of historical practice. The empiricist tradition that grew out of the nineteenth-century rationalism and was entrenched by Leopold von Ranke and his followers takes for granted the existence of a single and incontestable truth about the past that can be uncovered by systematically excavating the historical documents. In this commonsense, realist view, history is conceptualized as 'a corpus of ascertained facts' (Carr, 1964: 9); historical practice is the persistent mining of the written sources; and the historian is an invisible servant to the primary sources whose responsibility is 'the uncovering of new facts, the endless reordering of the immense detail that makes the historian's map of the past' (Steedman, 1992: 613–14). In contrast, interpretive historians decry the fundamentalism of the documentary positivists as antiquarianism (Hobsbawn, 1997) and argue that the historian's intervention and interpretation cannot be dislocated from what makes the past comprehensible and what comes to be known as history (eg, Geyl, 1955; Hobsbawn, 1997; Lowenthal, 1985; Moses, 2003). As MacIntyre and Clark (2003: 29, 216) explain in their discussion of the

Australian historiography: 'The facts do not exist prior to the interpretation that establishes their significance ... History is not revealed to us in tablets of stone, it has to be created from the remains of the past. It is not fixed and final but a form of knowledge that is constantly being supplemented and reworked.'

By representing good history and good historical practice as an orderly, predictable and scientific process, the text locates the writer's work in a discourse of historical virtues and systematic, impartial and dispassionate analysis that is impervious to inaccuracy and misinterpretation. There are autobiographical consequences to the textual conflation of history and science. By attaching the presence (or absence) of historical virtues to individuals, they are (re)configured into personal character attributes and moral traits. Thus, by casting the writer's work as good (scientific) history, the text inscribes the writer as a virtuous and disciplined scholar – a dispassionate, logical and methodical scientist who works with documentary, archival sources and whose agenda is to uncover the knowable and incontestable truth of the past. In contrast, the description of *l'historien engagé* as 'unashamedly advocates for a particular point of view' (p. xxx) casts a shadow over the accuracy and trustworthiness of their work by imputing an absence of principles, integrity and honesty. The absence of a rigorous, scientific approach to history also suggests a lack of intellectual rigour, hard work and lackadaisical ethical standards. There are traces of this insinuation in the charge that Green's *Forrest River massacres* (1995) contains 'many errors of fact and/or analysis' and that 'professional historians' got the massacre story wrong despite being 'trained for a much more rigorous approach to evidence, analysis and judgement' (pp. xxi, xxix). In the same vein, the integrity of those who support the established account of the massacre is questioned through ascriptions that insinuate dishonesty, deceitfulness or moral hypocrisy. There is evidence of this rhetorical manoeuvre in the commentaries on the members of the Western Australian establishment who reportedly ignored Terry St Jack's efforts to correct the (alleged) 'slander of his late father's name' (p. xxvii). For instance, the Archbishop of Perth is represented as a morally duplicitous character who lent his 'moral authority' to the highly dubious received 'wisdom' about the massacre by launching Green's book despite being given a 'detailed critique' of the book's 'errors of fact and analysis' (p. xxvii).

Configuring historical virtue as a personal attribute provides the logic for carving advocates of different accounts/interpretations of the Forrest River massacre into opposing camps of right and wrong. In this moral universe, there are no intermediate positions or shades of grey. The binary is accomplished, in part, through the rhetorical silencing/erasure of others. With few exceptions, however, these characters are a faceless collective: the unknown

readers who condemned the writer during *The Western Australian* debate; the nameless bad historians alleged to do bad history because their version of massacre differs from the writer (p. xxi); the unidentified intellectuals and *l'historien engagé* alleged to engage in polemic. Constituted as Other, these groups are the object of commentary but their voice is excluded from the text. Being while not being, they cannot respond to the identity thrust upon them – although their opposition hovers, ever present in the textual arguments used to negate their existence.

The silencing of these Others slides into a more complex rhetorical silencing of Green's (contrary) account of the massacre. The criticism of his book as 'seriously flawed' (p. xxv) is compounded by undercutting his scholarly expertise – detailed in *Forrest River massacres* (1995) – by describing him as 'a retired WA teacher with a long interest in Aboriginal history' (p. xxv). This textual slur of omission is bolstered by attacking the integrity and expertise of the (unidentified) reviewers who commended Green's book.

> Perhaps the most important [point] is that, almost without exception, those who have been commissioned to comment on the book obviously had no acquaintance with the wider archival and academic work on the case, nor any substantial knowledge concerning the chief accuser, Reverend E. R. B. Gribble … In short in the ranks of those who have been given the task of commenting on the veracity of the *Forrest River Massacres* it is difficult, at the time of writing, to find a qualified mind amongst them.
>
> (p. xxvix)

The rhetorical strategies of omission and criticism reaffirm the historical virtues proclaimed by the text and do autobiographical work by eroding/erasing Green's authority and credibility to write about the massacre. The doubleness of these rhetorical, autobiographical manoeuvres is that the silencing of the oppositional Other simultaneously works to assert and affirm the writer's textual identity as a person of integrity and as a practitioner of good (virtuous) history.

Postscript

The aim of this essay is not to assert a new autobiographical, master narrative of the writer or to suggest that the introduction to *Massacre myth* deliberately set out to dupe (innocent) readers. Rather, the purpose was to challenge and to provoke autobiographical critique to widen its analytic lens by illuminating the entanglement of autobiography in language in a particular, if novel, form of autobiographical practice. The art in the artless 'introduction-as-memoir' that prefaces *Massacre myth* is that it relies on the autobiographical effects of rhetoric and on an account of historical

virtues grounded in broader political, methodological, epistemological and historical debates. Nevertheless, the dialogic relationship between text, reader and the social world mediates how the 'introduction-as-memoir' is read/understood and this dynamic has profound epistemological implications. Because of its construction in/through text, the authorial self is always fragmentary, mutable and diffuse – 'the decision of each reading' (Derrida, 1981: 63) – and, therefore, cannot produce the definitive, authentic and unbiased autobiographical account. This insight does not erase the authorial subject in the 'introduction-as-memoir' that prefaces *Massacre myth* but it underscores the multiplicity of authorial selves present in any text, the fallaciousness of truth claims and the textual performativity of the authorial self in autobiography.

Notes

1 The book's title is used hereafter for brevity and clarity. All Roman numeral citations refer to the Introduction of *Massacre myth.*

2 For overviews of the role of politics and ideology in Australian historiography, see Macintyre, S. and Clark, A. 2003: *The history wars*. Melbourne University Press. Also Attwood, B. and Foster, S.G. 2003: *Frontier conflict: the Australian experience*. National Museum of Australia, 1–30; Reynolds, H. 1984: *The breaking of the 'Great Australian Silence': Aborigines in Australian historiography 1955–1983*. University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Australian Studies Centre.

3 Macintyre and Clark represent Keith Windshuttle as the first to challenge 'the veracity of the historians who had written on the subject' (2003: 162).

4 The reference is primarily to C. Halse, 1993: *The Reverend Ernest Gribble and race relations in Northern Australia* (PhD); University of Queensland. Later published as C. Halse, 2002: *A terribly wild man: The life of the Reverend Ernest Gribble*. Allen & Unwin. See also C. Halse, 1996: The Reverend Ernest Gribble: a 'successful' missionary? In B. Dalton, editor, *Lectures in North Queensland history*, 5. James Cook University, 218–47; C. Halse, 1996: Ernest Gribble. In D. Pike, editor, *Australian dictionary of biography*, 14, 1940–1980. Melbourne University Press, 330–31.

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