Aboriginal
Testimonial
Life-Writing
and
Contemporary
Cultural
Theory

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Statement of Originality

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

This study argues that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a distinct literary genre generated from and transformative of a certain stage in post-colonial Australian history. Such writing forms part of a larger process by which Aboriginal peoples work-through post-colonial trauma to establish Aboriginal identity in political and therapeutic contexts. As a therapeutic and political project concerned with establishing Aboriginal agency, it is part of the process of reclaiming Aboriginal identity through the present-centred performativity of Aboriginal identity.

From discussing key theoretical issues of autobiography, this study moves into the broader field of life-writing in general and Aboriginal life-writing in particular. This move provides a starting point for exploring the ways in which Aboriginal testimonial texts highlight the excesses, deficits, utility and creativity of contemporary theory; emphasise the co-extensivity of society and individuals to a greater degree than autobiography; are responsive to multi-disciplinary approaches as a consequence of their multi-dimensionality; reveal complex operations of traumatic material in the construction of texts and subjects; and provide insights into literatures of political resistance and post-colonial Australian history.

It examines a range of contemporary cultural theory for tools to explore the political and therapeutic dimensions of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. This provides the opportunity to test the effectiveness of such theories for articulating the political and therapeutic processes involved in establishing Aboriginal agency. This, in turn, provides the opportunity to consider how Aboriginal testimonial life-writing works to expand the interpretative scope of contemporary cultural theory.

This study does not seek to reconcile post-structuralist and post-colonialist views on agency, nor to reinstate Cartesian-like subjects, but rather seeks an understanding of
the liminality of a subjectivity that is neither “isolatable, constitutive and self-identical” (Smith 56) nor unlocatable and deferred, and a form of representation that is neither “an antirepresentational antihumanism” nor a “humanist [defence] of representation” (Arac qtd. in Colás 163). Such a strategy takes a position between the post-structuralist ethical imperative to resist closure and the equally important post-colonial imperative to specify objects of colonial trauma and Aboriginal resistance to dispossession.

The convergence of testimonial life-writing as a form of political resistance with testimonial life-writing as a form of writing-through post-colonial trauma encourages a collaboration between post-colonial and psychoanalytic theory. Both work towards a reinscription and retrieval of identity, which involves avoiding restrictive totalisations of identity and also the crippling of identity in epistemological aporia.

To contextualise this interest I examine the two major sites for theoretical discussion of testimonial writing: Latin American Studies and Holocaust Studies. The former focuses on testimonial writing as a form of resistance literature that seeks redress for injustices and advocates the rights of marginalised communities. Holocaust Studies primarily employs a therapeutic framework for discussing testimonial life-writing and focuses on issues concerning memory and history, subjectivity and traumatic experience. I set out to show how psychoanalytic theory’s interest in the role of traumatic memories in identity formation is compatible with post-colonial theory’s interest in the reinscription of marginalised identities following colonial dispossession.

With this in mind, I am interested in the following questions: how do the different emphases of these two discourses (Latin American testimonio and Holocaust Studies) undermine and reinforce one another? How does the project of expressing the impact and effects of traumatic experiences conflict with the need to set the official record straight in acts of discursive resistance? How does traumatic material impede the capacity to resist?
And, how does the need to resist drive the process of working-through trauma? To be more culturally and historically specific: how do those who write on Aboriginal cultural dispossession and survival deal with the tensions between testimonial literature as a form of resistance and as a form of working-through trauma. And, how do these tensions affect the project of “reculturation” that seeks to counteract the effects colonial dispossession?

A theoretical approach is pursued that simultaneously affirms dual directions: claims the privileges of essentialism and of non-essentialism; reinforces traditional Aboriginality and works towards its processual enrichment; and establishes and deconstructs identity. However, this dual affirmation is balanced by a dual resistance to absolutism and radical relativism, complete redemptive totalisation and complete impasse enforcement, and the complete deconstruction and complete establishment of identity. Maintaining this tension preserves the dynamism of dialectical interchange by not asserting the precedence of one dialectical pole over another. Opposite but ultimately complementary strategies that assert the precedence of one dialectical pole over another fail to account for the complexities involved in the movement between traumatic memory and narrative memory, opacity and transparency, between what can be phrased now and what remains to be phrased, and the testifier and his or her community.

Subjectivity is a continuum of identifications and alterities, re-territorialisations and de-territorialisations, and is not something eternally deferred in the opacity of self-representation or timelessly present in its transparency. Only through acknowledging that agency, and the narratives that represent and constitute it, is generated by maintaining dialectical tensions can we develop a model of representation subtle enough to register the complexities of new subjects and new literatures.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements i  
Publications by the Candidate Relevant to the Thesis iii  
Abstract v  
Introduction: Aboriginal Lives Writing Through Post-Colonial Trauma 1  
Chapter One: Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing, Post-Colonial Theory and the Realist/Anti-Realist Debate 11  
Chapter Two: Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Literary Resistance Theory 65  
Chapter Three: Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Trauma Theory 109  
Chapter Four: Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Recognition Theory 155  
Chapter Five: Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Schizo-Analytic Theory 207  
Conclusion 245  
List of Works Consulted 259
Introduction

Aboriginal Lives Writing Through Post-Colonial Trauma

This study argues that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a distinct literary genre formed from, and transformative of, a particular stage in post-colonial Australian history. At its core, it is a genre concerned with registering Aboriginal agency. This goal is advanced through two interconnected and equally important strategies: firstly, the presentation of Aboriginal political will; and secondly, the working-through of traumatic experiences resulting from colonial dispossession. These strategies form the primary driving forces of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and manifest themselves in a variety of writing techniques shared by, and distinctive of, many Aboriginal authors.

Because this study seeks to elucidate the multi-dimensionality of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, it chooses to bring together a number of fields of contemporary cultural theory to assist in the clearer articulation of the various processes involved in the establishment of Aboriginal agency in testimonial life-writing. These theoretical fields include theories of autobiography, theories of resistance literature, theories of trauma, theories of recognition, and schizo-analytic theory. While each chapter focuses on one of these theoretical frameworks, post-colonial interest in the establishment of Aboriginal agency remains the central focus. In this manner, the study sets out to demonstrate some ways in which Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and contemporary theory can inform one another. Because this study uses contemporary cultural theory eclectically to explore the multidimensionality of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, it may be of use to those

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1 Working-through is written with a hyphen to mark its special use in psychoanalytic theory. Dominick LaCapra writes: "$[w]orking-through [. . .] involve[s] a mode of repetition offering a measure of critical purchase on problems and responsible control in action which would permit desirable change. Laplanche and Pontalis also indicate how working-through is not a purely intellectual process but requires a form of work involving not only affect but the entire personality. Indeed, for them "working-through might be defined as that process which is liable to halt the repetitive insistence characteristic of unconscious formations by bringing these into relation with the subject’s personality as a whole” (Representing the Holocaust 209)."
interested in the political and/or psychotherapeutic aspects of Aboriginal writing as well as to a literary studies audience.

This study is concerned to retain the complex interrelationships between the literary, psychological and political dimensions of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. To separate them — conceptually or analytically — would preclude the registering of the synergetic relationship between post-colonial resistance, trauma and literary representation. The processes involved in establishing Aboriginal agency in a therapeutic sense are inseparable from the establishment of Aboriginal agency in the political and narrative senses. Employing the several theoretical frameworks identified above works to emphasise the connections between the individual, political and therapeutic domains involved in presenting Aboriginal agency. It also effectively elicits the tensions and concordances involved in advancing the joint projects of working-through post-colonial trauma and the establishment of Aboriginal agency. Psychoanalytic theory needs to get off the couch so to speak and realise its political and collective significance. Reciprocally, the conceptual tools of psychoanalytic theory that are so useful for articulating post-colonial trauma can help to more fully realise the interpretive power of theories of post-colonial resistance.

By employing a wide range of contemporary theory and testimonial narratives, such as Latin American testimonio and Holocaust narratives, to examine Aboriginal life-writing, this study brings together diverse cultural and historical contexts of trauma and political resistance. Nevertheless, the primary focus is always on Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. While acknowledging the importance of articulating incommensurable differences, this study argues that despite such differences there are processes involved in dealing with trauma and injustice that have cross-cultural significance. The most important of these are firstly, the desire to address injustice (although the injustices differ)
and, secondly, the project of recovering from traumatic experiences. Recovery is used here to encapsulate its historical, therapeutic and legal senses — “to bring back”, “to cure”, “a verdict giving right to the recovery of debts”\(^2\) — because the work of recovery in working-through traumatic histories necessarily involves negotiating specific historical, therapeutic and political content. Judicial, political and therapeutic practices and concepts operate across different political and cultural domains by virtue of the fact that they are present as organising determinants of those domains. It is therefore possible to pursue cross-cultural comparisons.

The current and growing interest in and practice of testimony is witnessed in many different countries in projects aimed at recovering and memorialising unheard and unread national histories. Some instances include the growth of memorials to the Holocaust, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Australia’s *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. There are many other instances besides. Nation-states, diasporic and dispossessed cultures employ testimony as a means of addressing and contesting unresolved and often traumatic historical material. From testimony’s antecedents in small-scale political and personal expressions of marginalised identities, it has been mobilised as a strategy for large-scale nation-building with both progressive and conservative manifestations. Its growth as a practice for establishing and recording individual and collective identity is providing previously unheard, heterogeneous accounts of history for the reading public.

It is also important to note that the testimonial mode can be deployed to efface heterogeneity and provide simplistic redemptive totalisations of national identity. As a mode of writing, it has no inherent political allegiances. It can be used by those who wish

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to deny the same traumatic historical events that others seek to have acknowledged through it. Nevertheless, I argue that those who use the testimonial mode to affirm hegemonic history and further render unheard subaltern histories aggravate historical sites of trauma and cultivate injustices. Testimony may have no inherent political allegiance as a mode of writing, but this study sets out to demonstrate that when mobilised in the form of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing it does have an allegiance: to the articulation and advancement of Aboriginal cultural identity and social justice. Furthermore, as argued in Chapter Two, its very formation as a genre is characterised by being a medium for the articulation of subaltern experience. This is why most texts written in the testimonial mode are written by those who have been dispossessed by a dominant power. However, this history does not mean that testimony cannot be employed as a mode of writing by which historical trauma is mobilised to further neo-colonialist practices.

From discussing key theoretical issues of autobiography in Chapter One, this study moves out into the broader field of life-writing in general and Aboriginal life-writing in particular in Chapter Two. This move provides a starting point from which to explore other issues such as the ways in which testimonial texts highlight the excesses, deficits, utility and creativity of contemporary theory; emphasise the co-extensivity of society and individuals to a greater degree than autobiography; are responsive to multi-disciplinary approaches as a consequence of their multi-dimensionality; reveal complex operations of traumatic material in the construction of texts and subjects; and provide insights into literatures of political resistance and post-colonial Australian history.

Throughout the study, and with different emphases according to the theoretical framework being examined, I set out to demonstrate that theoretical positions that assert either full incommensurability or full commensurability between different instances of historical trauma are short-sighted. This point forms part of the overall theoretical
position of this study that argues for resisting an either/or logic with regard to dialectical oppositions in order to preserve a vitalising tension between them that maintains theoretical rigour and protects possibilities for establishing agency. I argue that the strategies of reinforcing impasses or escaping into redemptive totalisations in discussions about Australia’s identity and reconciliation have serious consequences for establishing Aboriginality and an ethical citizenry. To choose either strategy is to risk destructively impacting upon the establishment and volition of Aboriginal agency and prolonging post-colonial trauma. I argue that there is an ethical obligation to conceptualise identity and Aboriginality in a way that acknowledges their continual processual movements and does not collapse them into simplistic oppositions. Thus, throughout the study, but mainly in Chapters Three, Four and Five (and especially in Chapter Five) I set out theoretical alternatives to ‘either/or’ approaches and argue for the simultaneous affirmation of small, mobile dialectical oppositions and for the rejection of absolutist dialectical oppositions. This strategy focuses primarily on the dialectics involved in working-through traumatic experience and the cognitive structures of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations. I contend that this approach not only improves vocabularies, imaginaries and conversations for working-through theory, but also works to refine the dialectical tensions involved in discussions on Aboriginality and national identity. This approach forms the overall theoretical position of this study and each chapter focuses on specific tensions relevant to the study of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing.

Chapter One draws out tensions between post-structural and post-colonial theory within a discussion of realist and anti-realist strategies for reading testimonial life-writing. It discusses the notion that there are forms of subjectivity presented in much traditional autobiographical writing that are dislocated and abstracted from specific material and symbolic forces, and that these are the basis of the proto-autobiographical
desire of readers to identify with authors. It outlines why such masterful, abstracted forms of subjectivity are illusory and yet still persist to shape the imaginaries of authors and readers. It then moves on to discuss the main theoretical challenges to this traditional subject and to introduce new ways of conceptualising the relationships between representation, authors and readers through a reading of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing.

Chapter Two sets out to demonstrate that theorisations of Latin American testimonio and Holocaust Studies may be used productively together for examining the political and therapeutic aspects of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, like the Latin American genre of testimonio, is characterised by an emphasis on the political dimensions of life-writing: testimonio is a culturally and historically specific instance of political testimonial narrative. Holocaust Studies undertakes analyses that, while not less political, are more focused on the individual’s psychological responses to working-through trauma. It deals with survivors’ testimonial accounts of the Holocaust and is closely associated with psychoanalytic conceptual frameworks. This study argues that Latin American testimonio theory and Holocaust Studies can be jointly developed to better articulate the complexity of post-colonial Australian conditions and the chapter builds on the core therapeutic and political concerns of each to do so. By introducing developments in psychoanalytic theory in the form of contemporary trauma theory (discussed further in Chapter Three) and schizo-analytic theory (discussed further in Chapter Five), Chapter Two aims to extend the scope of the therapeutic concerns taken up in Holocaust Studies. In addition, the concerns of testimonio resistance theory are taken up again in Chapter Four by analysing theories of recognition, which, it is argued, are necessary for showing how author/reader relations can form a basis for effective political dialogue.
Chapter Two also analyses different aspects of the discursive features of the testimonial mode. It argues that testimonial life-writing functions in a realist mode like traditional autobiography, although with important differences. Testimonial texts exhibit present-centred and urgent oral and written demands for justice. An analysis is therefore undertaken of the multiple narrative techniques that are employed to express those demands and of the way in which these techniques differ from and/or simulate other closely associated genres like autobiography, diaries, memoirs and historical modes of research. Later, Chapter Four extends this examination by analysing some of the ways in which testimony’s discursive features perform Aboriginality in order to confront non-Aboriginal Australians with the traumatic legacy of Australia’s colonial practices.

Chapter Three explores how the convergence of testimonial life-writing as a form of political resistance with testimonial life-writing as a form of writing-through post-colonial trauma encourages an alliance between post-colonial critical theory and psychoanalytic theory. It employs trauma theory to demonstrate the ways in which post-colonial trauma complicates the process of establishing and performing Aboriginal agency. Rather than employing notions such as the Oedipal or Elektra complexes or any other Freudian archetypes as a way of understanding Aboriginal life-writing, this study makes use of the more mobile concepts found in trauma theory, such as working-through, acting-out, resistance, denial, repression, and to a lesser extent, a reformed version of the concepts of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, with the intention of providing more specific analyses than psychoanalytic complexes allow. It outlines the foundations of psychoanalytic literary theory and argues for their development with the goal of increasing such theory’s ability to articulate the specificity of post-colonial Australian conditions. This work is later developed in Chapter Five in which schizo-analysis is taken as an example of an enhanced psychoanalytic model capable of addressing the
specificity of post-colonial conditions. Like other chapters, Chapter Three holds a theoretical position that does not affirm one dialectical pole over its other and, thus, neither affirms trauma as an absolute impasse experience nor as an experience that should be incorporated into redemptive totalisations of identity.

Chapter Four employs theories of recognition to develop a better understanding of how Aboriginal testifiers and non-Aboriginal readers may and do engage with one another. It argues for maintaining racial difference as a crucial component in establishing Aboriginal agency. Whereas in Chapter Two analysis centres on the co-extensivity between Aboriginal testimonial authors and the wider Aboriginal community, Chapter Four investigates the ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity positions mutually produce each other in the act of writing and reading testimonial life-writing. It argues that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing provides an opportunity to establish recognitive structures through which Australia can acknowledge depths of its colonial past that have been strategically ignored and thereby develop an ethical citizenry that can work against neo-colonialist practices. It argues that an ethical citizenry enriches its culture by maintaining complex systems of inter- and intra-racial identification and difference, connection and separation.

Chapter Five works to provide a theoretical extension of the preceding chapters’ concerns and argues that schizo-analytic theory provides tools for developing vocabularies and imaginaries capable of articulating the specificity of post-colonial trauma and Aboriginal responses to it. Later in the chapter, an analysis is undertaken of an Aboriginal-specific therapeutic program that employs both traditional Aboriginal healing practices and contemporary therapeutic concepts for working-through post-colonial trauma. It discusses the tensions involved in using traditional Aboriginal and modern healing practices and treats them as indicative of the complexities involved in the
present-centred establishment of twenty-first-century Aboriginal identity. This discussion leads into a theoretical overview of, and concluding comments on, the central concerns of the study.

Aboriginal Studies in general and Aboriginal testimonial life-writing in particular have great value as multi-disciplinary fields of study and I intend that this study will contribute to their processual enrichment. As primarily Australian fields of scholarship, their development will strengthen Australia’s unique identity and pay desirable symbolic and material dividends. In contrast, post-colonial theory, as an international field of research, is not bound to the Australian context and derives its theoretical tools from a broad range of disciplines and applies them to a broader range of contexts. Post-colonial theory is enriched by Aboriginal life-writing and theory because the nexus of the therapeutic and political found in Aboriginal life-writing strengthens the links between psychoanalytic and resistance theory. The exchange between international post-colonial theory and Aboriginal life-writing originating at this stage in Australian history can inform both practices. It is the intention of this study to demonstrate the importance of testing contemporary theory against the needs of Aboriginal authors and their project of establishing and reinforcing Aboriginal identity.
Chapter 1

Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing, Post-Colonial Theory and the Realist/Anti-Realist Debate

This chapter sets out problematics associated with the study of Aboriginal autobiography and introduces the theoretical framework through which those problematics are explored. This study may seem eclectic in its use of theoretical tools from post-colonialism, post-structuralism and psychoanalytic theory. However, these are drawn together here by way of their shared interest in the relation between subjectivity and representation, an interest shared by, and of primary importance to, the study of autobiography. The boundaries separating these theoretical schools are not readily defined and their conceptualisations of subjectivity and representation inform one another. As I show below, post-colonial scholarship employs post-structuralist techniques in dismantling colonialist discourse, while simultaneously highlighting ethical considerations associated with post-structuralism’s deconstruction of agency. Both post-colonialism and post-structuralism have borrowed from and are informed by psychoanalytic theory: Frantz Fanon’s synthesis of psychoanalytic and post-colonial concerns is a good example. Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, all eminent in post-structuralist scholarship, employ and critique psychoanalytic concepts. Reciprocally, psychoanalytic theory has had to reassess its overly deterministic and uniform understanding of subjectivity as a result of post-colonial and post-structuralist critiques of master narratives. While this study is primarily concerned with the way in which psychoanalytic concepts are useful for understanding the process of working-through trauma in life-writing, it is also concerned with how psychoanalytic concepts are useful for thinking through the realist problematic in post-colonial writing. The need to recover from the destructive impact of colonialism requires
questioning the ethicality of post-structuralism’s emphasis on deconstructing and dismantling agency.

Stephen Slemon describes the tensions between post-structuralist and post-colonialist thought thus:

an interested post-colonial critical practice would want to allow for the positive production of oppositional truth-claims in these [post-colonial] texts. It would retain for post-colonial writing, that is, a mimetic or referential purchase to textuality, and it would recognize in this referential drive the operations of a crucial strategy for survival in marginalized social groups.

This referential assumption would appear to make what I am calling a post-colonial criticism radically fractured and contradictory, for such a criticism would draw on post-structuralism’s suspension of the referent in order to read the social ‘text’ of colonialist power and at the same time would reinstall the referent in the service of colonized and post-colonial societies. The especial valency of textuality within colonialist discourse, however, means that the ‘referent’ simply cannot be totalized; for if the question of representation really is grounded in a ‘crisis’ within post-modern Western society under late capitalism, in post-colonial critical discourse it necessarily bifurcates under a dual agenda: which is to continue the resistance to (neo) colonialism through a deconstructive reading of its rhetoric and to retrieve and reinscribe those post-colonial social traditions that in literature issue forth on a thematic level, and within a realist problematic, as principles of cultural identity and survival. (5)

Slemon identifies the way post-structuralist criticism can direct attention to the violent operations of colonialist discourses (and discourses in general), but also importantly identifies the potential violence that post-structuralism can bring about through the deconstruction of agency. At worst, such deconstructive dismantling of the agent can aid neo-colonialist practices through undermining the emergence and registration of
historically suppressed voices.³ Post-structuralism’s dismantling of the subject, and the
use by post-colonial critics of deconstructive criticism in the critique of colonialist
practices, has necessarily confronted the ethical consequences of disabling emerging post-
colonial voices. It is ethically problematic because such deconstruction can further
dispossess agents already dispossessed by colonialism. There may even be something
ethically remiss in the move to more sophisticated models of analysing subjectivity when
the violent projections effected by ‘old’ models continue to have effects; a form of what
has been termed ‘strategic ignorance’.

Racist and neo-colonial discourses continue to operate and may be just as
effectively (if differently) contested through recourse to notions of humanity, morality
and justice as through the deconstruction of these concepts. Indeed, the legacy of colonial
impact is worked-through in all the Aboriginal life-writing examined in this study with
recourse to values such as humaneness, justice, freedom and self-determination. Because
of this emphasis in Aboriginal life-writing, it is fitting to further explore ways in which
the history of colonial dispossession is challenged in more humanist terms. The turn to
the ethical consequences of deconstructive criticism is not unexpected because there
always has been an ethicality implicit to deconstruction. As David Parker notes:

> even the most linguistically focused recovery of the marginalised Other of
> a logocentric philosophical or literary text at least implicitly links itself
> with the defence of those who have been Other to Western imperialism, to
> patriarchy or to bourgeois interests. [. . .] It is hard to see how a concern
> with such evils as ‘subordination and domination’ is not at least implicitly
> oriented towards a conception of a good life centring around goods such as
> freedom, self-expression, and self-realisation. (3)

³ Annamaria Carusi writes: “[i]f one takes only these aspects of post-structuralism and post-modernism into
account, it is small wonder that Habermas has relegated them to the realms of neo-conservatism” (101).
The potential suppression of already marginalised cultural identities is a risk of some post-structuralist
readings, nevertheless, post-structuralism also offers important strategies for post-colonial studies.
Yet, such ‘goods’ take a particular character in a deconstructive context: “recently deconstruction has begun to present its way of reading texts, its rigorous resistance to closure, as an ethical imperative. Viewed in this way, the ethical imperative is a dynamic within language itself to which deconstructive reading is alone properly responsive” (7-8).

Deconstructive method is problematised in reading Aboriginal life-writing because of such writing’s post-colonial agenda, which centres around consolidating Aboriginal identity. Deconstruction’s ethical imperative to resist closure is also problematised in a post-colonial context. Post-colonial theory, in the sense of a retrieval of the “principles of cultural identity and survival” (Slemon 5), demands accepting that some historical events are facts, such as the destructive effects of colonial impact on Indigenous peoples. The acknowledgment of such facts provides a basis for securing redress for past injustices and for the process of working-through traumatic histories. The imperative to attain a sense of narrative and affective control over the traumatic legacies of colonial impact demands something like the resistance found in some psychoanalytic theory, such as that of Dominick LaCapra, to the repetitive reinstatement of semantic aporia, that is, it demands something like closure as an act of object-specification.

The desire and necessity to work-through post-colonial trauma found in much Indigenous life-writing invites the use of psychoanalytic concepts to deal with the tension between post-structuralist deferral and psychoanalytic closure. Concerning closure, Saul Friedlander writes: “In a sense, what is suggested here is the simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naive historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closure” (qtd. in LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust 212). That which might be retrieved in “the search for ever-closer historical linkages” is not an uncorrupted originary
subject or Aboriginality, a search that results in a simplistic historical closure. Rather, such a search aims to provide a better understanding of the multiple ways in which colonialism has destructively impacted on Aboriginal peoples, as well as the multiple ways people have responded to it. This strategy draws on the post-structuralist ethical imperative to resist closure and the equally important post-colonial ethical imperative to specify objects of colonial trauma and practices of Aboriginal resistance to dispossession.

It is important to follow the post-structuralist imperative to resist closure because doing so avoids redemptive narratives that too easily cover the continuing traumatic effects of colonial impact, while also foreclosing possible expressions of post-colonial resistance. Yet, while closure can mean a fossilisation of identity or historical possibilities, it can also be used in another sense to mean the specification of objects to be worked-through. As LaCapra writes:

Any process of mourning, it seems, would require some degree of specification of the object [. . . and] one might still contend that a readiness — or a recovered readiness — could counteract trauma and function as an antidote to the extent that anxiety did not remain altogether diffuse but was related to objects that could be illuminated by historical understanding and subject to informed judgment, even if never susceptible to total mastery or fully adequate representation. Some combination of critical historical investigation, ethicopolitical judgment, and social ritual would increase this possibility [. . .]. (Representing the Holocaust 215)

The task of working through what LaCapra calls ‘anxiety’, but which in the case of Aboriginal life-writing may also be termed ‘mourning’, via a specification of “objects that could be illuminated by historical understanding” (215), is precisely what many of the Aboriginal life-stories examined in this study do by means of retrieving and reinscribing Aboriginal lives, family and cultural history in the context of colonial relations, racism and dispossession.
To explore the above issues, this study primarily draws from three intersecting theoretical fields: post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and psychoanalytic theory. The desire to have these discourses intersect arises from the need to counter the all-too-easy closures of redemptive national discourses (a form of post-colonial reactionism) while maintaining the need for historical object-specification. It is a form of historicism that curbs radical relativism (a particular deployment of post-structuralist thought), and allows for historical and ethicopolitical judgements that do not fall into overly-simplistic redemptive narratives. Furthermore, in the case of post-colonial Aboriginal life-writing, the use of psychoanalytic concepts — for example, psychological trauma, acting-out, working-through, object-specification, and repression — aids the post-colonial project of retrieving and reinscribing located, embodied histories. Such concepts can act as a corrective to a tendency in some post-structuralist thought to enact “an (an)aesthetics of the sublime that indiscriminately valorizes the un(re)presentable or the experimentally transgressive without posing the problem of the actual and desirable relations between normative limits and transgression” (223). One such transgression of desirable limits is the denial of the damaging impact of colonial dispossession. The correspondence between post-structural radical difference and notions of the sublime, the unrepresentable, the abject and the Other, is an issue that will be explored in more detail throughout this study. The point here is that the intersection of post-colonial, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic thought can act as a corrective to the excesses and deficits of each in territory where each has a stake. That territory is Aboriginal testimonial life-writing in which post-colonial subjectivities are registered and negotiated.
Realism

Debates surrounding post-colonial literature and the tensions between post-structuralism and post-colonialism are productively approached through the fallacious but heuristically powerful distinction between realism and anti-realism. Slemon’s recommendation “to retrieve and reinscribe those post-colonial social traditions that in literature issue forth on a thematic level, and within a realist problematic, as principles of cultural identity and survival” (5), invites the following question for this reader: what is the role of literary realism in effectively communicating the voices of historically suppressed cultures? Realism is characterised by post-structural anti-realists as part of a web of concepts that are implicated in supporting repressive ideologies and concepts such as Identity, Presence, Truth and History. Realist texts are criticised by anti-realists for not acknowledging their constructedness and also for perpetuating, amongst other things, the myth of the sovereign subject. The important question to be asked of the argument that realism necessarily supports ideology is why, according to such a position, any successful criticism of ideology (such as a criticism of colonialist discourse) must take the form of a meta-critique or meta-narrative, that is, a self-reflexive critique of its own or target discourse’s constructedness. Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin quote Benita Parry on this topic: “How then do these deconstructions of colonialism’s signifying system act more radically to disrupt the hegemonic discourse than does Fanon’s method of exposing through defamiliarization, the taxonomy of colonialist knowledge in order to break its hold over the oppressed?” (26). They then answer her question in this way:

Each approach has its strengths, and each can be helpful, but we would be wise to avoid embracing thinking that might continue imperialism’s silencing of the many different perspectives of the colonised. That is why this study focuses on post-colonial texts instead of colonialist ones, and
places them in cross-cultural postcolonial comparative contexts, instead of in exclusive relation to an imperialist tradition. (26)
This study shares that focus. Slemon notes that the realist problematic is tied to cultural identity and survival and the same connection is found as an implicit assumption and practice in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. All the Aboriginal life-writers examined in this study present their case in a literary realist mode with the associated concepts of identity, presence, truth and history. By changing the proper nouns (Identity, Presence, Truth and History) to common nouns I intend to register the move from abstract concepts to historically specific instances of those concepts.

The process of cultural survival as presented in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing places strong emphasis on the importance of accepting non-metaphorical facts, such as the distinctiveness of Aboriginal culture, identity and history. The central importance of non-metaphorical facts for establishing identity is also shared by trauma theory dealing with Holocaust survival, which views the establishment of such facts as a vital stage in gaining narrative and affective control over traumatic experience. Such non-metaphorical facts in the context of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing include the acceptance that colonial practices were damaging to Aboriginal peoples and that the effects (and causes) of that damage persist. Innumerable interpretations of the significance of these non-metaphorical facts can be developed (ideally with an ethical awareness of what different explorations might mean), but these facts always play a key role as the basis upon which the testimonial life-stories are developed. The Aboriginal life-stories examined in this study all deal with the legacy of colonial impact differently: one may forcefully reject and condemn colonial culture (Ruby Langford Ginibi); and

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4 It is interesting to note here that first generation Holocaust survivors who testified to their experiences of the Holocaust do so in strongly non-metaphorical language. In contrast, their children and grandchildren produce more complicated literary narratives that explore the complexities of language and subjectivity. The concept of non-metaphorical facts is explored in greater detail in Chapter Three.
another may present a more ambivalent position that criticises colonial cultural dominance through Christian values introduced by colonialism (Margaret Tucker). There is no homogeneous Aboriginal experience and response to colonialism, but rather heterogeneous experiences and responses. However, what these life-stories do share is an awareness of the fact of the traumatic effects of colonial impact.

To begin a detailed exploration of the realist problematic surrounding the retrieval and reinscription of cultural identity, this section examines a founding critique of realism. In doing so, a link is made to the neo-Marxist critic Louis Althusser because his model of subjectivity and historicism has had a strong influence upon the realist/anti-realist debate in literary and cultural theory. A comprehensive analysis of Althusser’s work is not undertaken and my focus is solely on his work on the interpellation of the subject by the State. Interpellation is viewed as a useful concept for beginning to explore the ways in which Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal, author/reader relations are constructed in post-colonial states and writing. Moreover, with regard to historicism and subjectivity, Althusser’s model has strong links with post-structuralist formulations of subjectivity. Annamaria Carusi, writing on the relationship between post-colonialism and post-structuralism, asks: “[w]hat does this commitment to the subaltern as the subject of his/her history imply? Firstly, it forces us to re-evaluate the historicism of post-structuralist thought, an important element in the work of Althusser, Barthes, Kristeva and Foucault” (104). Carusi, in addition to connecting Althusser and post-structuralist thought, is asking in what ways does subaltern history, as practised by the subaltern, differ from post-structuralist historicism. Carusi suggests an answer: “it is possible to foresee an appropriation of post-modernist strategies, in addition to and perhaps in the same place as various forms of realism, in [South African] black literature, which could be strategically useful to this literature and also mobilize post-modernism as a politically effective tool”
Later in this study, I explore ways in which post-structuralist strategies are useful for the reinscription of cultural memory and for opening up possibilities for post-colonial agency. However, at this point, I want to address how literary realism can also be effective in this way and how post-structuralist and anti-realist claims to the contrary are not conclusive. An important question for this study is, what are the issues involved in contesting subaltern identity through subaltern history as carried out by the subaltern in a literary realist form?

Althusser’s formulation of literature as presented in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” identifies ‘Literature’ as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Ideological state apparatuses are devices by which the means of production are reproduced and include such cultural institutions as Literature, Family and Sport. According to Althusser, such institutions and their associated practices are in collusion with Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), such as the army, police, and law, but rather than operating through the threat of violence ISAs operate via ideology. Raymond Tallis writes, “[i]deology in this extended sense is that in virtue of which one account of, or one part of, reality becomes reality tout court; or a historically derived reality presents itself as eternal and extra-human, as given rather than made, as objectively sensed rather than intersubjectively constructed” (In Defence of Realism 46). As presented in Althusser’s model, the problem with ideology is that it effaces the constructedness of reality and the interestedness of social institutions in maintaining particular power relations between subjects and the State as natural. The two institutions of interest for this study that function as ISAs are literature and subjectivity, more specifically, literature in its realist mode.

Catherine Belsey’s use of Althusser’s formulation is a familiar but still useful starting point for exploring the relationship between subjects and the literary realist mode.
She argues that realism is a term used to distinguish “between those forms which tend to efface their own textuality, their existence as discourse, and those which explicitly draw attention to it. Realism offers itself as transparent” (51). Realism insists that it accurately represents the world outside the text and consequently that there is a reality outside of texts and language. Tallis provides a clear explanation of the anti-realist position to frame his defence of realism. On the connections and collusion between realism and ideology, he writes:

> the realistic novel, by working with ‘the given’, by taking for granted what is usually taken for granted, by replicating, or attempting to replicate, reality without really questioning it, collaborates in the work of ideology: the naturalization of the social, the eternization of the historically derived, the installation of but one version of reality as reality itself. For realistic novels are realistic — or seem realistic to their readers — precisely because they do not question what is customarily taken for granted. (*In Defence of Realism* 50)

The problem anti-realists have with realism is that it effaces the multi-perspectival ‘nature’ of the world and instead asserts a monologic version of what is ‘real’. In this way, it enshrines a version of reality that privileges some subjects, behaviours, institutions and discourses over others without plausible justifications for why such structures should be privileged. Realism, in colluding with ideology, “‘privileges’ one version of reality over all others and suppresses any suspicion that things might be ordered or perceived differently” (46), and is “so potent and inescapable because it is invisible; because it does not consist of a set of ideas that can be debated, tested, opposed but is *implicit in practices*” (49). For anyone doubting the pervasiveness and near invisibility of ideological practices, Terry Eagleton reminds us that

> [s]tate[m]ents of fact are after all *statements*, which presumes a number of questionable judgements: that those statements are worth making, perhaps more worth making than certain others, that I am the sort of person entitled
to make them and perhaps able to guarantee their truth, that you are the kind of person worth making them to, that something useful is accomplished by making them, and so on. (qtd. in Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* 26)

Indeed, any act of communication participates in some or all of these assumptions. What Eagleton is alerting us to is that things that seem ‘obvious’ and ‘natural’, for example, ‘facts’, are contextually derived and historically determined.

That these assumptions are necessarily ideologically inflected is a question I will return to later in a discussion of literary realism’s potential to question such ideological assumptions. As Tallis notes, there is a risk in the anti-realist argument of equating intelligibility with ideology “[i]nsofar as anything makes sense, the individual for whom it makes sense implicitly acquiesces in ideology” and, due to the entirely negative casting of ideology, creates a condition where “[a]ll recognition is misrecognition; all knowledge is ignorance” (83); and all apprehension is misapprehension. Tallis writes:

The myth that it [realism] describes reality dispassionately and objectively only embeds the realist enterprise more deeply in the reality it mistakenly believes itself to be outside of. Its pretence to be outside of reality, when it is in fact inside, makes it ideologically more potent, a more effective weapon in the hands of those who have already won the ideological struggle. (50)

Realism is a practice that mistakenly assumes itself to be outside of reality and thereby capable of objectively describing it. Belsey’s position maintains that while realism can achieve much, it can never hold such a privileged position:

of course realism can show contradictions within society — especially between the rhetoric of the ruling classes and the needs and experiences of those whom they govern and whose welfare they pretend to have at heart. But it cannot acknowledge that reality is *irreducibly* polycentric. A realistic novel can highlight contradiction within capitalist society but it
does not accept its inevitability: contradiction is there but it is not ‘foregrounded’. (Tallis, In Defence of Realism 52-53)

The argument that realism’s location inside an ideologically created reality disables it from contesting particular versions of reality is not self-evident, and I will address this argument in more detail below. Likewise, to argue that reality is irreducibly polycentric overlooks that there probably are very few Aboriginal people who consider the violence of colonial dispossession to be a positive experience; some identities have privileged access to realities that are more polycentric than others.

Such anti-realist arguments developed from the widespread adoption and adaptation of Saussurean linguistics. Saussurean linguistics challenged the claim that language could refer to the ‘real’ world with the argument that signs generate their meaning by virtue of their position in a signifying system. In the Saussurean account language is not a nomenclature, a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms. He argued that far from providing a set of labels for entities which exist independently in the world, language precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts. (Belsey 38)

In response to this argument, post-Saussurean anti-realist critics developed the literary category ‘classic realism’ to identify writing that creates an illusion of reality. In this way realism could continue to be used productively as a genre category without maintaining that it ‘really’ represented the world. Hence the term classic realism is employed to designate that writing which creates a ‘reality effect’ and “sustain[s] the illusion that they [texts] ‘show things as they really are’” (Tallis, In Defence of Realism 51-52 fn. 11).

In this sense, classic realism is such a broad category that it can refer to any text that does not self-reflexively acknowledge its own constructedness, that is, meta-narrate its own process of construction. This broadness of the term means that it is equally appropriate to employ it for describing science-fiction, or a fantasy about dwarves and
elves, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*, as it is for a literary study of the British working class in the mid-nineteenth century or of Australia’s Indigenous peoples’ experience of colonialism, because “[t]he plausibility of the individual signifieds is far less important to the reading process than the familiarity of the connections between the signifiers” (Belsey 52). Such a position contends that the structure of the classic realist text is more important than the particular ‘signifieds’ employed in it.

Two of classic realism’s most important structural elements are the concern with rendering the subject of the story wholly transparent and resolving any narrative ambiguities and tensions by the story’s conclusion. By resolving the conflict they explore, classic realist texts ultimately reinforce the power of human agency to order the world and, in particular, the power of the author to comprehend and thereby control the world. Classic realism reinforces the sovereignty of the author/subject over the world while simultaneously effacing the powerful historical and social determinations of subjectivities and authors by the world. Such insights into the operations of classic realism provide the prescription for a criticism that aims to “establish the unspoken [ideology] in the text, to decentre it in order to produce a real knowledge of history” (136). However, there is an ethical tension involved in reading texts this way because the decentring of the text, and by extension the author, risks further marginalising those already marginalised by dominant ideologies, such as colonialist ideology. The problem with such criticism is that its effort to decentre oppressive ideologies itself becomes oppressive when it further decentres subjects already historically marginalised.

Another potential problem with anti-realism (defined in reaction to a false notion of realism) is that its promise of multi-perspectival readings that deconstruct ideology contradictively risks imposing strict limits on alternative reading strategies. Regarding classic realism, Tallis writes:
‘Classic realism’ proves to be very broad indeed. [...] The term is a rather blunt instrument used for castigating all texts that aim to produce the ‘reality effect’, to sustain the illusion that they ‘show things as they really are’. As Terry Lovell has pointed out [...] a hostile attitude to realism so broadly defined leaves fiction very little to do other than to reflect, somewhat narcissistically upon its own processes of signification. Hardly the recipe for the popular texts that will ignite the revolution. (In Defence of Realism 51-52 fn. 11)

A literary critical position that maintains that for writing to be an important representation of reality it must concern itself with its own process of production is a form of literary bullying. Such anti-realist criticism “condemn[s] realism, not because it fails to escape ideology (no intelligible text could) but because it does not attempt to undo its own ideology from within by a cold-blooded self-contradiction that denies the reader a fixed view point from which it makes sense” (85). While self-reflexive and against-the-grain readings are important, they are not the only valuable method through which to read texts or effective tactic for resistance writing, and to maintain that this is the case is to risk excluding other important critical reading strategies. In the case of the Aboriginal testimonial life-writing examined throughout this study, there is an ethical appeal made to readers to not read against-the-grain texts whose aim is the retrieval and reinscription of a threatened community and subjectivity. To do so would further render inaudible historically unheard voices. This is not to dismiss such critical readings but only to say that their imperative that “insists on finding the plurality, however ‘parsimonious’, of the text and refuses the pseudo-dominance constructed as the ‘obvious’ position of its intelligibility by the forms of classic realism” (Belsey 129) is problematic. Why must a reading strategy always undermine the ‘obvious’ position and, consequently, what is at stake in claiming the right to describe the obvious position as false? Later, in my discussion of writing-through trauma, I argue that one of the consequences of responding
to testimony to trauma as false is to risk exacerbating that trauma. Consider the dangers of such a response to the testimony provided for South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Australia’s *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*.\(^5\)

Similar considerations regarding the ethics of realist and anti-realist responses to testimony are relevant to reading Aboriginal life-writing. Aboriginal life-stories published over the past thirty years testify to the same traumatic history of colonial dispossession at the centre of *The Bringing them Home Report*. They present subjects whose access to the ‘irreducibly polycentric’ nature of reality has been circumscribed by their position as the colonised in the colonialist symbolic. Because colonised subjects have historically been less privileged in their access to the polycentrism of reality, literary realism with its greater monocentric approach (or at least dialogical approach in its presentation of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations) is suitable for portraying that circumscribed reality. These life-stories, like the testimony in *The Bringing them Home Report*, do not employ anti-realist, self-reflexive meta-analyses of the production of the subject as text, but rather appeal to the reader to accept the testimony to the reality of the life-story as true. This type of life-writing functions in the realist mode because it “purports to present the truth of a self as grasped by itself” (Lloyd 170). In this way, realist life-writing is a genre aligned with particular ways of understanding and practicing the self that, in the case of Aboriginal authors, are shaped by the forces of subaltern history. In addition, such life-writing aims to establish an ‘autobiographical pact’ to circumscribe the reader’s response within a realist framework. Underpinning this aim and the realist framework, as stated in the introduction to this study and argued in detail in Chapters Two and Three, are the primary driving forces of Aboriginal testimonial life-

\(^5\) Subsequently, this publication will be referred to as *The Bringing them Home Report*. 
writing, that is, articulating Aboriginal authors’ political will and working-through traumatic histories. To achieve this goal also involves specific forms of negotiation between author and reader, which are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

The broader realist/anti-realist debates are important for reading testimonial life-writing and that writing in turn complicates and enriches those debates. What may be at stake in realist/anti-realist positions is the very possibility for Aboriginal writers to establish agency in a context where their agency has already been undermined by the traumatic legacy of colonial dispossession. And yet, as discussed at the end of this chapter, there are theoretical tools for understanding such life-writing that fall outside both the realist and anti-realist positions. However, at this point, it is enough to note that there is a correspondence between genres and subject positions.

**Imaginary Subjects and Realism**

Integral to the critique of realist literature is the critique of the subject as natural. The primary reason for this critique is that the ‘natural’ subject is seen as complicit with a unified and monologic perspective of ‘reality’, that is, as complicit with the classic realist mode. The subject as author is arguably the most important element in a classic realist text for reinforcing the illusion that it conveys a true representation of reality because the author functions as the authority that underscores the realist text’s claim to truth. Classic realist writing establishes a transcendent, abstracted subject position, often shared by author and reader due to the tendency for authors and readers to identify with the monologic perspective of the text, which works against the heterogeneity of possible views by which the text might be intelligible:

the conventional tenses of classic realism tend to align the position of the reader with that of the omniscient narrator who is looking back on a series of past events. Thus, while each episode seems to be happening ‘now’ as
we read, and the reader is given clear indications of what is already past in relation to this ‘now’, nonetheless each apparently present episode is contained in a single, intelligible and all-embracing vision of what from the point of view of the subject of the enunciation is past and completed.  

(Belsey 77-78)

Such a subject, temporally and spatially transcendent with an all-embracing vision, effaces the fact that it is historically located, interested and partial. Like the literary realist text — indeed the locus of the perception guaranteeing realism’s claim to faithful representation — the classic realist subject as author effaces perspectivism and presents a monological perspective.\(^6\) The link between the classic realist text and the transcendent and abstracted subject operates in the same way as ideology and realism operate in Althusser’s formulation of ideology, in that realism supports ideology because it aims to render a particular social construction as natural. Similarly, such an ideology, or ideology in general, supports the above form of subjectivity, and symbiotically relies on it to sustain itself. In Althusser’s criticism, there is a confluence between ideology, realism and subjectivity. As Tallis writes, “[f]or Althusser, the acquisition of a sense of self and of a world picture are inextricably entwined with acquiescence in the political status quo. The very process of becoming a subject in the metaphysical sense entails subjecting oneself to ‘the Subject’ and involuntarily supporting a repressive state” (In Defence of Realism 80). Tallis then registers his scepticism towards this formulation of the subject: “It seems extraordinary that being co-present with others — indeed, being ‘worlded’ and even ‘selved’ — should have such a specific and readily defined character” (80). An important point is identified here within the overall problematic of realism and its

\(^6\) As I discuss in more detail in later chapters, the engagement of the testifier in Aboriginal testimonial texts in the present-centred activities of political resistance, working-through post-colonial trauma and negotiating Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations, emphasises their perspectivism and historical locatedness and means that they are, therefore, less abstracted. While the classic realist subject emphasises an all-embracing transcendent vision, the testimonial texts discussed in this study emphasise situational transcendence, that is, they are concerned with transcending/reconfiguring post-colonial conditions through trauma work and political resistance.
inherent incompatibility with deconstructive practice, that is, the tension between abstracted models of subjectivity and more specific and context-orientated models.

This study originally began with the intention to show how the Cartesian subject, characterised by a mind/body split, formed the substratum of traditional autobiographical agency. This proposition was to provide a point of departure for exploring alternative subjectivities in autobiographical-like writing, specifically testimonial life-writing. This is because the authorial subject presented in classic realist texts resembles the Cartesian subject. The Cartesian subject is predicated on a split between the mind and body in which the self is considered to reside in a mind that is transcendent of the particular bodily and historical circumstances of the person. It is this type of sovereign subject that Althusser denaturalises by demonstrating that it is constructed through ISAs, that is, by showing that it is generated by and dependent on particular social and historical forces. While Althusser, among other theorists, denaturalises the Cartesian subject, it still retains significant influence. For example, as I contend below, Cartesian-like forms of subjectivity characterise the form of agency presented in classic realist autobiographical writing. However, for all the theorists of autobiography who view the Cartesian model of subjectivity as a significant and dominant mode of subjectivity in the practice of traditional autobiography, and use it as a point of departure from which to study other subjectivities, there are others who consider the Cartesian subject to be a ghost-like figure, a merely heuristic foil. Theorists in the latter camp argue that the Cartesian subject is a fictional construct with little relevance for exploring real autobiographical persons. It is necessary to clarify how abstract notions of the subject, such as those deriving from Althusser and Descartes, relate to the practice of life-writing.

Paul John Eakin, borrowing from Vincent Descombes, helps clarify how the notion of the Cartesian subject is used in this study. Eakin argues that Descartes’s
Cartesian “subject is not a person; Descartes is not the Cartesian subject; protagonist-narrator-author figures endowed with proper names are not subjects — not in the strict philosophical sense” (How Our Lives 8). This philosophical sense of the subject as opposed to a person is described by Eakin thus:

the ‘I’ that opens the passage, the autobiographical narrator of Descartes’s intellectual autobiography, introduces a second ‘I,’ set off in quotation marks, the sign of Descartes’s existence as ‘thinking substance’ distinct from the body. Splitting the first person in this way, Descartes establishes ‘the philosophical notion of a subject distinct from the person.’ (7)

Following Descombes, Eakin argues that the philosophical subject cannot be equated with a person and criticises theorists who conflate the two, who “tak[e] the metaphysical subject as identical to the ‘I’ of autobiographical discourse” (8 fn. 6). Those who maintain that the metaphysical subject and the autobiographical subject are the same risk analysing phantoms with little relevance to embodied historical persons.

Does this critique of the metaphysical subject mean that “[b]ecause some version of this ‘possibility’ [of an ‘I’] characteristically underwrites any form of life writing, [we should] apply this deconstruction of the subject to autobiography and write its obituary?” (6). For theorists such as Eakin, who are concerned with countering the erasure of the subject’s historical specificity, the Cartesian subject is a phantom. But rather than extending this phantom-like quality to all claims to self-presence, which such theorists see as a risk of radical deployments of deconstruction, they instead pursue other models of the autobiographical subject that they see as more relevant to embodied subjects and the life-writing that attests to them. This is because “[t]he death of the author [. . .] is simply the death of one, rather odd, conception of the author [. . .]” (Tallis, In Defence of Realism 75).
This study takes a different approach to the above two positions on the Cartesian subject. While it employs techniques from deconstructive criticism, especially in regard to constructions of the self that rely on violent forms of othering, and is sympathetic with Eakin’s and others’ attempts to find models of the autobiographical subject that better reflect embodied selves, it maintains that there are elements of the notion of the Cartesian subject that are relevant to the study of autobiographical subjects because these elements form a significant part of what Moira Gatens calls the ‘social imaginary’ (defined below, page 33).

The Cartesian and Althusserian abstracted models of the subject remain relevant for literary and cultural theory (and for social imaginaries) because they are useful for thinking through important issues surrounding selfhood and language. In the case of Althusser’s model, some important issues are: how is the subject determined by political and ideological structures; what does this determination say about free-will and agency; what possible strategies exist for subjects to subvert ideological structures; and, how are different subjects, for instance, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects, interpellated by the state differently? Of the Cartesian subject position, we might ask what is the relationship between language and identity formation; is the source of the acquisition of a sense of self linguistic or is the source of the self found in extra-linguistic, affective structures; if linguistic and affective structures are equally important, how so; what does the Cartesian projection of the subject outside of language hope to gain and what does it relinquish; is there a continuing presence of a Cartesian-like subjectivity in traditional forms of life-writing; are there implicit reconfigurations and rejections of this Cartesian-like subjectivity in recent life-writing; and, overall, how is the Cartesian subject a convenient starting point for exploring the self and writing that attests to that self? No
attempt to fully answer these questions will be made here but they will act as guiding considerations throughout the study.

Because this study is concerned with registering historically located and specific subjects, it is important to note that the Cartesian subject is similar to Althusser’s formulation of the subject to the extent that both present an extremely abstracted subject and make claim to the universal relevance of that subject. However, the difficulties associated with the claim to universality operate differently in both accounts. As stated, the problem with the Cartesian subject is that it is not really a subject at all in that “Descartes establishes ‘the philosophical notion of a subject distinct from the person’” (Descombes qtd. in Eakin, How Our Lives 7). In contrast, the potential problem with the Althusserian subject and its relation to the state is that it may not adequately register that the subject functions variously in specific historical contexts. While Althusser’s formulation of the subject is important for this study because it provides useful concepts for understanding how subjectivity functions in society, it remains an abstracted formulation until it is made to take into account the diverse ways subjects are interpellated by the state, for instance, the way Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects respond to the interpellation of the state differently.

As noted, it can be argued that the Cartesian subject does not exist other than as structuring narrative fantasy/fiction. Nonetheless, such narrative ‘fictions’ have real effects and histories because “narrative is a phenomenon which extends considerably beyond the scope of literature; it is one of the essential constituents of our understanding of reality” (Butor qtd. in Tallis, In Defence of Realism 23). While acknowledging that narrative extends beyond the scope of literature, literature can nevertheless provide us with an insight into the structuring narratives of subjects. This study contends that because “narrative is an essential constituent of our understanding of reality”, one can
draw connections between particular genres and particular subjects. Realist writing on selves and their worlds, as found in autobiography and other forms of life-writing, presents subjects whose structuring narratives are uncomplicated by post-structuralist, self-reflexive meta-analysis.

Furthermore, Cartesian-like structuring narratives prescribe strict forms of engagement with, or deny altogether, dialogical engagement with the Other, and such forms of engagement allow for an easy complicity with colonial and neo-colonial practices. For example, colonial practices such as Christian missionism, dispossession of Indigenous peoples by settlers, and the imposition of English law all depended on the denial or denigration of the rights of the Other. The structuring narratives operating in these colonialist subjects, while all distinctive, worked with their colonialist practices to privilege themselves and dispossess other subjects. For colonialist subjects to have a relativistic understanding of themselves, whereby they are not privileged to dispossess others, would jeopardise the success of economically and culturally empowering colonialist practices. In this sense, Cartesian-like (transcendent) subjects may be understood to operate according to Althusser’s formulation of the subject, that is, they are produced by and complicit with the ideologies of nation-states, such as colonialist nation-states.

To acknowledge that the Cartesian subject is highly fictionalised as a consequence of over abstraction does not mean it does not have a significant impact on the imaginary of living subjects. The term ‘imaginary’ is used here in a special sense to mean those constructs that exert powerful influences in shaping subjective experience and the narratives that attest to that experience. Moira Gatens defines the imaginary as “those images, symbols, metaphors and representations which help construct various forms of subjectivity” (viii). To employ the concept of the imaginary means that it is not necessary
to defend the use of the Cartesian subject as an instance of heuristic method for analysing the subjects of life-writing, where the Cartesian subject is merely a foil employed to find out or discover something — in this case, to find out something about new subject formations and the writing in which they are presented. Rather, it is enough to say that the structure underpinning the Cartesian subject is influential in ordering the imaginary of traditional autobiographical narratives and subjects. Indeed, it is because Cartesian-like subjects are a dominant part of the Western colonialist imaginary that they can be usefully adapted and interpolated by the subaltern to question the privileges of such imaginaries, for instance, in the use of authoritative literary modes like life-writing by Aboriginal writers.

In *Imaginary Bodies*, Gatens investigates the way imaginaries order the world from the individual to the body politic. Gatens, introducing her collection of essays, states that a “major concern of these essays is to identify the resonances of imaginary understandings of human embodiment in relation to accounts, in political theory, of another kind of body: the body politic. It will be argued that this body shares several features with the masculine imaginary body” (x). Whereas Gatens focuses on sexual imaginaries and shows the impact of those imaginaries on the body politic and social institutions, this study is interested in the way colonial and racist imaginaries continue to operate in collaboration with a wide range of social practices, and in identifying genres of subjects/texts that embody or reject these imaginaries — specifically Aboriginal testimonial life-writing as an instance of rejection of these imaginaries. Feminist work on the Cartesian imaginary has demonstrated how such an imaginary marginalises women and this study employs insights from such feminist scholarship.7 However, as Gatens writes, the concept of the imaginary should not be limited to that of the sexual imaginary:

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7 I primarily employ the work of Moira Gatens, Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Genevieve Lloyd and Aileen Moreton-Robinson.
“I do not think it is helpful to reduce the complexity and variety of social imaginaries to a univocal sexual imaginary. To do so leaves the notion of the imaginary open to precisely those objections that may be made to Marxist and post-Marxist notions of ideology” (x). Gatens aims to avoid the over abstraction and application of the concept of the imaginary that I earlier argued was a limitation of Althusser’s concept of ideology and its role in the production of the subject. For instance, Alan Lawson stresses the significance of racist rather than sexual imaginaries in the social imaginary and pinpoints the way such racist imaginaries, although considered anachronistic, recur during moments of social crisis (19-37). Lawson points out that while racist imaginaries may be discredited as irrational or inhumane, there is, nevertheless, the uncanny re-emergence of them when particular triggers are engaged. What then are the features that characterise the Cartesian imaginary?

Descartes formulated the concept of the Cartesian subject in *Discourse on Method* thus: “I thereby concluded that I was a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which, in order to exist, needs no place and depends on no material thing; so that this ‘I’, that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body” (54). Here we see Descartes’s (in)famous mind/body split, where the mind (the Cartesian subject) is independent of the body specifically, and the material environment generally. Qualities and practices of this subject are detachment, objectivity, effacement of intersubjective formation and historical context, belief in a soul independent of the body, and the ability to transparently represent the world through language. The Cartesian imaginary, and its associated qualities, is desirable because it is a powerful and masterful subject position that is unaffected by the vicissitudes of history and contact with others’ difference. The Cartesian subject is masterful and universalised by virtue of its abstraction. Due to the emphasis on power in
certain imaginaries/fictions, it is not surprising that recourse is made to them, or to elements of them, as a way of empowering agency. The master/slave dialectic is a case in point and was without doubt a significant imaginary in colonialist cultures. As Redding writes, “[a]s a model social institution based on recognition, master and slave instantiate a simple hermeneutic social ontology. Their respective roles are indeed ‘fictions’ in the sense that they exist only inasmuch as they are recognised. Stripped of this ‘clothing of the imagination’, each is only a ‘man’” (123).

A striking example of the effects of a Cartesian-like imaginary on embodied persons is contained in Oliver Sacks’s *A Leg to Stand On*, an account of his incapacitation following an injury to his leg. Eakin writes:

> After the accident, Sacks experienced two sets of symptoms, neurological and psychological: a loss or ‘extinction’ of feeling *in* the leg (an anosognosia), and a sense of radical ‘alienation’ *from* the leg. Two sets of symptoms and two stories, for the narrative recounts not only the doctor-turned-patient’s struggle to learn to walk again but also his passage through an acute if peculiar identity crisis, ‘a total breakdown in his inner sense of identity, memory, ‘space’; but one confined to the domain of the limb, the rest of consciousness being intact and complete’. *(How Our Lives 26; Sacks 199)*

The crisis referred to here is the shock of an assumption about the split between identity and body being proved false by the experience of an injury. This crisis inaugurates a rethinking of the relationship between mind and body; identity and embodiment. Eakin asks, “[h]ow, though, to understand the injury to the leg as an injury to *identity*?”, and notes that “[b]affled, Sacks the patient called for a new disciplinary paradigm, ‘a neurology of identity’ (199), that would address the link between body and self” (26-27). The physiological trauma resulting from injury to the leg triggers an epistemological trauma characterised by the collapse of the distinction between a more or less Cartesian
identity and the body; between an abstracted, unembodied self and an embodied one. This crisis of identity is paralleled on a more general theoretical level with the movement away from concern with abstracted models of identity to localised, embodied and historically specific persons.

Belsey’s characterisation of the author in classic realism invests it with qualities associated with the abstracted Cartesian subject, with a Cartesian-like imaginary. The transcendent and abstracted qualities of the authorial subject of the classic realist text signal its similarities with the Cartesian formulation of agency, a subject sovereign to historical contingencies and to language. As Tallis writes:

According to Catherine Belsey, contradiction is overcome in classic realism by the deployment of a ‘hierarchy of discourses’. Warring voices, mutually incompatible points of view, conflicting worlds, etc., evident at one level, are resolved by being gathered up into the homogenous and unified discursive space of a higher-level authorial voice and standpoint.

The very tense in which realistic stories are told seems to confer a privileged viewpoint upon the teller. (In Defence of Realism 52-53)

Transcendence in classic realist writing and the Cartesian subject functions by “gather[ing] up [multiple perspectives] into the homogeneous and unified discursive space of a higher-level [emphasis added] authorial voice and standpoint” (53). In classic realism the author is presented as a distant authority who is the source of the narrative. The author, according to this model, as the source of the realist narrative does not self-reflexively meta-narrate itself and is, thereby, complicit with dominant imaginaries. The shadowy and hidden quality of the author is a consequence of the lack of an acknowledgement of the role of history and language in the construction of the authorial subject. By placing the author outside the text as a distant authority, classic realism constructs the author as an abstracted, transcendent and objective subject. It also signals the close relationship between classic realist fiction and traditional autobiography,
because nowhere do we more clearly see the assumption that the self as a subject can know itself as an object than in traditional autobiography.

For instance, some philosophers saw autobiography as a genre through which they could record the formation of a rational self. In this way, traditional autobiography was viewed as empirical data from which knowledge of the self could be derived. John Stuart Mill writes of the subject of autobiography that: “[it] has also seemed to me that in an age of transition in opinions, there may be somewhat both of interest and of benefit in noting the successive phases of any mind which was always pressing forward, equally ready to learn and to unlearn [. . .]” (1). Mill assumes that it is possible to represent accurately the successive phases of the mind through a retrospective analysis of one’s life. There is no acknowledgment that mimetic representation relies on the vagaries of memory. This assumption that the self can successfully represent itself is also seen in Sir Henry Morton Stanley’s autobiography when he writes, “I may tell how I came into existence, and how that existence was moulded by contact with others; how my nature developed under varying influences, and what, after life’s severe test, is the final outcome of it” (xv). This is certainly an optimistic view of autobiography’s power to represent the self truthfully. It also shows that to achieve an account of how the self came into existence relies more on interpretation than on mere presentation of life data and, therefore, the stress is on the desire to know and understand rather than simply re-present. Linda H. Petersen explains why this may occur in the following passage:

The autobiographer focuses less on narrative emplotment than on explicit interpretation. This focus may help to explain why the finest practitioners of the genre in the Victorian era were historians, philosophers, and critics rather than novelists and why readers who value the autobiography have been those who take special interest in the interpretative act. (4)

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8 As I will discuss in Chapter Three, disruptions of memory are magnified in traumatised subjects.
In such representation of the self, a split is formed between the self that is presented (the protagonist) and the self that interprets this presentation (the narrator). This splitting of the autobiographical subject is indicative of a Cartesian-like subject.

Perhaps the most striking example of this split subject is found in the traditional autobiography of Herbert Spencer. Wayne Shumaker writes that Spencer tried to examine himself as if he were a complete stranger, drawing deductions from his own books and letters as though no recourse to memory were possible; and in the attempt, of course, he forfeited much of the advantage of his intimate knowledge and became, so far as he was faithful to his method, his own biographer. (91-92)

In the effort to truly represent the self, memory is sacrificed in favour of ‘objective’ sources, and the split between the subject as author and as protagonist is at its most extreme.

Such autobiography posits a transcendent authorial subject characteristic of the subject position of classic realist fiction. A transcendent subject is a subject that is transparent to itself as an object, and “[a]utobiography purports to present the truth of a self as grasped by itself” (Lloyd 170). Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* functions in this way and presents the split subject of traditional autobiography most clearly, “for as a narrative it traces this very transition, from the personalised I of autobiography to the impersonal I of philosophy” (Sturrock 94). Such a subject, rather than faithfully representing itself in the narrative, which is the aim of autobiography, encourages an abstracted, unlocatable, and unaccountable authorial position that, because of the combination of its presence in and transcendence of the text, is powerful. By envisioning him or her self as outside history and the text, the author of classic realist life-writing effaces the fact that the effect of his or her self as present is a consequence of the
narrative form itself.⁹ The narrator achieves this by purporting to “see each event in its fixed relation to a past which has presumably achieved its final form. The past self, from this God-like stance, is seen as having a completeness which it could not attain while present. The retrospective narration constitutes the self as a coherent object, grasped from the stance of immutable truth” (Lloyd 174).

Like classic realist autobiography, the Aboriginal testimonial life-writers examined in this study present a monological (Aboriginal) viewpoint and do not interrogate the intra-racial differences that exist between Aboriginal peoples. However, there are important differences in the way in which the monological, abstracted viewpoints are presented in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and classic realist autobiography. Firstly, the Aboriginal readership is not the addressee of these texts, rather the addressees are primarily the white non-Aboriginal reader and secondarily the non-Aboriginal reader. Unlike classic realist autobiography, wherein the addressee of the text is encouraged to identify with the author, testimony, as Rosamund Dalziell identifies, is “generally narrated so that the positions of jury and accused are reversed: the testimony of the accused implicates the reader in some form of moral deficiency”, thus precluding, or at least circumscribing, the identificatory impulse of the reader (131-132). In this sense, it presents a more complex dialogical relationship between author and reader than classic realist autobiography. It appeals for both identification and the acknowledgment of difference by enacting a dialogical relationship with non-Aboriginal readers that encourages coalition, not identification. Furthermore, unlike classic realist autobiography, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing nearly always presents subjectivity/Aboriginality in crisis because it is profoundly involved in negotiating post-colonial trauma and political resistance. Because the traumatic material and the moral

⁹ Deconstructive critiques of self-presence argue that the sense of presence in a narrative is a consequence of the literary devices employed. This view will be explored in more detail below through an analysis of Paul de Man’s influential essay “Autobiography as De-Facement”.
deficiency that Dalziell identifies is part of the ongoing process of reconciliation, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing does not possess as strong a retrospective perspective as classic realist autobiography. In this sense, it does not have the teleological completeness of classic realist autobiography or of Cartesian-like subjectivity because it does not present a subject that sees “each event in its fixed relation to a past which has presumably achieved its final form” (Lloyd 174). It is equally concerned with the present-centred activity of establishing the self as it is with retrospectively narrating the self that has achieved, like the Cartesian subject, its final (transcendent) form. It presents a subject-in-becoming that to some degree depends on the dialogical relationship between the author and reader for addressing the unfinished business of colonial dispossession. It appeals for recognition by the non-Aboriginal reader of that colonial history and its ongoing impact as part of the process of symbolic reconciliation.

While Aboriginal testimony may be critiqued because of its presentation of a monological Aboriginal perspective in the same way anti-realists critique classic realist autobiography, it differs in the above ways. The similarities between the two genres mean that Aboriginal authors often deploy some of the claims made in classic realist autobiography in order to sustain the authority of the authorial subject. Due to this, such life-writing can be critiqued in a de Manian fashion, discussed in more detail below. However, the therapeutic and political aims of these texts work against the anti-realist and deconstructive impulses. The therapeutic and political drivers of testimony need to be considered in responding to the criticism that there is a tendency in theorising Aboriginal testimony to treat the Aboriginal authorial subject less rigorously in a deconstructive sense than the subject of classic realist autobiography. Such rigor may be directed towards the Aboriginal authorial subject to reveal the interestedness, omissions and contradictions of that subject. Yet, the risk of such analyses is that they may underplay
the importance of the identity work of establishing Aboriginality in a context where that subjectivity has already been threatened and undermined by colonialism.

In another sense, the monological Aboriginal viewpoint of the Aboriginal testimonial text is a reflection of the colonialisgment projection of a monological Aboriginality. However, because the text is primarily directed at the non-Aboriginal reader, the presentation of a monological Aboriginal perspective that is antagonistic towards its colonial figuring means that these texts hold the potential to transform dialogical relations. The Aboriginal testimonial text presents a monological Aboriginal perspective in dialogical relation to the non-Aboriginal reader wherein the process of establishing Aboriginality requires a balance between reinforcing and deconstructing that subjectivity — a responsibility held by both the author and the reader. In contrast, the classic realist autobiography presents a monological perspective that does not of necessity emphasise racial positioning but rather encourages the reader to fully identify with that perspective. In the classic realist text the ethics of deconstruction are not as deeply intertwined with the ethical considerations surrounding the establishment of identity in the aftermath of colonialism. While Aboriginal testimonial life-writing encourages identification, it does so in a way that encourages identification with the Aboriginal figuring of non-Aboriginality and not Aboriginality itself. Traditional autobiography can reveal the reader’s co-extensivity with social forces, but it does not necessarily accuse some readers as participants in those social forces, as does Aboriginal testimony. Traditional autobiography focuses on the author as individual to a far greater degree than Aboriginal testimony and not on race relations. Traditional autobiography may be read to explicate racial relations but it does not necessarily foreground them.

While Aboriginal life-writing presents a monological perspective and a subject split in the sense that it knows itself as an object of itself, there are fundamental features
of the genre that undermine the smooth presentation of such a subject. Each of these features depends to some degree on the present-centred character of the testimonial text. Firstly, because the testifying subject is involved in the present-centred process of working-through trauma and because traumatic material is characterised by its resistance to representation, testimonial subjects often portray themselves as not fully present to themselves because they are in the process of integrating the trauma of colonial dispossession into their identity. This explains the frequent repetitions/rehearsals found in these texts wherein the same traumatic issues are revisited in an attempt to integrate them into the testifiers’ understanding of themselves. Secondly, because these texts aim to effect political change as part of the process of reconciliation by convincing non-Aboriginal readers of their implication in colonial injustice, there is little possibility of the kind of retrospective closure attributed to classic realist autobiography and Cartesian-like subjects. Thirdly, because these texts appeal to the reader to acknowledge the ongoing legacy of colonial trauma, they again focus not on retrospective closure but on present-centred political change. While these testimonies present a monological Aboriginal view, it is a view that emphasises the tensions and deferral involved in the present-centred identity work of addressing the complexities of post-colonial Australian conditions.

The later chapters of this study examine life-writing that does not split the subject in the way described by Lloyd. They argue that, for a number of reasons, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing places greater emphasis on the co-extensivity between authors and their communities (Chapter Two), between authors and readers (Chapter Four), and on the material and symbolic forces that shape both authors and readers, rather than on the transcendence of these forces. They argue that the process of working-through post-colonial trauma as the establishment of Aboriginal identity (Chapter Three, Four and Five) cannot afford to split the subject as in classic realist autobiography, and that the
construction of the author/reader relationship in testimonial life-writing presents subjects enmeshed in post-colonial trauma. Equally important, this enmeshment, in turn, interpellates the non-Aboriginal reader differently from classic realist autobiography.

**Classic Realism and Reader/Author Relations**

Classic realist autobiography encourages the model of the split subject/author to be adopted by the reader through the operation of what Althusser termed ‘interpellation’. Tallis describes how this may occur:

> A reader who imagines that the novel he is reading emanated from a unitary character named on the dust jacket and who, furthermore, believes that this character has a personal viewpoint expressed in the novel, merely demonstrates the extent to which he is the dupe of the ideological process by which he is himself centred in a subjectivity that serves only to hold him subject to the social formation in which the majority are exploited to benefit the minority. (In Defence of Realism 72)

However, many autobiographies persist in presenting to the reader an author who believes that his/her experiences are his/hers when, in fact, as Tallis sceptically points out, any writing that is not a meta-linguistic exercise dupes readers by encouraging them to feel that the author is a real person. Tallis is identifying a position that states that readers who are unaware that the author is dead persist in deceiving themselves in their desire to read autobiographies to experience another’s personal viewpoint. Eakin identifies the same tendency when he writes, “I am arguing that this proto-autobiographical tendency — this identification of reader with autobiographer — constitutes the fundamental motive for the reader’s interest in autobiography in the first place” (Touching the World 36).

The above discussion of classic realist fiction and its relation to autobiography referred to Althusser’s ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in which Althusser identifies ‘Literature’ as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). As noted, ISAs are
devices by which the means of production are reproduced. It was also argued that at the heart of this process of reproduction is the category of the subject because “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” (Althusser 170). To expand on this, Althusser employs the concept of interpellation to demonstrate how Literature reproduces ideology, arguing that “the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’” (182). Interpellation is the means by which individuals become “subjected to the Subject” (179), with the capital in ‘Subject’ identifying the universality of the category.

Just as the narrator takes up a transcendent and sovereign subject position in relation to the autobiographical narrative, so too does the reader through the proto-autobiographical tendency to identify with the author. Interpellation reinforces the illusion of a sovereign subject within the reader who, through his or her identification with the author, assumes that sovereign position to the text. It is from this point that the reader, like the author, maintains a detached distance from the fate of the protagonist. Such interpellation creates a space from which the subject can grasp itself as an object, but this transparency, rather than ensuring a masterful subject, functions instead to obfuscate the forces that act upon and form the self. It is “[i]n this way [that] classic realism constitutes an ideological practice in addressing itself to readers as subjects, interpellating them in order that they freely accept their subjectivity and their subjection” (Belsey 69). The reader/author relationship as it is characterised in classic realist autobiography encourages an experience of subjective mastery for both the reader and author.
As argued earlier, the persistence of Cartesian-like forms of subjectivity can be attributed to the fact that the adoption of the privileges of subjective mastery associated with a transcendent authorial or readerly position is empowering. However, this mastery is illusory and predicated on the exclusion of other perspectives and as such the sense of mastery becomes instead a *screen* that conceals subjection. Doris Sommer, borrowing from Henri Lefebvre, defines a screen as “something that shows and that also covers up” (135). A screen both carries a projection and also conceals what is behind it, just as the interpellation of the subject as sovereign in classic realist autobiography conceals that the sense of sovereignty over the subject/text is a consequence of suppressing other perspectives.

**Interpellating the Colonised Subject**

As argued above, subjects are subjected to the Subject. This subjection takes a specific form in colonial societies. Becoming a colonised subject involves first being interpellated as one by the colonising culture. A colony interpellates at least two subject positions, that of the colonised and that of the coloniser, both of which are defined and ordered by the laws of the coloniser. Of course, there are subjects, cultural practices and experiences that lay outside the laws of the coloniser, but they are unheard, marginalised and deemed illegitimate.

Natalie Melas employs Frantz Fanon’s model of the relationship between black and white subjects in colonial societies, presented in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as a way of articulating contradictions inherent in interpellating colonial subjects based on colour. She outlines two different ways of interpellating the colonised subject — that described by Alfred Adler and that described by Fanon. She offers the following translation of Fanon:
The Martinican does not compare himself to the White man, considered as father, leader, God, but compares himself to his similars [other Martinicans] under the White man’s patronage. [In contrast], an Adlerian comparison can be schematised in the following manner:

‘Ego greater than the Other’

The Antillean [Fanon] comparison, in contrast, presents itself thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>White</th>
<th>Ego different from the Other</th>
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The Adlerian model (Ego greater than Other) “describes the overcompensation of an individual’s feelings of inferiority through direct access (via comparison) to a ‘governing fiction’ or model” (278). In the Adlerian model of the interpellation of the colonised subject a hierarchy is established by which comparison with the governing model subject (White, Western, and Imperial) is possible. There is a chain of being so to speak (and the reference to this theological teleology is not without relevance when the links between Christian missionism and colonisation are considered) through which it is possible for the colonised subject to identify with the governing fiction, that is, the white Subject.

In Fanon’s model, whiteness stands as the signifier of the transcendent subject position and as the exclusive attribute of the colonising culture. The contradiction identified here is as follows: “[t]he black man finds himself doubly bound by the contradictory injunction of white culture: you must be like me, you can’t be like me” (Melas 277). Fanon shows that the colonised’s identification with the governing fiction/imaginary and Subject is impossible. The line that separates the two cannot be traversed and this is primarily due to the fact that “‘[t]he process of assimilation . . . requires that which defines the difference between the elements to remain over as a residue’” (D. Lloyd qtd. in Melas 277). For Fanon, the Indigenous subject is interpellated as the colonised, rather than as the coloniser, and is ordered to adopt, yet is barred from adopting, the position of the privileged white (Cartesian-like) Subject. This double
interpellation calls the subject into being white and yet bars it from being white, thus splitting the subject. Just as the subject of classic realist autobiography is powerful because of its ability to be both inside and outside itself and the text, the colonised subject is rendered powerless because it is barred from such mobility. As Melas writes, “[t]he demand colonial society makes on the black man, particularly the black man from Antilles, where no original culture survived colonialism, Frantz Fanon asserts in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, is to ‘blanchir ou disparaitre’ (whiten or disappear)” (277). Yet, this interpellative injunction is impossible to fulfil. In the Antillean case, to be black is to disappear, but equally to whiten is to disappear, that is, both render blackness invisible.

Interestingly, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing inverts Fanon’s model because it presents a monological Aboriginality (one that functions in a classic realist, Cartesian-like way because it does not emphasise the multiplicity of intra-Aboriginal perspectives) while barring identification with it by non-Aboriginal peoples. These texts appeal to the non-Aboriginal reader to identify with the Aboriginal view of colonial history, not Aboriginality itself. Furthermore, while these texts function in a classic realist mode in that they present a monological Aboriginal viewpoint, they contain many other features that distinguish them from classic realist texts (discussed further below). It is sufficient to note here that the feature of classic realism they do employ (the monological perspective) is used in such a way as to invert Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal positions of authorial, colonial power as presented by Fanon.

Colour has been the marker of difference and citizenship in colonial Australia and functioned as outlined in Fanon’s model above. It was not until the 1967 referendum that the Australian Government was granted the power to begin providing equal citizenship rights to Aborigines and to include ‘full-blood’ Aborigines in the Census. *The Bringing them Home Report* discusses the first Australian Commonwealth-State Native Welfare
Conference held in 1937, where the conference was sufficiently impressed by the attitudes of West Australia’s Chief Protector on ‘absorption’ that the conference stated that “the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end” (32). After citing this excerpt from the conference, *The Bringing them Home Report* goes on to say that

> [f]rom this time on, States began adopting policies designed to ‘assimilate’ Indigenous people of mixed descent. Whereas ‘merging’ was essentially a passive process of pushing Indigenous people into the non-Indigenous community and denying them assistance, assimilation was a highly intensive process necessitating constant surveillance of people’s lives, judged according to non-Indigenous standards. (32)

However, assimilation as the interpellation of the colonised subject as white can be contested and Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a case in point.

**Interpolating the Colonising Subject**

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines interpolation as “[t]he action of inserting words into or altering a book etc., esp. in order to mislead; an interpolated word or passage.” Interpolation in a post-colonial context can also designate the way subaltern agency is reflexive and actively moves back to contest the construction of the subject by dominant colonialist ideologies. Bill Ashcroft writes that interpolation is a strategy that includes all the tactics through which a colonised group enters “the ‘scene’ of colonisation to reveal frictions of cultural difference, to actually make use of aspects of the colonising culture so as to generate transformative cultural production” (177). Aboriginal testimonial life-writing inserts specific Aboriginal subjects into non-Aboriginal life-writing practices and in so doing unsettles dominant cultural imaginaries.

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10 While testimonial life-writing is not produced to mislead, it is written to register Indigenous difference.
It contests official historical accounts of colonisation that might, for instance, argue that colonisation and assimilationist practices were positive and necessary experiences for Aboriginal people. It does this by interpolating into colonialist history the marginalised voice of the colonised, voices that articulate the traumatic consequences of colonial impact.

Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, in her introduction to *I Rigoberta Menchú*, outlines how Rigoberta Menchú enters the ‘scene’, writing:

> there are the ‘indigenists’ who want to recover the lost world of their ancestors and cut themselves off completely from European culture. In order to do so, however, they use notions and techniques borrowed from that very culture. Thus, they promote the notion of an Indian nation. Indigenism is, then, itself a product of what Devereux calls ‘disassociative acculturation’: an attempt to revive the past by using techniques borrowed from the very culture one wishes to reject and free oneself from. (xvii)

This excerpt shows the way in which Indigenous life-writing does not necessarily have to be a form of oppositional political writing that demands a complete rejection of dominant cultural practices. Interpolation as a form of literary resistance is distinct from direct opposition. In a sense, it is a strategy that comes from the fact that the language and cultural practices of the colonising force have already deeply penetrated Indigenous culture. For instance, Aboriginal English is a central part of many Aboriginal peoples’ lives and in no way illegitimates the authenticity of Aboriginal culture, but rather, embodies the process of contact. Pam Johnston stresses this very point, not surprisingly, in similar terms to Burgos-Debray’s, in her ‘Foreword’ to Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *My Bundjalung People*, writing:

> Ruby, I know, has had the experience of being questioned in relation to Aboriginal people writing in the European mould, as the Koori cultural tradition is oral. As you will note, Ruby has very much made the English language her own. Koori English is an existing language that you will
meet repeatedly in these pages. We are all adaptors and survivors who must tell our histories in our own way. To be questioned in relation to language structure, or cultural ‘correctness’ seems to me to continually illegitimise the Aboriginal race as much as questioning just exactly how much Aboriginal blood courses in ones’ [sic] veins. (xiii)

Aboriginal English embodies the cross-pollination of cultures characteristic of post-colonial nations. It provides the reader of English with both a means of identification and an indication of the distance between him or her self and the Aboriginal testimonial voice.

Aboriginal life-writing has qualities in common with classic realist autobiography, yet often counters classic realist assumptions. Indigenous adaptation of the culturally dominant language and genres is an appropriation of language and genre that can benefit the colonised community. Johnston writes that Aboriginal people “are all adaptors and survivors” (xiii), highlighting the way the appropriation of language is part of surviving colonisation, while also highlighting the presence of Aboriginal agency. Johnston criticises the position that views the colonised’s use of the coloniser’s language as a loss of ‘authenticity’, equating it with the denial of Aboriginality on the basis of blood or colour. The denial or attribution of Aboriginality based on colour and language are both colonalist strategies because, as quoted above, for the colonising power “‘[t]he process of assimilation . . . requires that which defines the difference between the elements to remain over as a residue’” (D. Lloyd qtd. in Melas 277). Melas identifies colour as this residue, yet language use can also be this residue. In this sense, it is not so much the particular signified of difference that matters for maintaining colonial power, but rather the colonising culture’s power to define difference through any signifying system. As Johnston shows, the power to define reflexively moves between the coloniser and the colonised and the appropriation of the coloniser’s language by the colonised attests to an agency that adopts, defines and transforms dominant cultural practices in its own interest.
Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a striking example of this and it interpolates classic realist life-writing in a number of ways, for instance, in its inversion of Fanon’s model of black/white relations discussed above. Indeed, it is by employing classic realist autobiography’s Cartesian-like subject that testimonial life-writing inverts and adopts the privileges of the abstracted white Subject of Fanon’s model. It also interpolates classic realist life-writing in the following ways, each of which is discussed in more detail throughout this study.

First, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing strongly emphasises co-extensivity between the author and his or her cultural group presenting an almost, but not completely, group subject in the position of author (see Chapter Two). By placing emphasis on racial identity (which is a group in part because it was Othered as one by colonists) within a genre of individualism, testimonial life-writing constructs an authorial presence that restricts the prototypical readerly desire to identify with the author of autobiography.

Secondly, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing interpolates the classic realist author/reader relationship by implicating the non-Aboriginal reader in the history of colonialism by presenting, as outlined above, to non-Aboriginal readers a group Aboriginal subject that has been dispossessed by non-Aboriginal settlers. In classic realist life-writing, the reader may identify with an author (narrator) who grasps him or her self as object (protagonist), that is, the reader is detached from the fate of the protagonist due to the centre of identificational gravity. In contrast, testimonial life-writing presents a profoundly troubled link between the narrator and the protagonist due to the present-centred concerns of the testifier’s life-story, such as the ongoing effects of colonial trauma. The non-Aboriginal reader is interpellated as an ambivalent subject because the Aboriginal testimonial text complicates the autobiographical desire to identify with the author who is, in this case, an antagonist of dominant white non-
Aboriginal subjects. Moreover, the non-Aboriginal Australian reader is made responsible to some extent for negotiating the ongoing impact of colonial history. Such writing aims to shift the reader away from identification with the colonial non-Aboriginal subject towards identifying with the struggle of the colonised (see Chapter Four).

Thirdly, because such life-writing interpolates the ongoing effects of colonial trauma into the text (as above), it does not offer the teleological completeness of classic realist life-writing wherein conflict is resolved in a retrospective understanding of the protagonist’s fate shared by the narrator and reader. The Aboriginal narrator’s commitment as a protagonist to effect political change and work-through trauma undermines easy retrospective closure and redemptive resolutions (see Chapter Three).

Fourthly, Aboriginal life-writing works to dismantle the notion of the colonised Indigenous subject as the ‘Exotic’, which is defined by Livio Dobrez thus:

Where the merely stereotypic simplifies, the Exotic enigmatizes. It forcibly inserts its object into and restricts it to the category of the Indefinite. In short it refuses definition. [...] The Exotic neutralizes what is Other. But if all discourses of Unfamiliarity involve a knowing of the Other through the process of othering oneself, then the Exotic amounts to a refusal of self-definition. (31)

Aboriginal life-writing others the reader, as outlined above, and in so doing establishes a recognitive relationship that both de-exoticises the Aboriginal subject and brings the non-Aboriginal reader into better self-definition (see Chapter Four).

Lastly, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing emphasises cultural difference and traumatic post-colonial history to underscore its truth claims. It aims to reinforce the reader’s belief that they are hearing the ‘real’ rather than the ‘reality effect’ of the classic realist mode (Chapters Two, Three and Four).

These are some of the ways Aboriginal testimonial life-writing reconfigures the classic realist autobiographical mode. New literary modes arise through authors’
rejections of dominant literary modes as inadequate for the representation of new subjects. Likewise, new theoretical investigations result from the limitations of old models for figuring these new subjects.

**Reconfiguring the Subject**

Challenges to traditional forms of subjectivity have been undertaken by different theorists and in different theoretical fields, such as psychoanalysis, post-colonialism and post-structuralism. Underlying these challenges is a belief that subjectivity is highly determined by cultural symbolic systems and by the particular historical and social manifestations of those systems. The view that the self is constituted by discourses or, in Gatens’s terminology, ‘social imaginaries’, complicates Cartesian-like conceits. In order to pursue the consequences of this disruption, a reappraisal of the structure of subjectivity is required. To acknowledge that language constructs the *authority* of the authorial position is one way of deconstructing Cartesian-like presence, as does Eakin’s qualification (via Descombes) that the Cartesian subject is not a person. Consequently, a reconfiguration of the sovereign subject underpinning this conception of autobiography is required because “[t]he Cartesian self, originally at the very centre of objective knowledge, now seems in danger of disappearing — not just as the archetypal object of knowledge, but as an object of knowledge at all” (Lloyd 170).

I have argued that classic realist autobiography relies upon a subject/object split within the writer that cannot be sustained; a split that, once experienced as illusory, precipitated a traumatic crisis for Sacks and caused him to call for a new neurology of identity. Such a call need not necessarily be met with a new neurological model but may be adequately dealt with through the conceptual resources of contemporary cultural theory. The notion of the sovereign subject has undergone the most effective challenges
in the twentieth-century, and the problems with this subject are mirrored in three areas in the theory of autobiography. Robert Smith outlines the problematic thus:

1. Theories and surveys of the theory [...] showing perhaps ‘the tendency of much recent work on autobiography to cancel out both itself and its subject’.
2. Suspicions as to whether autobiography can be theorised as a genre since as Candace Lang pointed out, it seems to get everywhere, like sand.
3. Positivist definitions of autobiography, merging with quasi-existentialist claims about self-knowledge. (55-56)

All three difficulties arise from one central problem, that is, the formulation of the subject as bordered, “isolatable, constitutive and self-identical” (56). The first point shows that theories of autobiography that aspire to formulate an objective theory distinct from the creator of the theory are untenable. As E. S. Burt writes, “the critic’s job of writing about autobiography [is] dangerously like writing autobiography” itself (18-19). The second point follows from the first, in that classic realist autobiography’s claim to truly represent the self outside the text is untenable because the subject it claims to record resists categorisation. This point could be made with regard to all genres but it has a special significance for classic realist autobiography because the putative aim of the genre is to truly represent the subject.

Like Smith, I take the third point as the most important one because “it takes autobiography above all as a document of personal history, or ‘history of personality’, and so places autobiography fairly within an ideology of individualism” (Smith 56). The connection between this point and my claim that all three points are compromised by their formulation of subjectivity as bordered, “isolatable, constitutive and self-identical” (56) should be clear. Smith argues that the individualism that underpins autobiography begins to collapse when the subject is interrogated. Autobiography’s aspiration to self-knowledge, gained through a history of personality, fails for exactly the same reasons
Lloyd gives for the disappearance of the Cartesian subject. In both cases the subject can never be entirely present to itself as object and thus never entirely transparent to itself. However, as we have seen, such an attack on the Cartesian claim to self-presence may have only limited connections with ‘real’ persons, because Descartes’s Cartesian “subject is not a person” (Eakin, How Our Lives 8).

This movement from self-knowledge to a loss of self-presence is addressed in Paul de Man’s influential essay on the relationship between identity and representation, “Autobiography as De-Facement”. De Man writes of autobiography that “[i]t seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name [. . .] (emphasis added)” (68). In this excerpt we see that the authority behind the autobiographical narrative is the proper name of the author. De Man provides a sketch of the traditional Cartesian subject in accordance with my earlier outline: that is, the proper name, the author, is identical with an essential self that is sovereign to and unifying of multiple perspectives and experiences. De Man goes on to make what can now be considered a classic deconstructive operation, that is, reducing the referent to the signs that attest to it. This deconstructive operation will be analysed (employed and criticised) throughout this study with regard to its effects on the establishment of subaltern identity. At this point, it is sufficient to state its function in autobiographical theory. De

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11 Examples of this operation can be found in a number of post-structuralist writers. For example, Baudrillard writes, “[a]ll of Western faith and good faith was involved in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning, and that something could guarantee this exchange — God of course. But what if God [. . .] was] reduced to the signs which attest his existence” (30). Catherine Vasseleu makes a similar point when she writes that narratives in their “very manufacture of metaphors, images, models, diagrams and analogies, and their simultaneous dismissal as just substitutes for or illustrations of the essential thing [. . .] efface [themselves] as figurative practices” (59). Spivak identifies the same point in Friedrich Nietzsche’s writing when she states that “[i]n its simplest outline, Nietzsche’s definition of metaphor seems to be the establishing of an identity between dissimilar things. Nietzsche’s phrase is ‘Gleich Machen’ (make equal), calling to mind the German word
Man writes, “but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all aspects, by the resources of his medium?” (69). Here we see that the author’s selfhood is defaced by the autobiographical narrative that attests to it. The autobiographical project that was meant to evoke and record an accurate representation of a self has failed.

De Man argues that the language that is meant to evoke the self is tropological and metaphorical. The figure he employs to characterise autobiography is prosopopeia which is “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity [. . .]” (75). Prosopopeia is the rhetorical operation by which an absent figure is represented and addressed. Its etymological root means to give or make a face; prosopon meaning ‘face’, and poien ‘make’. Yet, the irony of prosopopeia is that in giving a face it erases it, thus the title of de Man’s essay, ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’. This is the reason for its problematic use in post-colonial studies. Prosopopeia functions like this because it cannot evoke the ‘real thing’; it is a metaphorical operation and thus a substitution that effaces the self as much as it evokes it. These issues are dealt with in greater detail throughout this study and it is enough at this point to indicate the consequences of de Man’s classic deconstructive operation for the authorial presence of classic realist autobiography and the crippling of agency that it engenders. De Man finishes his essay with these words:

As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by

‘Gleichnis’ — image, simile, similitude, comparison, allegory, parable — an unmistakable pointer to figurative practice in general” (Translator’s Preface xxii).
autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause. (80-81)

The death of the subject is a linguistic predicament because the effort to speak oneself effaces oneself. De Man’s subject is a mute subject and, he argues, it is the very effort to restore and reclaim the voice of the subject that defaces it.

The potential consequences of this for colonised communities are ominous and redirect attention to the ethics of such deconstruction. Colonised subjects have experienced a history that is characterised by their exclusion from self-representation and written history. De Man’s position suggests that if there were an opportunity for the subaltern to speak it would be an act of self-violence because defacement is a condition of autobiographic, or for that matter ethnographic, self-presentation. Therefore, in de Man’s deconstruction of the classic realist autobiographical subject, there is a risk of erasing the agency that would allow the subaltern to speak.

In the testimonial writing that I will investigate later in this study, de Man’s pervasive erasure of agency is contested. Underlying this contestation is — as Ashcroft maintains — a reinstatement of “a principle of post-colonial agency which concedes, on the one hand, the central function of language in constructing subjectivity, but which confirms the capacity of the colonised subject to intervene in the material conditions of suppression in order to transform them” (176). Such a conception of agency is necessary for acknowledging those practices and interventions performed by colonised peoples that have an effect on the material and symbolic conditions that have subjugated them. To deny this is an act that works to strengthen processes that have traditionally been employed to render others inaudible. However, this should not entail a regression to a Cartesian-like conception of the subject because such a transcendent and sovereign subject was also central to the colonising process. To return to such a subject would only
reinstate the underlying principles of the traditional notion of agency. We require a conception of agency that does not create a sovereign subject, nor the wholesale erasure of the subject that results from deconstructions of realist agency such as de Man’s. As LaCapra states, we need to ask what is at stake in the deployment of “an (an)aesthetics of the sublime that indiscriminately valorizes the un(re)presentable or the experimentally transgressive without posing the problem of the actual and desirable relations between normative limits and transgression” (Representing the Holocaust 223). This study seeks not so much a balance between post-structuralist (de Manian) and post-colonialist views on agency, nor a reinstatement of Cartesian-like subjects, but rather an understanding of the liminality of a form of subjectivity that is neither “isolatable, constitutive and self-identical” (Smith 56), nor unlocatable and deferred, and a form of representation that is neither “an anti-representational antihumanism” nor a “humanist [. . .] defence] of representation” (Arac qtd. in Colas 163).

**Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism**

Ashcroft affirms “a principle of post-colonial agency which concedes [. . .] the central function of language [while confirming] the capacity [. . .] to intervene in the material conditions of suppression” (176). This signals that the relationship between language’s determination of identity and cultural identities’ reconfiguration of language as acts of survival, between realism’s presentation of a monocentric reality and anti-realism’s denial of it, is more complex than the arguments recounted above concerning realism and anti-realism suggest. As Donna Haraway has written on the issue of absolutism and relativism: the ‘god-tricks’ of totalisation and relativism “promise [. . .] vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully [. . .]” (191). Haraway identifies such a form of relativism as an effective way of risking laying oneself out on the table with self-
induced multiple-personality disorder (186). This insight is equally applicable to the debates on realism and anti-realism. Realism in its potential effacement or non-recognition of multiple perspectives is a form of absolutism or totalisation that, like the Cartesian subject, “promise[s] vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully [. . .]” (191). Anti-realism, in its advocacy of an openness to multiple perspectives, also becomes, paradoxically, like totalisation: unlocatable, highly mobile and, in a sense, unified by its omniscient ability to evacuate. It cancels out difference by meeting each object with the same operation.

Haraway’s insights, like Gatens’s discussed above, are derived from feminist theory. Haraway critiques two trends in feminist theory. The first is the overdetermination of subjectivity, and the consequent erasure of difference, that Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist and anthropological efforts have engendered. Haraway identifies the second trend thus: “If my complaint about socialist/Marxian standpoints is their unintended erasure of polyvocal, unassimilable, radical difference made visible in anti-colonial discourse and practice, [. . . the] intentional erasure of all difference through the device of the ‘essential’ non-existence of women is not reassuring (emphasis added)” (159). Such an essential non-existence is reminiscent of de Man’s use of the rhetorical figure *prosopopeia* to show how the inessential is essentialised. Like Haraway’s arguments in a feminist context, this study also argues for a more complex and specified approach for theorising post-colonial literatures and the post-colonial cultures they present. Exceeding both totalisation and relativism, realism and anti-realism, are subjectivities born in the liminal spaces of the post-colonial. Such post-colonial spaces are formed from the interaction between different cultures, and by the construction, erasure and reconfiguration (the becoming) of subjectivity: they are not formed by
overdeterministic theories, or by the complete evacuation of subjectivity in de Manian deconstruction.

It is no surprise that much feminist writing has strong connections with post-colonial theory since they both arise from the need to establish spaces that allow for the registration of voices within a symbolic order that marginalises them. In addition, it is clear that feminist theory also confronts the tension between “continu[ing] the resistance to (neo) colonialism [or patriarchy] through a deconstructive reading of its rhetoric and retriev[ing] and reinscrib[ing women’s or . . .] post-colonial social traditions [. . .]” (Slemon 5). Thus, a strand of both intellectual practices is deconstructive practice and it is important to now address some deconstructive strategies for dealing with identity in the context of the realism/anti-realism debate explored in this chapter. Again, this analysis will be aimed at showing how realism and anti-realism’s formulations of language and identity at the level of the acquisition of the symbolic are inadequate.

On this topic, Tallis writes:

The very process of recounting experience transforms it; or rather past reality becomes stories only at the cost of being changed into something that wasn’t, or couldn’t be, lived. Narration dramatizes, and hence distorts. We don’t live inside the referent of stories; and since there is no liveable reality corresponding to them, all stories must, in an important sense, be untrue [. . .]. (In Defence of Realism 22)

Of importance for this study is Tallis’s discussion of the essentially metaphorical nature of experience. Even before language metaphorises experience, experience has already been metaphorised:

I have already discussed how articulated or factual reality is in an important sense artefactual reality; how even remembered reality, inasmuch as it is structured differently from current experience, is an

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12 There has been much criticism of the tendency to conflate Western feminist practice with women’s experience in other cultures, and this issue is explored in more detail in Chapter Five.
artefact of the remembering consciousness. I argued, however, that we were not entitled to conclude from this that factual and remembered reality are false. For if they were false, there would be no means of proving or knowing this. There would be no alternative, direct access to what is out there that would enable us to compare reality itself with those representations that are supposed to traduce it. As an argument against realism in fiction, therefore, the appeal to the observation that reality and fiction are differently structured seems to be self-defeating. (43-44)

Post-structuralists and literary anti-realists would agree with Tallis that reality and fiction are not differently structured. Tallis misses this point, although I would not go as far as John Sturrock in sourcing this to, in an act of unbridled stereotyping, “‘scouse commonsense’” (qtd. in Tallis, Not Saussure xi). There is the soft argument against realism that states that realism does not acknowledge its own constructedness and therefore presents a false view of reality. The hard case against realism is that it does not acknowledge its own constructedness and that all representation is misrepresentation when there is no recognition that all experience is constructed. Tallis misrepresents anti-realists of the hard argument in criticising the soft argument.

Yet, moving on, how attractive is the hard argument when all that its criticism of realism calls for is that realist fiction acknowledge its constructedness and fictionality; merely a caveat applicable to any narrative? Furthermore, why is this important when the distinction between reality and fiction has been deconstructed? Surely, we can in some sense take this for granted and move on to the sometimes serious and sometimes playful work of literary criticism. More importantly, what risks are involved in requiring that the distinction between realism and anti-realism is acknowledged to be false? Does it not emphasise fictionality at the expense of emphasising materiality; place emphasis on the limitless possibilities of being structured differently at the risk of effacing the deep impact and formativeness of fictions and imaginaries that shape the world? Rather than reading
against the grain, is it too much to ask why not read with it? Tallis continues, “[m]ore particularly, anyone who asserts that stories are false on the grounds that their construction involves the ordering of experience in a way that does not reflect any inherent order it may have must hold the more general belief that any ordering of experience necessarily falsifies it” (In Defence of Realism 25-26). Beyond being necessarily false or true, the ordering of experience is simply necessary. Yet, different subjects are restricted or enabled in ordering experience by their particular placement in a symbolic system. Symbolic systems are material and have material effects. Racist, sexist and colonialist discourses marginalise some subjects with real material effects, so why not deal with them in a realistic problematic? As Brydon and Tiffin discuss, there is no reason why realism cannot deal with these symbolic systems as effectively as post-structural anti-realists (26).

In addition, there is no imperative that anti-imperialist texts should not be complex anti-realist meta-narratives. After the realism/anti-realism distinction is deconstructed (or, ubiquitously, ‘always/already’ is), what is it about certain texts that demand certain ways of reading and responding? When is it not appropriate to indulge in Barthesian playfulness? What is at stake for the subaltern in the play of weaving and unweaving multiple perspectives? It is true that realism, at its worst, is a form of totalisation that marginalises other perspectives; anti-realism, at its worst, is a form of relativism that by asserting the equality of all perspectives effaces them; both “promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully [. . .]” (Haraway 191).

What is needed is a critical method for dealing with historically specific subjectivities, invoked by metaphors/concepts such as ‘located’, specific’, ‘embodied’, ‘particular’. Once the realism/anti-realism distinction is broken down, the specificity required by literary criticism can still distinguish between modes of experience in dealing
with texts: focusing on materiality, imagination, affectivity, delusions, normativeness, self-reflexivity, unself-consciousness, politically engaged texts and apolitical texts. Once specificities are acknowledged more productive readings result. It is to exploring the distinct concerns of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, which works-through the trauma of colonial impact in the twentieth-century, that this study now turns.
Chapter 2
Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Literary Resistance Theory

We do not confront reality as isolated individuals but as members of collectives. The encounter between the individual and what is ‘out there’ is mediated by the other individuals who constitute those various collectives. For what is ‘out there’ is not simply matter-in-itself but what is acknowledged to be out there; pieces of matter are ‘there’ not simply in virtue of their existence but because they matter to someone. Reality is what counts as real to someone — or, more precisely, to someone representing or adopting the viewpoint of a group or someone under its influence. Reality, in other words, is what ‘they’ — or ‘I’ insofar as I am they — acknowledge. (In Defence of Realism 45)

In the previous chapter, analysis centred on debates surrounding realist and anti-realist perspectives on testimonial life-writing and identified risks associated with the deconstruction of the subject for colonised peoples. This chapter furthers that analysis by investigating the links between the reclamation of identity and agency in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing with the reclamation of political agency in the public sphere. It looks at some culturally distinct conceptions of community in Aboriginal societies and the way in which the process of writing Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a political affirmation of that distinct culture. It also begins an analysis, explored further in later chapters, of the way in which such life-writing works in a psychoanalytic sense to establish narrative and affective control over traumatic histories.

This chapter also addresses generic similarities and differences between testimonial life-writing and other life-writing practices such as autobiography and diary. As discussed in Chapter One, particular genres, such as realist life-writing, are suited to presenting certain forms of agency and identity practices. This chapter discusses the ways in which Aboriginal testimonial life-writing presents a group agency in contrast to autobiography’s greater emphasis on the individual. Such testimonial life-writing frames
the narrator’s life-story within the broader story of the colonial dispossession of the narrator’s cultural group.

This chapter argues that testimonial life-writing functions in a realist mode like traditional autobiography, although with important differences. In Chapter One, it was argued that traditional autobiography is a form of realism because it is underpinned by a notion of agency that splits the subject by rendering it transparent to itself as an object. It was also argued that this split created an extremely abstracted authorial subject that is temporally and spatially unlocatable, that is, simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. In contrast, testimonial life-writing functions in the realist mode in a way that emphasises difference and the polycentrism of reality (or at least the dialogical reality of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations) rather than effacing difference by gathering up multiple views into an overarching viewpoint. This fundamental difference causes a range of generic differences. As discussed in Chapter One, classic realist autobiography’s claim to truly present a subject as grasped by itself as an object is supported by a number of narrative devices including “retrospective narration [that] constitutes the self as a coherent object [. . .]” (Lloyd 174). Yet, testimonial life-writing’s negotiation of post-colonial reality results in very different temporal structures being employed. Instead of presenting a split within the narrator through the retrospective closure of identity, testimonial life-writing is present-centred because it is concerned with negotiating persistent and present post-colonial injustices. In this way, the testimonial text is opened to the world and appeals for different responses from its readers than classic realist autobiography.

Because Aboriginal testimonial life-writing focuses on the collective Aboriginal experience of injustice and trauma, its scope is circumscribed in ways that traditional autobiography, with its focus on the individual life-story, is not. Although classic realist
autobiography is strictly prescribed, post-colonial issues of race, post-colonial injustice and trauma do not prescribe it. Finally, because testimonial life-writing is involved in contesting post-colonial reality, it is suitable for being read through post-colonial theorisations that are beyond the scope of both realist and anti-realist positions, particularly anti-realist positions that risk crippling subaltern agency.

One of the defining features of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is the way it emphasises the co-extensivity between the narrator/protagonist and his/her community.\(^\text{13}\) This emphasis is closely connected to Aboriginal testimonial life-writing’s political agenda of voicing unheard histories of colonial dispossession. As such, it highlights the large-scale political, collective and cultural forces that shape identities rather than a particular individual’s distinctiveness from such forces, as is often the case in autobiographical writing. Rigoberta Menchú, in an exemplary testimonial text, \textit{I Rigoberta Menchú},\(^\text{14}\) illustrates her co-extensivity with her Quiche Indian collective when she writes/says:

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people. It’s hard for me to remember everything that’s happened to me in my life since there have been many bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what happened to me happened to many other people also. \textit{My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people} (emphasis added). (1)

In this passage, Menchú presents her role as one in which she publicly represents Quiche identity and history on behalf of all Quiche Indians, directing her testimony to non-

\(^\text{13}\) Some critics may argue that autobiography is equally collective in scope and that it is an expression of collective identity, for example, class. However, to varying degrees, autobiographical writing always focuses more exclusively on the individual. In contrast, testimonial life-writing is characterised by multiple generic modes of which the autobiographical is not predominant.

\(^\text{14}\) The direct English translation of the original Spanish title is \textit{My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is How My Consciousness was Raised}. 
Quiche Guatemalans and an international audience. Menchú explicitly asks the reader to hear her experience as a culturally distinct group experience and through doing so her “testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (Beverley, “Margin at the Centre” 28). Menchú establishes herself as an agent of a group agency that employs a popular literary genre (the life-story) in order to direct the popularity and reach of that genre for the benefit of her community. In contrast to autobiography, Menchú’s testimony emphasises the ‘we’ in place of the ‘I’ and performs “a transvaluing of the ‘we’, so as to rescind its status as the necessary other against which the tyrannical ‘I’ measures its existence, and to claim a space for the collective identity to exist in its own right” (Marin 53). In distinction to autobiography, which usually emphasises the narrator/protagonist’s individuation from his or her community, testimonial life-writing emphasises the co-extensivity of identity, highlighting the way individual and community mutually produce each other.

Testimonial life-writing counters the individualism of autobiography and in doing so may implicitly redress what Robert Smith views as autobiography’s failure of the standards of philosophical rigor, standards “that might dispute ‘self-identity’ on the grounds that any identity conferred upon the self is done so solely, and at best jaggedly, by hegemonic determinisms, for the self cannot identify itself ex nihilo (56). However, it may also be argued that Smith’s criticism of autobiography applies to testimonial life-writing. If it is applicable, it means that testimonial life-writing’s claim to present an authorial voice in a collective mode is no less a ‘hegemonic determination’ of identity than autobiography. And, if this is so, according to Smith, testimonial life-writing is no less a failure in terms of philosophical rigor than autobiography.

To respond to this disqualification of autobiographical and testimonial life-writing’s rigor, it is only necessary to challenge Smith on his assumption that ‘identity’
and ‘hegemonic determinism’ are conceptually incompatible. Determinism, as a position that views subjects and their actions as the consequence of external or antecedent forces, is a key concept for thinking through the way testimonial life-writing establishes political and therapeutic agency. Post-colonial theorisations of testimonial life-writing, rather than dismissing the concept of identity due to its dependence on ‘hegemonic determinisms’, place their focus firmly upon hegemonic determinations of identity and, by doing so, aim to show the ways in which testimonial life-writing is a force that works to establish some control over such determinations. By acknowledging that group identities are in some ways formed by large-scale national and political forces and, in turn, that the group shapes individuals within it, testimonial life-writing challenges the criticism that hegemonic determinism and the registering of difference are mutually exclusive practices. It is precisely the hegemonic generators of identity that is the issue in post-colonial life-writing. In this sense, there is some merit in Fredric Jameson’s claim that “the great testimonies are those in which a life is necessarily intersected by the convulsions of history — for Esteban Montejio, the wars of independence, for Rigoberta Menchú, the struggle for Guatemalan liberation” (188). The liberation of Quiche Indians is the goal of Menchú’s testimony. The convulsions of history that are significant for Aboriginal life-writers are colonisation and dispossession, and the traumatic experiences resulting from those convulsions are the historical objects that testimonial life-writing endeavours to establish political, narrative and affective control over. Melas writes that “[c]olonialism is indeed the imposition of a single law” (277), that is, a hegemonic determining force, and testimonial life-writing is a counter-force that forms part of a larger program of wresting power away from colonialist forces in order to reclaim what has been deposed. As I will discuss below, it is testimonial life-writing’s focus on the conflicts that arise from the hegemonic determinations of entire peoples, such as that between the imposition
of colonial law and the resistance to such imposition, that create significant differences between it and autobiographical texts. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing embodies the tension between coloniser culture’s hegemonic determination of Aboriginal identity as the colonised and Aboriginal people’s resistance to that colonially imposed identity position.

One form of such resistance, arising from cultural difference, is the refiguring of the individualism of Western coloniser identities. In literary terms, the emphasis on the co-extensivity between the life-writer and his or her community found in Aboriginal life-writing counters the emphasis on the individual in Western autobiographical life-writing. Nevertheless, some features of autobiography remain in testimonial life-writing, for instance when Menchú states that “[t]his is my testimony (emphasis added)” (1). Yet, in strongly identifying her story with that of her group’s and her group’s story with her own, the reader is alerted to testimonial life-writing’s simultaneously collective and personal character. Neithere pole of the self/group spectrum is entirely collapsed into the other, as is often the case in autobiography, which strongly emphasises the self as an entity distinct from its community. Autobiography often presents a protagonist who is characterised by his/her adoption of several identity positions on his/her path to individuation, whereas the protagonists presented in the Aboriginal testimonial life-writing examined in this study are almost exclusively characterised by their racial identity. In Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, the protagonist’s individuation is to a great degree reliant on the group’s individuation.

It is the emphasis on co-extensivity that leads Jameson to argue that testimonial life-writing disrupts the “Western-style bourgeois subjectivity” (184), and instead enacts [an] anonymity [that] is understood as designating what the poststructuralists envisage as some new ‘decentered subject,’ or what political people celebrate as genuine democracy or plebeianization, a
social world without privileges, including that very peculiar form of special privilege and private property that is the old bourgeois ego or ‘personal identity.’ This is then a good anonymity that I have in mind; but it will still be misleading to the degree that the word suggests namelessness, facelessness, the indistinction of the mass, the empty representativity of the sociological case or example. (185)

Thus it is important to remember that this anonymity, or to recast it slightly, group identity, does not mean that the individual is entirely effaced. To the contrary, testimonial life-writing has a strong sense of the individual, but as John Beverley writes, “testimonio constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode” (“Margin at the Centre” 29). To function in such a mode entails the acknowledgment of, to again use Marin’s poetic description of the condition, the presence of the ‘we’ at the heart of the ‘I’. It may be argued that the registering of the narrator/protagonist’s individuated self risks being effaced by the collective voice of the collective political agenda. However, testimonial life-writing retains a sense of the individual agent, although it radically differs from the individualism of the sovereign agent of classic realist autobiography.

Menchú is an exceptional individual and it is her very exceptionality that allows her to speak and act as an agent of her people in a collective mode. Yet to do so, Menchú leaves her village, against her cultural tradition, to learn the coloniser’s language (Spanish), chooses not to have children, and takes up an organisational role in Quiche Indian politics: it is these decisions that provide her with the opportunity to act as an agent of and register her people’s oppression in wider fora. While sharing the material conditions of her collective culture, it is still necessary for Menchú to transform those

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15 In Chapter Three, I critique psychoanalysis on the basis that its efforts at re-establishing agency after the disruptive experiences of trauma do not dedicate enough time to the collective and political aspects of re-establishing agency.
conditions in order to register her culture (transform her culture in the very act of telling) in the wider political and literary spheres.

Although Aboriginal testimonial texts construct the narrator as an agent of a colonised collective, the processes involved in gaining access to the technologies of such textual construction rely on adopting practices associated with the colonising culture. As discussed in Chapter One, a hitherto unheard voice is interpolated into a literary mode of the colonising culture, but this mode is not endemic to the colonised culture. Menchú’s testimonial text claims “[m]y personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1) but, as discussed above, this is not absolutely accurate. To claim that an individual within the collective can simply adopt the role of effective cultural agent in the manner of Menchú is too simplistic. In fact, to be an agent of this unheard voice relies on establishing a gap between the voice and the material conditions that are registered by that voice. In such a way, the voice of the agent in the testimonial text performs both a simulation of the bourgeois subject and a dismantling of it. Employing the coloniser’s literary modes involves adopting voicings and identity positions that are endemic to the coloniser’s culture and its autobiographical mode while simultaneously registering difference. Indeed, it is in part through generating this ambiguity that testimonial life-writing gains much of its rhetorical force because the interplay between identificatory and distancing effects brings the reader’s attention to the performative nature of presenting Indigenous identity positions to non-Indigenous readers. Such performance is “a culturally specific and appropriate presentation of subjectivity and experience” that

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16 As identified in Chapter One, such testimonial life-writing simulates the colonising subject in the way in which it presents a monological Aboriginal subject characteristic of the monological subject presented in classic realist autobiography. However, due to testimony’s therapeutic and political agendas, this is only one correspondence among many differences between the genres. For example, in contrast with classic realist autobiography, Aboriginal testimonial texts bar non-Aboriginal readers’ identification with the Aboriginal authorial subject and in doing so perform an inversion of black/white roles as defined in Fanon’s model of coloniser/colonised relations.
highlights the discourses operating in Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations in specific historical contexts (Whitlock 208).

To some extent, the testimonial text needs to simulate the identity of the colonised subject because the very adoption of the coloniser’s literary modes necessitates establishing a gap between the testifier (Menchú) and her people. This gap is established through a variety of means, discussed above, that often include adopting the coloniser’s language, engaging with Western intellectuals (Burgos-Debray), furthering one’s education, and disengaging from traditional family and gender structures (choosing not to have children or remain in one’s village). This situation is compounded by the fact that the testimonial content has been translated from Quiche to Spanish to French to English languages. This gap creates a space through which to advocate on behalf of one’s people in domains where one’s people have traditionally not been heard. Therefore, it is not surprising that the negotiation of truth is fraught in a situation where the representation of the subaltern relies on separating she who represents from what is represented. Furthermore, there is no possibility for any agent of the subaltern to establish a seamless equivalence with the subaltern because the subaltern community is itself fractured. The impossibility or at least extreme difficulty in presenting a fractured subaltern reality in the testimonial mode is one reason the mode adopts the monological authorial perspective characteristic of classic realist autobiography.

David Stoll’s critique in Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans of Menchú’s testimony identifies this fracturedness of the subaltern and in doing so casts doubt on the veracity of Menchú’s testimony. The value of Stoll’s critique is that it brings the attention of readers of Menchú’s testimony to the fracturedness of subaltern reality. Yet, what this critique seems to gloss over is that it is impossible to find any representative of the subaltern that does not participate in such incongruity. Rather
than view this situation as an impasse, this study, as has been stated, adopts a principle of historicism that aims for “the simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naïve historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closure” (Friedlander qtd. in LaCapra 212). The so-called ‘Menchú controversy’ strikes me as being an instance of such naïve historical positivism because both sides of the debate appear to be involved in establishing self-assured historical closure in that they are primarily concerned with establishing the truth or untruth of Menchú’s testimony. Further problematising this debate is the way such historical positivism seems to be used to support broader ideological debates of the neo-Marxist/anti-Marxist, ‘neo-conservative’ contra ‘politically correct’ kind and, in doing so, further mute the expression of the colonised. What is potentially useful about Stoll’s critique is that it might encourage a more detailed historicism that seeks to register the fracturedness of the subaltern. Yet, identifying this fracturedness does not undermine the broader aim of Menchú’s testimony to record and convey to the world the violence involved in coloniser/colonised relations in Guatemala. By rendering Menchú’s case definitive, both sides of the ‘controversy’ fall into overly simplistic iconism. Rather than viewing Menchú’s testimony as the definitive case regarding the truth or untruth of colonial trauma in Guatemala, it should be viewed as one point from which to pursue closer historical linkages regarding the history of coloniser/colonised relations.

Such historical positivism regarding the ‘facts’ as seen in the Menchú controversy is currently being practised in Australia in debates surrounding the Stolen Generations and it forms part of a larger political agenda that seems to be focused on undermining Aboriginal testimony to Aboriginal experience. As I argue in Chapter Four in my discussion of psychoanalytic theory and defensive mechanisms that are employed for not
hearing testimony to trauma, such historical positivism enacts a “[f]oreclosure through facts, through an obsession with factfinding; [it is] an absorbing interest in the factual details of the account which serve to circumvent the human experience” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 72-73). This study supports factfinding when it employed to open debate but not when it is employed to foreclose debate in the interests of simplistic, albeit insidious, self-serving political and cultural agendas.

Another point to consider in the context of the Menchú controversy is the way in which testimony is not only concerned with accurately representing reality but also with transforming it. This dual agenda may result in slippages in testimonial texts that need to be challenged. Menchú’s purported silence in responding to the questioning of the factualness of her testimony has worked to support naïve historical positivism. It is important that this slippage between conveying and transforming reality is acknowledged so that the rhetoric of testimony as political appeal does not betray the experience of colonised peoples. In this sense, it is important for discerning readers to carry out their readings in such a way as to avoid the historical positivism of both Stoll and Menchú, that is, to follow Friedlander’s principle of historical research. With such a strategy, the reader of Menchú’s testimony could not hastily conclude that it is all true or all false, but would rather pursue a more balanced ethicopolitical judgment of the value of testimonio.

**Genre**

Another striking example of the way in which testimonial life-writing disrupts the discourse of literature and the autobiographical mode is its resistance to genre categorisation. As previously argued, testimonial life-writing emphasises the collective rather than the individual aspects of identity and acknowledges the depths to which cultural community forms selfhood. In addition, and this is a point that many theorists on
testimonial life-writing have not stressed strongly enough, it is the collectivity of testimonial life-writing’s origins that complicates the effort to distinguish between the individual and the collective that also frustrates easy categorisation of it as a genre. For example, Beverley writes:

[t]estimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life-history, novela-testimonio, non-fiction novel, or ‘factographic literature’. (“Margin at the Centre” 24-25)

The narrative strategies that conflate the individual and the collective are also the reason that such writing contains characteristics from a wide variety of genres. The authorial voice of testimonial life-writing contains not only its individual history, but also the history of its cultural group. Furthermore, to speak as an agent of others requires certain ethical and political considerations to be registered in the text itself — considerations that are not necessary for traditional autobiographical writing. To claim that one is writing history compounds this ethical weight, again in contrast to autobiography. Due to these considerations, testimonial life-writing employs different textual sources and modes that have been traditionally on the margins of the literary, such as oral patterns of speech, court reports and historical documents. These sources are addressed in more detail later in this study with reference to particular testimonial texts.

Taking into account the distinct and diverse cultural factors shaping the process of producing testimonial life-writing, it is not surprising that such writing displays aspects of many different genres. To illustrate: testimonial life-writing is autobiographical because it records the personal; it is cultural and political history because it records collective experience; and its claims to historical accuracy mean that it often employs material from quasi-legal sources such as eye-witness reports that, in turn, are gathered from oral
mediums like interviews and confessions. Testimonial life-writing, rather than merely disputing official representations of Aboriginal history, problematises the discourses that order these representations into strict categories. It problematises the institutional compartmentalisations of cultural practices because, as Gugelberger writes, it

is placed at the intersection of multiple roads: oral versus literary (which implies questioning why the literary has always colonized the oral); authored/authoritarian discourse versus edited discourse (one authors or two authors? [. . .] literature versus anthropology; literature versus non-literature, or even against literature; autobiography versus demography (people’s writing); the battle of representationality; the canon debate [. . .]; ‘masterpiece’ of literature versus minority writing; and issues of postmodernity versus postcoloniality. (10-11)

Often the complexity of forces that make up identities and texts are effaced by their resolution into individuality and genre respectively. This explains why the fusion of the individual and the collective may have significant repercussions for literary debates on genre. By interpolating a collective, oral, popular voice into the autobiographical mode and the institution of literary studies, testimonial life-writing highlights the omissions and gaps that characterise the genre and the institution. However, this inherent indeterminability does not mean that testimonial life-writing cannot be better determined in the minds of readers.

Beverley focuses on the generic characteristics of testimonial life-writing and influentially defines testimonio as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and

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17 Ruby Langford Ginibi and her son’s (Nobby Langford) jointly produced testimonial text _Haunted by the Past_ provides many instances of the use of quasi-legal sources. It contains extended extracts from psychological and probation reports submitted in court. Of particular note for those interested in the testimonial mode is the inclusion of a letter written by Langford Ginibi to the judge presiding over one of Nobby Langford’s court cases in which she describes the collective trauma of colonial dispossession in an effort to have that history acknowledged as central to any deliberation on justice (165-69).
whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (“Margin at the Centre” 24). Beverley dates the coalescence of the various narrative techniques that make up testimonio as a genre to the 1960s with its history of consciousness raising politics, while also acknowledging testimonio’s narrative antecedents in war diaries (diaries de campana), colonial crónicas, the contumbrista essay, and the tape recorded life-story employed by the 1930s anthropologists of the University of Chicago.\(^\text{18}\) It is important to note that Beverley identifies different generic features of testimonial life-writing that contribute to its status as a form of resistance literature — a project that devotes an equal amount of attention to generic features as to their potential political effects. Beverley also observes that there is a collective, polyphonic dimension in the testimonial narrative voice, as discussed above, that distinguishes it from autobiography and is itself a form of resistance. Concerning testimonial life-writing’s difference from autobiography, Beverley writes that testimonial life-writing can approximate “the symbolic function of the epic hero, without at the same time assuming his hierarchical and patriarchal status” (27).

One of the best examples of this movement between the individual and collective is found in the Aboriginal writer Ruby Langford Ginibi’s testimonial life-story *My Bundjalung People*. In her ‘Foreword’ to *My Bundjalung People*, Pam Johnston aims to guide the reader’s attention to what is characteristic of and significant in the testimonial life-story. In doing so, Johnston stresses the communality of Langford’s voice:

*My Bundjalung People* is not an academic work. It is not a remote observation of a people. *This is an Aboriginal history as experienced by many many Aboriginal people* [emphasis added]. It has been begging to be told for so very long. It has heart and soul, and tears of blood because it has been lived and tested by time itself. It is wholistic in the same way

\(^\text{18}\) For further analysis of testimonio’s narrative antecedents refer to Eliano S. Rivero. Also see Jimmie Barker’s *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker* for an example of Aboriginal life-writing that employs edited transcriptions of self-recorded testimony.
that Aboriginal culture is wholistic. One part cannot be separated from another. It tells what it is to be an indigenous person, what that means. Aboriginal history involves fact, spirituality, and culture. (xii)

The movement between individual and collective is pinpointed when Johnston writes “[o]ne part cannot be separated from another. It tells what it is to be an indigenous person, what that means” (xii). Langford Ginibi’s testimonial is a record of a personal journey that also functions as a collective rediscovery of unwritten cultural history. The individual aspects of the testimony are no doubt what led its publishers to categorise it as autobiography rather than testimony or Aboriginal Studies. Yet the publication history of Langford Ginibi’s books reflects the growing realisation of the impulse to record collective history and its associated generic complexity. Langford Ginibi’s publication history begins with the more personally focused autobiographical work Don’t Take your Love to Town, moves on to the tribal history of My Bundjalung People, and then on to Haunted by the Past, the last jointly produced by Langford Ginibi and her son Nobby Langford to record his life-story and experiences with the Australian justice system. In Haunted by the Past, Langford Ginibi restates the collective significance of Aboriginal life-stories first identified in her earlier books, writing:

My son’s story is not only his story but the story of many others. Speaking of her own family’s experience, Aboriginal magistrate Pat O’Shane wrote that: ‘I recognised all the things that happened to me through my grandparents, and their parents; their brothers and sisters; through my mother and her siblings; through my cousins and my siblings, the things that happened to thousands of other Aboriginal families, and I have marvelled, THAT WE ALL WEREN’T STARK RAVING MAD!’ (48)

Like Kevin Gilbert’s and Sally Morgan’s testimonial texts discussed below, Langford Ginibi’s texts contain many discrete life-stories from different Aboriginal people, although in the Langfords’ jointly produced Haunted by the Past, these stories might be
more accurately termed death-stories. In fact, *Haunted by the Past* dedicates as much attention to death-stories as it does to life-stories by including case studies of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Langford Ginibi writes:

I want to write about some of the Aboriginal deaths in custody. The lives of any one of these could easily have been my son Nobby’s. I feel that now is the time to show people what really happened. Maybe it will open up people’s eyes! It knocks the guts outa me to write it up, so you read it, and form your own opinions. For legal reasons I haven’t been able to include all the facts as I know them, or write about all the people who have died. I have had to cut back some details I think you all should know. That’s the white fella’s law for you, aye? (77-78)

This use of a series of discrete death-stories to illustrate colonial injustice is distinctive of the testimonial mode. This passage also shows connections that are distinctive of the testimonial mode, such as those between injustice, traumatic experience, the conflict between different cultural laws, the appeals to the reader to listen empathetically to the stories, and a sense of shared history. Notwithstanding, it is simply important to note that the collective features of Langford Ginibi’s life-story present in her first books are given greater and greater expression as her publication history continues, highlighting, I suggest, the desire in her earlier autobiographical work to register her people’s history. Like other authors of testimony, Langford Ginibi maintains that her story is the story of all her people and, unlike autobiography, her writing does not “affirm a self-identity that is separate from a group or class situation marked by marginalisation, oppression, and struggle” (Beverley and Zimmerman 177). Likewise for Marnie Kennedy who, in the preface to her *Born a Half Caste* writes, “[t]his is my story and it is the story of many Australian Aborigines. My tribe, the Kalkadoons, fought and lost a terrible battle for what was theirs” (1).
As I have argued, the presence of a narrator who emphasises his or her co-extensivity with his or her community is one feature that distinguishes testimonial life-writing from autobiography. Autobiography’s emphasis on the individual often sets up personal individuation against the political forces that oppress a group of people and, in so doing, understates the power of the material and symbolic conditions of disadvantage that colonised peoples have suffered. Autobiography’s emphasis on the individual risks delegitimating the agency of those individuals who remain within their disadvantaged cultural group. It is this predominance of individualism in autobiography that leads Beverley and Zimmerman to note that autobiography is a literary genre of the middle and upper-classes and “is an essentially conservative mode in the sense that it implies that individual triumph over circumstances is possible” (Beverley and Zimmerman 178). Beverley goes on to say that “[t]estimonio, by contrast, always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability and complacency of the reader’s world must be brought into question” (178). Therefore, testimonial life-writing is distinguished not only by the way it emphasises the collective but also by the way it politicises collective history by strongly binding it to larger historical and political contexts such as colonial injustice. Langford Ginibi ties her testimony to the story of colonial impact in her dedication at the beginning of *Haunted by the Past*:

*I dedicate this book to my son Nobby and to every mother’s son or daughter who has fallen foul of the Westminster system of justice that came with the first squatters and settlers in 1788. Those laws are not our Koori laws — our laws were the first laws of this land. Since we Kooris are invaded people, we have always had to conform to other people’s laws, rules and standards — we were never allowed to be ourselves as Aboriginal people.* (v)
Another Aboriginal testimonial life-story, *Auntie Rita* (jointly produced by mother and daughter, Rita and Jackie Huggins), similarly illustrates the connection between Aboriginal family history and the effects of colonialism. Jackie Huggins writes:

> The writing of this book was an attempt to reclaim the history of our people. To do this is to encounter a double fold of silence. Each fold is of the same cloth — two centuries of colonisation. There are the acts of violence that attempted to alienate (with varying degrees of success). Black people’s access to knowledge of their own culture and its history: taking people from their lands, separating children from their parents, insisting on the surrender of traditional languages and customs and the adoption of European ways. This list goes on, and continues into the present. There is another order of silence again, though, and this is the silence that you meet in Aboriginal elders who cannot bear to speak of the humiliations and mutilations they have experienced and which they have witnessed. (4-5)\(^{19}\)

*Auntie Rita*, as a testimonial text, aims to redress such silences. In doing so, Jackie Huggins addresses non-Aboriginal culture’s role in controlling the emergence of Aboriginal life-stories themselves when she writes:

> One of the many contemporary forms that the silencing takes is the resistance that Aboriginal people meet in white bureaucrats when they attempt to see Aboriginal records. Files were compiled on every person who had lived on a reserve, in Queensland and elsewhere, and often were continued long after the person had moved on. As part of writing this book, we sought access to my mother’s personal files held by the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs in 1990. When I first made enquiries about seeing my mother’s file, I was made to watch across a huge desk as two white public servants turned the pages. Watch, not touch. The men stopped at various pages and read them, and made comments to each other that I couldn’t hear. These gatekeepers behaved as if the files were their personal property whereas

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\(^{19}\) See Chapter Four for discussion of the significance of Huggins’s use of italics.
they are in fact my people’s inheritance, part of a history that remains to be recovered and claimed.

A white friend of ours had far greater access to these files than we would ever have. He was taken to be a credentialled researcher whereas I am dismissed as just another Blackfella wanting to know some family roots. (4-5)

Aboriginal testimonial life-writing works to address this censorship of Aboriginal history by bringing that history to public attention through employing oral and official sources. In addition, it works to counter representations of Aboriginal people’s histories as found in official sources. Rita Huggins tells of the time she finally got to read the files that consist of over thirty years of surveillance of her by government bureaucrats, files maintained long after she left the mission. She says, “[i]t told of all the bad things in my life and none of the positive, of which there were many. Anyone would think I was a murderer. But I guess there has to be something to keep those dorry [stickybeak] public servants in a job. There were even comments in the files on the lives of my children who were born free, not on the mission” (5). As I will demonstrate throughout this study, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing’s objective is to bring the effaced historical experiences (official and unofficial alike) of Aboriginal people to national attention.

Kevin Gilbert’s testimonial text, Living Black, identifies the destructiveness of colonialism on Aboriginal people’s lives and self-esteem when he writes:

White people’s devaluation of Aboriginal life, religion, culture and personality caused the thinking about self and race that I believe is the key to modern Aboriginal thinking. As Robert Kantilla said, ‘Suffering is that the white people class them as the lowest person on earth.’ Modern Aboriginals are victims of this chain of historical events. I believe that Aborigines should come to view their background a bit more realistically on the surface and with a bit less shame underneath. (2-3)
Gilbert, in addressing the ties between personal histories and the larger story of colonial impact, also aims to address the white reader’s role in that history:

I have also written this book in order to bring white Australia to some greater compassion through understanding and to enlighten it to its responsibilities in the areas of land and compensation for Aborigines.

It is my thesis that Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today. It is this psychological blight, more than anything else, that causes the conditions we see on reserves and missions. And it is repeated down the generations. (3)

In the above two quotes, Gilbert identifies some central aims of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing: to create a more realistic view of Aboriginal history and to counter feelings of shame felt by Aboriginal peoples; to bring non-Aboriginal Australia to a better understanding of Aboriginal peoples and, thereby, to a more compassionate view of Aboriginal peoples; and to identify the nature of the traumatic legacy of colonial dispossession, particularly its inter-generational effects on the psychological and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal peoples.

One of the most widely read Aboriginal life-stories is Sally Morgan’s *My Place*. While it displays generic features that have more in common with traditional autobiographical texts (discussed in more detail below), it nonetheless displays features of testimonial life-writing that reflect the agenda of the more clearly testimonial texts discussed above. For instance, when Sally Morgan discusses with her mother what she found at the Western Australian library, *My Place* takes on a distinctively testimonial tone:

Mum sat down. ‘Tell me what you read.’

‘Well, when Nan was younger, Aborigines were considered sub-normal and not capable of being educated the way whites were. You know, the pastoral industry was built on the back of slave labour.
Aboriginal people were forced to work, if they didn’t, the station owners called the police in. I always thought Australia was different to America, Mum, but we had slavery here, too. The people might not have been sold on the blocks like the American Negroes were, but they were owned, just the same.’ (151-52)

Sally Morgan’s mother recounts her reaction to this: “‘I know’, Mum said. There were tears in her eyes. ‘They were treated just awful. I know Nan . . .’ She stopped. ‘I better get going, Sal, I’ve got to go to work early tomorrow’” (151-52). And later, the book evokes a similarly testimonial tone:

‘Now, you know Sally’s trying to write a book about the family?’

‘Yes. I don’t know why she wants to tell everyone our business.’

‘Why shouldn’t she write a book?’ Mum said firmly. ‘There’s been nothing written about people like us, all the history’s about the white man. There’s nothing about Aboriginal people and what they’ve been through.’

‘All right’, she muttered, ‘what do you want to ask?’

‘Well, you know when you write a book, it has to be the truth. You can’t put lies in a book. You know that, don’t you Nan?’

‘I know that, Glad’, Nan nodded. (161)

Following this passage, the text moves on to show Sally Morgan’s mother asking her own mother who she thinks her (Sally Morgan’s grandmother) father was. Again, such Aboriginal life-writing shows the important link between the individual and collective dimensions of rediscovering and reclaiming Aboriginal history. Morgan’s historical work depends upon the assistance of many members of her extended family. In describing this historical work the text continues in the testimonial mode. Sally Morgan recounts talking with her uncle:

‘I want to write the history of my own family’, I told him.

‘What do you want to do that for?’
‘Well, there’s almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There’s a lot of our history we can’t even get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won’t release them. You take the old police files, they’re not even controlled by Battye Library, they’re controlled by the police. And they don’t like letting them out, because there are so many instances of police abusing their power when they were supposed to be Protectors of Aborigines that it’s not funny! I mean, our government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people. I know Nan doesn’t agree with what I’m doing. She thinks I’m trying to make trouble, but I’m not. I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story.’ (163-64)

Again, the story she recounts is not solely her family’s story. The story she aims to tell is intended to have familial, community, cultural and national significance and, like Gilbert’s and Langford Ginibi’s books, it is a form of historical redress that is often presented in the form of testimonials.

While My Place contains features that are more easily attributable to the autobiographical mode than other Aboriginal life-writing, it nevertheless consistently employs the testimonial mode when addressing colonial trauma and injustice. When the life-stories begin to be told in the first person by Sally Morgan’s extended family (Arthur, Gladys and Daisy Corunna), they are not constructed with autobiographical figures of detection (such as doubt, self-searching, and discovery), but rather as testimonial statements uncomplicated by self-searching. These passages can be contrasted with the more traditional construction of the majority of Sally Morgan’s text. To illustrate, Arthur Corunna, in a taped interview that was later incorporated into My Place, says, “[y]ou see,
the trouble is that colonialism isn’t over yet. We still have a White Australia policy against the Aborigines. Aah, it’s always been the same. They say there’s been no difference between black and white, we all Australian, that’s a lie. I tell you, the black man has nothin’, the government’s been robbin’ him blind for years” (212). And later:

I got no desires for myself any more. I want to get my land fixed up so my children can get it and I want my story finished. I want everyone to read it. Arthur Corunna’s story! I might be famous. You see, it’s important, because then maybe they’ll understand how hard it’s been for the blackfella to live the way he wants [emphasis added]. I’m part of history, that’s how I look on it. Some people read history, don’t they? (213)

Likewise, the following parts of this section of My Place sustain the testimonial mode.

**Temporality in Testimonial Life-writing**

Another distinctive element of testimonial life-writing, one related to the way the political and therapeutic agenda of testimonial life-writing determines generic features, is the way temporality is structured differently than in classic realist (traditional) autobiography. In defining traditional autobiography, Roy Pascal contrasts it with diary to highlight its distinctive temporal structure. He writes:

> The formal difference between diary and autobiography is obvious. The latter is a review of a life from a particular moment in time, while the diary, however reflective it may be, moves through a series of moments in time. The diarist notes down what, at that moment, seems of importance to him; its ultimate, long-range significance cannot be assured. (3)

And later Pascal writes, “the diary [. . .] can never be so systematically retrospective” as autobiography (4). Extending this observation, Genevieve Lloyd in a discussion of the retrospective structure of Augustine’s confessions writes:

> The unconverted protagonist, ignorant of his true nature, is in the position of the temporal self, able to see the events of the life only in their ever
changing relations to a past continually reshaped by the addition of new experience, and to future expectations which experience is constantly revising. The narrator, in contrast, purports to see each event in its fixed relation to a past which has presumably achieved its final form. The past self, from this Godlike stance, is seen as having a completeness which it could not attain while present. The retrospective narration constitutes the self as a coherent object, grasped from the stance of immutable truth. (174)

Testimonial life-writing, its subject and temporality, differs from Lloyd’s and Pascal’s definition of traditional autobiography. In contrast to traditional autobiography (and like diary), testimonial life-writing contains much material that is present-centred. The testimonial life-writing of Langford Ginibi in *My Bundjalung People* and *Haunted by the Past* records journeys that have the goals of the discovery, recovery and reinforcement of cultural identity. The acts of discovery, recovery and reinforcement are present-centred activities and their prominence in Langford Ginibi’s testimonial narratives shows a significant difference from the retrospective structure employed in traditional autobiography. While retrospective elements are employed in Langford Ginibi’s testimonial life-writing, they are not as singularly dominant as in traditional autobiography, and when they do occur it is in a more temporally complicated manner. Like diary, and in contrast with autobiography, testimonial life-writing is more present-centred because the life-story presented is often told as the events under discussion, or the effects of the events, take place and are worked-through.

This difference between the temporal structures of testimonial life-writing and traditional autobiography can be found in Morgan’s *My Place*, which contains instances of both modes. While much of *My Place* contains significant elements of writing in the testimonial mode, it differs from the majority of testimonial texts examined in this study in its use of temporal structures more commonly found in autobiographical texts. Recalling a scene when she found her ‘Nan’ in the backyard tapping on trees and
listening to their trunks, Morgan writes, “‘Nan’, I called out, ‘what on earth are you doing?’” (66). Her Nan refuses to answer, but after being further pressured to give an answer, responds: “‘All right, I was just checking on them to make sure they were all right, that’s all’” (66). The narrator in turn responds in a style not seen in predominantly testimonial texts:

‘Okay’, I sighed as I burrowed my head down into my towel once again.

I hadn’t comprehended her answer at all. What on earth did she mean, making sure they were all right? I puzzled over her words for a few seconds and then dismissed them. There was so much about Nan I didn’t understand. (66-67)

This scene shows the way in which Morgan’s text employs techniques that manipulate the reader in a more traditional literary fashion. This use of traditional literary techniques may also be a factor in the book’s greater success in reaching a wider audience than testimonial texts have achieved. In this text, mysteries are not maintained to protect cultural sovereignty as is often the case in many testimonial texts (see Chapter Four of this study), but rather are employed to hold the reader’s interest by indicating an answer will be provided later — a retrospective, non-present-centred resolution of textual tension characteristic of the classic realist mode analysed in the previous chapter.

Such figures of detection result in more mediated temporal structures than found in testimonial texts or diary. In contrast to testimonial life-writing, these figures are a form of revelation fabricated through traditional novelistic devices. The traditional literary device at work here, in contrast to testimonial writing, is the greater separation between narrator and protagonist. Morgan retrospectively constructs herself as ignorant of her Aboriginality, from a position that carefully demarcates the roles of narrator and protagonist. Morgan the narrator aims to alert the reader to significant clues concerning the search for Aboriginal identity before Morgan the protagonist is aware of them. This
separation has at least two important consequences: the reader knows things the protagonist does not and the narrator knows things the protagonist does not. Another example of this demarcation is demonstrated in the following excerpt in which Morgan remembers her grandmother drawing pictures in the sand:

“You want me to draw you a picture, Sal?” she said as she picked up a stick.

‘Okay.’

‘These are men, you see, three men. They are very quiet, they’re hunting. Here are kangaroos, they’re listening, waiting. They’ll take off if they know you’re coming.’ Nan wiped the sand picture out with her hand.

‘It’s your turn now’, she said, ‘you draw something’. I grasped the stick eagerly.

‘This is Jill and this is me. We’re going down the swamp.’ I drew some trees and bushes.

I opened my eyes, and, just as suddenly, the picture vanished. Had I remembered something important? I didn’t know [emphasis added]. That was the trouble, I knew nothing about Aboriginal people. I was clutching at straws. (100)

As readers, we know that this scene is important. As a narrator, Morgan knows why it is important. It is important because Morgan’s grandmother is communicating with her granddaughter in a culturally specific way. Sand drawing is one of the most common cultural signifiers of Aboriginality, yet the protagonist is unaware of this. It would be naïve to believe that the narrator or most readers are not aware of this.

A similar phenomenon is found in the many allegories that occur throughout the text that are incomprehensible to the protagonist except through the cipher of Aboriginality. For example, Morgan cannot understand the habits of her mother and grandmother, such as hoarding items of questionable value, the use of the hot-water system, and their frugality (117-18). Yet, the reader and protagonist ‘discover’ that this behaviour is the result of Aboriginal historical experiences. In contrast, when the text
moves into stories recounted in the first person by Morgan’s extended family (Arthur, Gladys and Daisy Corunna), the text loses these figures of detection and adopts a testimonial mode uncomplicated by doubt. Although these testimonial passages concentrate on individual life-stories and are not as politicised as other testimonial texts examined in this study, they do, nevertheless, address racism and colonialism and identify historical injustices that are felt to require redress. To repeat: “You see, the trouble is that colonialism isn’t over yet. We still have a White Australia policy against the Aborigines. Aah, it’s always been the same. They say there’s been no difference between black and white, we all Australian, that’s a lie. I tell you, the black man has nothin’, the government’s been robbin’ him blind for years” (212).

Testimonial life-writing shares characteristics with both autobiography and diary. The standpoint of traditional autobiography is a unifying one that “purports to see each event in its fixed relation to a past that has presumably achieved its final form” (Lloyd 174). This feature is not as common in testimonial life-writing, although it can be found. For instance, Langford Ginibi’s writing displays a narrator who is the protagonist in the process of discovering and reclaiming cultural and personal identity, a cultural identity disrupted by colonial displacement. Langford Ginibi’s writing records a journey that is part of the testimonial process because it endeavours to provide evidence of colonial dispossession and reclaim Aboriginal identity, rather than simply represent it from a “fixed relation to a past” (Lloyd 174). And yet, like autobiography, the life-story contains elements that are constructed retrospectively. It functions in this way in order to show the continuing impact of past colonialist practices on the present. Thus it shares a temporal aspect with both genres. Unlike autobiography, the retrospective construction of a life is focused on describing present injustices. This manifests itself textually in the inclusion of government, court, psychological and police reports, documents, letters, oral
data from interviews, eye-witness reports, the present-tense construction of the reader through oral inflections like ‘aye’, newspaper articles, and historical archives. But, while diary-like and documentary material is used in testimonial life-writing, it is nevertheless constructed (and this is where it is useful to compare it with traditional autobiography) as a first person narrative told from the standpoint of the political and moral attitudes of the narrator — a standpoint circumscribed by the history of colonial dispossession that necessarily contains retrospective elements. It is the emphasis on present-centred political agendas and the urgency involved in dealing with the ethically charged content of traumatic post-colonial histories that determines testimonial life-writing’s different temporal structure from traditional autobiography.

**Resistance Literature**

The urgency of addressing moral issues as a process of discursive resistance to injustice found in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is characteristic of what is termed ‘resistance literature’ in Latin American Studies, following Barbara Harlow (1987, 1989, 1991). This is a category of writing, of which testimonial life-writing is only one example, that addresses and challenges political and moral oppression. Understood as resistance literature, testimonial life-writing aims not only for the portrayal of reality but also the transformation of it. Indeed, resistance literature does not necessarily aim for the accurate portrayal of reality and this is one feature that distinguishes it from the strong truth claims of testimonial life-writing, although in many other ways there is a strong resemblance.

Harlow argues that one way in which testimonial discourse transforms reality is through the reconstruction of traditional models of the relationship between the author and the text. She argues that this is due to the collaborative process involved in the production of many testimonial texts, whereby testimonial life-writing “might well be
read [. . . as] a single volume with two authors, or two protagonists and no author at all” (“Testimonio and Survival” 12). While involving very different relationships, all the testimonial texts examined in this study have more than one protagonist/author: Ruby Langford and Pam Johnston in My Bundjalung People; Ruby Langford and Nobby Langford in Haunted by the Past; Jackie and Rita Huggins in Aunty Rita; Douglas Lockwood and Phillip Roberts (Waipuldanya) in I, the Aboriginal; Sally Morgan and her family in My Place; and Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Dubray in I, Rigoberta Menchú. As I discuss later in this study (Chapter Four), testimonial life-writing presents numerous subject positions both in the narrative voices it employs and in the type of reading subject it projects. For example, Harlow argues that the collaborative process redefines the role of the traditional intellectual (in this case she is referring to anthropological and ethnological scholars) from being a commentator to being the mere amanuensis of marginalised voices.

George Yúdice argues that testimonial life-writers like Menchú do not “speak for or represent a community but rather perform [. . .] an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective” (15). This can be contrasted with writing or political activity undertaken by protagonists who do not share the material conditions of the ‘voiceless’ but who nevertheless act as spokespeople of the ‘voiceless’ or, preferably, ‘unheard’ group. Yúdice usefully distinguishes being an ‘agent of’ from being a ‘representative for’ in order to alert readers to the possibility of paternalism or maternalism in the latter, as distinguished from the former’s stronger claim for the narrator/protagonist’s co-extensivity with his or her cultural group and the material conditions associated with it. Yúdice’s objective is to show how testimonial life-writing undercuts the literary practices of great writers or, as he terms them, ‘master subjects’, who represent the cause of the ‘voiceless’ through high cultural forms.
Resistance literature seeks to transform reality through the participation of narrators/activists who, due to the link between their narrative voice and political activism, are said to “historicize and politicize the traditional claims to an aesthetic autonomy of culture [. . .]” (Harlow, “Testimonio and Survival” 11). This is said to remind us, and Harlow quotes Roque Dalton here, that “Poetry / pardon me for having helped you understand / [is . . .] not made of words alone” (17). Resistance literature “transgress[es] distinctions of discipline and genre, introduces that politically conscious, strategically developed, even militant articulation into an isolationist literary arena and collapses its self-protective defenses” (11). While I agree that testimonial life-writing can be classified as predominantly a form of resistance literature, there are also ways in which it can function regressively. For instance, Harlow balances her celebration of testimonial life-writing’s transformative power when she notes that gender inequities are occluded in Dalton’s *Miguel Marmol*. This is due to that same sublimation of the personal to the political that grants testimonial writing its status as resistance literature, although this is the only instance of many possible occlusions that can be identified — others at times include race and class.

A similar tension is also relevant to Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. Because such writing emanates from shifting political and cultural terrain, intra-Aboriginal conflicts may be effaced in the project of advancing Aboriginal culture as a whole. One issue that has been developing as a site of intra-racial tension in Aboriginal communities is the problem of family violence, particularly violence against women and children, and it may be anticipated that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing will begin to reflect this conflict more in the coming years, particularly because it is predominantly written by women.
In Latin American testimonio, the issue addressed by the testimony is the injustice experienced by a dispossessed people. Such testimony is intended to function as a consciousness raising activity, written to represent the marginalised community and to inform communities outside of its own of the injustices it suffers in order to develop larger and more effective networks. Testimonio made its greatest impact on and through academic and political networks in the West — Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work (her testimony being the primary example). Marc Zimmerman writes:

"testimonio signals a transformation of literary production that may well symptomize at least those forces tending toward an overall transformation in national social formations or even (at the extreme) modes of production. It is, then, a form which takes its place in the struggle for the middle sectors so often crucial in supporting and opposing revolutionary struggles. It may help constitute a new national narrative or deconstruct limited and excluding national constructs. (22-23)"

We see here that testimonio is aimed at reconstructing national narratives through an appeal to those sectors of a nation where a politics of solidarity and coalition may be developed, that is, those sectors of the community that will empathetically read testimonio. Yet, as the current impasse in the project of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia shows, testimonial life-writing forms only one part of the overall process of reconciliation.

While Beverley’s definition of testimonial narrative is vitally important for the discussion of testimonial life-writing in this study, an equally significant definition of testimonio is provided by Yúdice who defines it

[a]s an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a
present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (17)

This definition is important because it draws attention to the fact that instances of injustice are frequently concurrent with the text’s production and dissemination, as well as providing the impetus for the testimonial text’s production. Providing a response to an urgent and “present situation of exploitation” is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes testimonial life-writing from autobiography and allows such writing to claim extra-literary significance (17).

**Holocaust Testimonies and Resistance Literature**

The other primary source for theoretical analysis of oral and written testimony is Holocaust Studies. In contrast to Latin American testimonio, Holocaust testimonies do not focus on present injustices — although the testimonies are effective at working against the insidiousness of revisionists — but rather focus on working-through the continuing effects of the traumatic material of the Holocaust. Because of this, Holocaust Studies places more emphasis on the past than the present and on psychotherapeutic analysis of individual responses to trauma. It is centrally concerned with the operations of time, memory and trauma in individual responses to the Holocaust. It considers testimony in terms of the bearing witness to the effects of traumatic experience, as a memorial to lost others, as an expression of the need to counter the vagaries of memory and memory’s centrality in forming identity. The central concern of Holocaust testimonies is the recollection of the experiences and effects of the Holocaust on the testifier.

Due to this focus on memory, identity and trauma (and also because of the Jewish people’s strong presence in the psychoanalytic field), Holocaust Studies employs psychoanalytic concepts such as working-through, acting-out and latency, and explores
the possibility of therapeutic breakthroughs resulting from the narrative reconstruction of traumatic events. The centrality of memory, identity and representation in testimonial writing that bears witness to traumatic experience is similar to the concerns found in self-reflexive autobiographies and autobiographical theory. In contrast, testimonial writing as resistance literature, as the bearing of witness to injustice, has less concern with the operation (even the accuracy) of memory because its primary and stated aim is to identify and challenge injustice, usually an injustice that has present-centred and ongoing significance. The distinction between the two can be expressed thus: testimonial literature that functions as resistance literature (testimonio) is concerned with identities and communities in political resistance and protest, while the other form of testimonial literature (narrative working-through of trauma) is primarily concerned with an individual in crisis, that is, traumatised identity. One more strongly emphasises the causes and agents of injustice and the other emphasises the traumatic effects of injustices.

Gugelberger writing on the relationship between Holocaust Studies’ and Latin American Studies’ work on testimony states:

Most certainly we do not wish to identify Holocaust testimonies, which are basically documentary, with the testimonio that wants to effect change and is quite different from documentary writing. The one has no audience, or perceives its audience as having vanished apocalyptically, while the other definitely lives from the hope and the will to effect change or at least raise consciousness. (4)

I maintain Gugelberger is mistaken when he separates these two sites of testimonial discourse so completely. Psychoanalytic work on testimony, while different from post-colonial theorisations of testimonio, can offer much to post-colonial work concerned with registering and analysing literatures that “constitute [. . .] new national narrative[s] or deconstruct limited and excluding national constructs” (Zimmerman 23). To say that Holocaust testimonies have no audience is simply wrong, and the psychoanalytic work
involved in interviewing Holocaust survivors provides resources for understanding the complexities of witnessing and recognition involved in hearing testimony to post-colonial trauma. These include, as discussed in Chapter Four of this study, being witness to oneself, to others witnessing, and to the process of witnessing itself.

In my view, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is writing that can be constructively read by employing insights from both post-colonial testimonio and psychoanalytic theory. One cannot simply generically categorise Aboriginal testimonial life-writing as being either best read through the eyes of resistance literature or trauma theory because the injustice that demands political resistance is the cause of the traumatic experience/material. Although it is by no means always the case, acts of injustice often have attendant trauma, as is the case in the Aboriginal testimonial life-writing examined in this study. With this in mind, I am interested in the following questions: how do the different emphases of these two discourses (post-colonial testimonio and Holocaust Studies) and literary genres (resistance literature and autobiography) undermine and reinforce one another? How does the urgent need to set the official record straight through acts of discursive resistance conflict with the difficulty of expressing the impact and effects of traumatic experiences? How does traumatic material impede the capacity to resist? And how does the urgency to resist drive the process of working-through and coming-to-terms with trauma? To be more culturally and historically specific: how do those in the Aboriginal community who write on cultural dispossession and survival deal with the tensions between testimonial literature as a form of resistance and as a form of working-through trauma. And, how do these tensions complicate the long undertaken project of (re-)culturation required to counteract the legacy of dispossession resulting from colonial impact?

While many psychoanalytic resources on trauma come from work in Holocaust Studies, it is important to be careful not to collapse them into one another because they often deal with different subject matter and address different audiences.
In order to think through these questions it is useful to return to the question of how Aboriginal testimonial life-writing differs from traditional autobiographical literature. This comparison is productive because both literary practices implicitly deal with the relationship between representation and identity, while testimonial life-writing additionally deals with issues surrounding traumatic experience and resistance. It is important to appreciate that there is a synergetic relationship between identity, representation, trauma and resistance. Such a correlation between identity and representation is a foundational concept in autobiographical theory and this synergetic relationship is maintained and broadened in testimonial literature because of the inclusion of material related to trauma and injustice. Testimonial life-writing is different from traditional autobiography for a variety of reasons over and above those already outlined because it is driven by a need to articulate individual and group trauma.

Due to the effects of traumatic experience, the relationship between representation and identity is profoundly more complicated in testimonial life-writing than the relationship between representation and identity found in traditional autobiography. The disruptions to memory and affectivity resulting from traumatic experience affect the capacity of testimonial narratives to “present the truth of a self as grasped by itself” (Lloyd 170). This means that testimonial life-writing’s presentation of identities and their reconstructed histories can be contrasted with the presentation of a static subjectivity in Cartesian reflection on the self and, by extension, with classic realist autobiography. Put simply, unlike traditional autobiography, testimonial life-writing presents identity in a crisis that results from the effects of injustice and/or traumatic experience.

Sir Ronald Wilson, who headed the development of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s Bringing them Home Report, commented on the testimonies that formed the oral history basis of the report as follows:
Grief and loss are the predominant themes of this report. Tenacity and survival are also acknowledged. It is no ordinary report. Much of its subject matter is so personal and intimate that ordinarily it would not be discussed. These matters have only been discussed with the Inquiry with great difficulty and much personal distress. The suffering and the courage of those who have told their stories inspire sensitivity and respect. (3)

And later:

In no sense has the Inquiry been ‘raking over the past’ for its own sake. The truth is that the past is very much with us today, in the continuing devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians. That devastation cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past and, having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation (3)

On testimonial life-writing (as distinguished from oral testimony), Rosamund Dalziell writes:

In memorialising the dead, Don’t Take Your Love to Town resembles other autobiographical texts addressing grief and loss, but also bears witness specifically to the high mortality rate among younger Aboriginal people. Langford Ginibi’s narrative counters the shame of being the object of racism primarily by expressing pride in her survival and in that of Aboriginal people. This work may be characterised as testimonio in that the narrator bears witness to suffering and loss. The narrative attests to endurance and resilience, and has been described as ‘the ultimate battler’s tale’. (131)

In Haunted by the Past, Langford Ginibi directly cites testimony from The Bringing them Home Report to make her case, demonstrating the frequent use of official documents in testimonial life-writing:

We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we
were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls, by caretakers who thought their mission [in life] [sic] was to eliminate us as Aboriginals. (6; Bringing them Home 12)

Later Langford Ginibi connects such collective Aboriginal trauma directly to her family’s trauma when she writes the following about her son:

Nobby was seeing a Dr Kordik [the naming of people frequently occurs in testimonies] at Polyclinic Mt Druitt to sort himself out. He was a psychiatrist. When a Koori person has a breakdown, it’s very easy for people to blame that person alone, because they do not understand that that person’s breakdown is part of a bigger historical picture. They never look at the dispossession, the having to conform to other people’s laws, rules and standards. Koori people have never been able to be themselves. We were forced to assimilate, and never had a choice. My son is fair, and looks like a whiteman, but he says, ‘I’m a black man wrapped up in a white skin!’ And all the trauma he’s had to cope with throughout his life has been bound up with this identity crisis that goes right back to when he was young. He never knew who he really was. (Haunted by the Past 48)

Langford Ginibi clearly ties her son’s traumatic experience to colonial dispossession and identifies the synergetic relationship between identity, trauma and dispossession.

Elsewhere, Langford Ginibi describes how she responds to her son’s trauma:

But now I said, ‘Listen, son. We must talk about our loved ones, and not just lock them away as though they never lived, cause their life had meaning and they really lived, you know. And we just can’t lock them out forever. Besides, talking about them and how they were in the family with us keeps them close to us. I know it still pains you if anyone mentions their names. But if you want me to write your story with you, you’ve gotta sit down and talk to me and tell me things you couldn’t tell me before.’ (26)

Langford Ginibi’s testimony attests to pain and to the difficulty of attesting to that pain, but also to the necessity in her view of articulating painful material, recording it, and
memorialising members of her family. The reader also witnesses her motivation to heal herself and her family in the process of narrating injustice in the testimonial life-story.

The same relationship between pain and truth in testimony has been identified in Morgan’s *My Place*:

Gladys Corrunna’s story, recounted in Morgan’s *My Place*, does demonstrate the kind of commitment to truth that characterises the discourse of testimony; involving a willingness to reveal experiences of shame: [Gladys Corruna says] ‘it hasn’t been an easy task, baring my soul. I’d rather have kept hidden things which have now seen the light of day. But, like everything else in my life, I knew I had to do it. I find I’m embarrassed sometimes by what I have told, but I know I cannot retract what has been written, it’s no longer mine.’ (Dalziell 130-31)

The traumatic experience resulting from colonial dispossession is the primary factor determining the testimonial nature of Aboriginal life-writing. Traumatic material affects the narrative devices the life-writer/testifier employs to construct his or her life-writing, the dominant of these devices being the testimonial mode. By extension, the expression of trauma affects the ways in which readers respond to and witness testimonial life-writing. For the Aboriginal authors examined in this study, life-writing is an engagement with post-colonial trauma aimed at coming-to-terms with that trauma. In order to come-to-terms with that trauma it is important to establish narrative control over the traumatic material and, as I will show, the process of establishing narrative control extends beyond the individual autobiographer/testifier to his or her cultural group. Thus, testimonial life-writing is a dual project of self/group re-personalisation and self/group political representation and, consequently, addresses issues of national significance that come to form part of national history — the contestation of history is history itself.

The effort to gain narrative control over traumatic experience is of a different order to other literary endeavours because it is the nature of traumatic experience to both
urgently demand and also to confound expression. This is distinct from other literary challenges to expression such as developing suspense, continuity or thematic coherence because, as I will argue below, it is a function of traumatic experience to disrupt representation regardless of the narrative mode employed to express it, be it oral, poetic, prosaic, colloquial, or theoretically technical. Yet the reader of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing continuously witnesses a unifying factor in this writing: the struggle (both conscious and unconscious) to represent post-colonial trauma in order that it be integrated into the sufferers’ lives and that of their culture and society. Post-colonial trauma functions for Aboriginal authors of testimonial life-writing as that which both resists and demands representation, and testimonial life-writing narratives are the records of their engagement with this tension.

In addition to being a series of acts aimed at establishing narrative control over post-colonial trauma, it may be constructively argued that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is simultaneously a form of post-colonial resistance. There is a profound connection between testimonial life-writing’s function as a process of working-through post-colonial trauma and its function as a literature of post-colonial resistance. As a form of resistance literature, testimonial life-writing is part of a larger process of re-personalisation, and both working-through and resistance aim to reinscribe subaltern agency by working against the de-personalising and de-familiarising effects of post-colonial traumatic experience and injustice. In this study, I aim to show that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing’s function as a process of re-personalisation is inseparable from its function as a written practice of resistance. Essential for this argument, in addition to the analysis of resistance literature, is an expansion of the resources of psychoanalytic theory regarding the experience of trauma away from their traditional focus on the individual towards their application to group and social analysis in a post-colonial
context. Instead of focusing on the individual, the process of gaining narrative control over post-colonial traumatic experience demands that psychoanalytic theory on the nature of trauma be extended beyond the individual and its potential for social and collective analysis be examined.

Earlier in the examination of group-oriented life-writing, it was argued that breaking down the overly individualistic separation between self and collective is a necessary step for maintaining philosophical rigor in theorising identity. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, in its voicing and narrativising of post-colonial traumatic memories, maintains such rigor by demonstrating that the re-emergence and re-personalisation of what has been effaced is of collective significance. In this way, individual re-personalisation, as seen in testimonial life-writing, is also a process of collective re-familiarisation because, as Langford Ginibi writes, it entails a journey “to the places we were born to find our extended families” (*My Bundjalung People* 1).

In emphasising the links between individuals and their cultural community, it is important to develop a complementary framework that places psychoanalytic insights in a collective and social context, a framework that contrasts with psychoanalytic theory’s traditional focus on the individual or family unit. We must, that is, demonstrate how psychoanalytic concepts extend beyond the individual and beyond therapy to social exegesis. Dominick LaCapra writes that he is interested in showing why psychoanalysis is misunderstood as merely a psychology of the individual, and its basic concepts are overly reduced when they are confined to a clinical context, however important the latter may be. [...] The processes referred to by the basic concepts of psychoanalysis undercut the opposition between individual and society insofar as they involve social individuals whose relative individuation or collective status should be a problem for inquiry and argument. (*Representing the Holocaust* 9)
Much like the way the co-extensivity between individuals and their cultural groups is foregrounded in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing (in contrast to traditional autobiography), the traditionally individual-oriented practice of psychoanalysis can be extended to articulate material of collective significance. In testimonial life-writing, the foregrounding of co-extensivity between individual and collective is due to the fact that testimonial life-writing “constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode” (Beverley, “Margin at the Centre” 29). This is because testimonial life-writing addresses issues of significance for the larger cultural community in a mode that does not “rescind [the ‘we’s’] status as the necessary other against which the tyrannical ‘I’ measures its existence” (Marin 53), as is the case in traditional autobiography. Testimonial life-writing has a strong collective dimension because it addresses the conditions of subalterneity, and subalterneity is, by definition in a post-colonial context, a group identity position imposed by colonialist practices.21 This is one reason why testimonial life-writing “evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (Beverley, “Margin at the Centre” 28). Psychoanalytic theory, used as a resource for collective rather than individual analysis, acknowledges that there is an interrelationship between the individual and community. Psychoanalytic theory, as a set of tools for specifying and working-through historical sites of anxiety, can improve the accuracy of post-colonial historicism, which, in turn, extends the scope of post-colonial literary theory.

Aboriginal post-colonial trauma is a direct consequence of the experience of colonialism. This is not to say that all traumatic material experienced in the lives of Aboriginal life-writers is the result of colonial impact. No doubt, the experience of trauma would have antecedents that predated colonial impact. Pre-colonial figurations of

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21 There is also the sense in which testimonial life-writing places a stronger emphasis on collectivity, in contrast to traditional autobiography, due to the different organisation of filial relationships in Aboriginal societies.
traumatic experiences would make an interesting study but it is well beyond the scope of this present study to do so. Furthermore, traumatic experience in Aboriginal communities is not necessarily related to the nexus of colonial power-effects and to argue so would be an overestimation of the degree to which colonial impact determines Aboriginal society. Regardless of these considerations, the testimonial life-writers examined in this study directly concern themselves with the destructive effects of colonialism on Aboriginal culture. Individual testimonial life-writings form part of a larger community-based process of writing-through post-colonial traumatic events and are best understood as part of a larger process of cultural articulation and consolidation. It is in this way that the work of re-personalisation becomes one of re-culturation and the process of cultural consolidation becomes one of resistance to neo-colonial practices. However, as I have been suggesting, to better understand testimonial life-writing’s potential for both re-personalisation and resistance, it is essential to have an understanding of its counterweight, trauma.

I have aimed to set out different responses along with my own position towards the complex interaction between representation, trauma and subjectivity that occurs in a style of writing that I place in the broader spectrum of resistant writing practices that write back to and challenge the ‘centre’. Not all testimonial life-writing always employs all of the features I and others attribute to it as a genre: different combinations of its generic features occur. Yet, the one feature common to all the cases of writing identified as testimonial in this study is the way they address a situation characterised by either injustice or trauma. Different writers will negotiate this terrain of injustice and trauma differently and, consequently, literary theorist’s readings of these texts will vary. Some, like Elzbieta Sklodowska (see Chapter Four), may emphasise the rhetorical

22 See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* for more on post-colonial resistance writing and the concept of the ‘centre’.
strategies and devices of testimonial texts while others, like Dori Laub (see Chapter Three), may focus on guarding against too great an emphasis on the rhetorical and discursive features of testimonial texts in an effort to aid the process of establishing narrative and affective control over traumatic material. I suggest the way in which a reader interprets testimonial life-writing ought to be guided by the strategies the narrator of the testimonial text employs for challenging injustice and writing-through trauma. This is because the tension between what can and what cannot yet be phrased that exists within the on-going process of redressing “the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim” involves changing contexts that demand different responses from testifiers and readers (Lyotard 9).

Theories of writing-through trauma, as a process of working to phrase what has not yet been phrased, have not received enough attention as a resource for dealing with the legacy of colonial dispossession. This is due perhaps to the difficulty contemporary theory is experiencing in “envisioning an effective process of working-through in a posttraumatic context in which agency cannot simply be assumed but must be reconstituted” (LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust 194). This difficulty may itself be a consequence of the difficulty confronting contemporary theory in linking the benefits of deconstructive critiques of agency with the benefits of affirming agency in political and therapeutic contexts. Furthermore, the reconstitution of agency in a political sense requires the reconstitution of agency in a therapeutic sense. The reconstitution of agency cannot simply rely on political empowerment because the effects of trauma continue to undermine effective public agency. The complexities of toxic memory, debilitating traumatic affects and transgenerational trauma must be addressed to deal adequately with the political dimensions of agency. Consequently, this study will now explore in more
detail the complexity of the relationship between trauma, resistance and representation through a more detailed focus on theories of trauma.
Chapter 3

Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Trauma Theory

The convergence of testimonial life-writing as a form of political resistance with testimonial life-writing as a form of writing-through post-colonial trauma encourages an alliance between post-colonial critical theory and psychoanalytic theory. Beverley, one of the most prominent voices in debate on testimonial discourse, asks in his essay “The Real Thing”, “[d]o testimonial narrators such as Rigoberta Menchú have an unconscious, and would a psychoanalytic reading of their narratives be useful? The answer on both scores, it seems to me, should be yes” (268). Such a positive view about a coalition between psychoanalytic and post-colonial theory is only briefly outlined in Beverley’s essay. He discusses how Menchú’s testimonial can be read “as an Oedipal bildungsroman built around the working-through of an Elektra complex [. . .]” (268). It is not the aim of this study to employ notions such as the Oedipal or Elektra complexes or any other Freudian archetypes as a way of understanding Aboriginal life-writing, because I contend that they are, like most over-enthusiastic deployments of theory, over-deterministic meta-narratives with little relevance to the life-writing examined here. #23 Rather, this study will make use of the more mobile concepts found in psychoanalytic theory, such as working-through, acting-out, resistance, denial, repression,#24 and to a lesser extent, a reformed version of the concepts the Real, the Imaginary and the

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#23 See Chapter Five for further discussion on forms of psychoanalytic theory this study distinguishes itself from.

#24 There is another deployment of psychoanalytic concepts that must be distinguished from the use of those concepts in this study. The use of such concepts has become popularised through the ‘self-help’ industry, most publicly in the American daytime chat-show Oprah. This industry’s constant use of concepts like ‘working-through’, ‘acting-out’, ‘denial’ and ‘repression’ corrupts the use of such concepts. The most significant problem, apart from the banalisation of these concepts, is the underlying goal to establish simplistic redemptive narratives that are closely related to religious redemption. In this context, for every assertion that ‘to name it is to control it’ there is the assertion that ‘to name it is to create it’, a tactic that operates to ensure perpetual confession for ‘good’ television.
Symbolic, with the intention of providing more specific analyses than psychoanalytic complexes allow.\textsuperscript{25}

The post-colonial project of describing the mechanisms by which post-colonialised subjects reinscribe their agency and register their voice is compatible with the psychoanalytic concern with working-through the disruptions to identity resulting from traumatic experience. Both work towards a reinscription and retrieval of identity, which involves preserving the tension between avoiding restrictive identities/nationalisms and the crippling of identities/nationalisms in epistemological and ontological aporia. Psychoanalytic concepts like working-through, acting-out, resistance, denial and repression can be usefully employed in post-colonial studies as theoretical tools for dealing with the cluster of problems associated with post-colonial cultural articulation and re-emergence, cross-cultural dialogue, and the relationship between history (often effaced and traumatic) and the present.

By extension, the compatibility of post-colonial and psychoanalytic theory is useful for combating that particular deployment of post-structuralist thought which emphasises aporia, impasse and infinite regression. There is a tendency in post-structuralist thought to oppose

- total-mastery, full ego-identity, ‘totalitarian’ social integration, and radically positive transcedence [. . . to] acting out repetition compulsions with endless fragmentation, aporias, and double-binds [. . .]. Sometimes evident as well is a perspective fixated on failed transcendence or irremediable loss in which any mode of reconstruction or renewal is seen as objectionably recuperative or naive. (LaCapra, History and Memory 46)

\textsuperscript{25} Deleuze and Guattari have been frequently used in post-colonial theory, particularly the concept of the rhizome (see bibliographical references to Ashcroft, Brydon and Tiffin, and Gugelberger). However, as I will show later in this study, more of their theoretical repertoire is applicable to post-colonial conditions, particularly their framework of schizo-analysis.
Donna Haraway warns against the risks of such oppositions when she argues that “[r]elativism and totalization are both ‘god-tricks’ promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully [. . .]”. Both relativism and totalization deny “partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well” (191). LaCapra’s and Haraway’s interest in the liminal is also what drives post-colonial theorists Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin when they write, “we [do not] mean to suggest that an uncontaminated alternative space exists outside imperialist discourse from which the subaltern may speak. Instead, we are suggesting that even dominant discursive systems are diverse and multiply fractured, opening themselves to different levers in different times and places” (26). The point that there is no uncontaminated space from which the subaltern may speak also applies to dominant discursive systems because they too are fractured. In criticising the idea of an uncontaminated space and, by extension, full-identity and mastery, Brydon and Tiffin do not become “fixated on failed transcendence or irremediable loss [. . .]” (LaCapra, History and Memory 46), but rather focus on specific instances of the registration of post-colonial agency, that is, “different levers in different times and spaces” (Brydon and Tiffin 26). I will argue that some such levers in the post-colonial context are psychoanalytic concepts developed for understanding and dealing with traumatic experience. However, before their capacity for interpretation in the post-colonial context can be explored, it is necessary to outline how trauma has been conceived more generally.

**Trauma and Latency**

I have so far concentrated on testimonial life-writing’s potential as a method for effectively transforming post-colonial traumatic memory into narrative and social history. However, general trauma theory argues, over and above its specific employment in the
post-colonial context, that traumatic material repeatedly resists language’s efforts to capture, control and communicate it. One of the reasons for this resistance is the effect of *latency*.

Sigmund Freud argued that what is unique to the experience of trauma is that it is not fully witnessed by the victim as it occurs. In fact, the experience of trauma could be defined as an event that invades the subject to a degree that the ability to witness that event is incapacitated. As Freud argues in “Moses and Monotheism”, witnessing is disrupted due to a latency inherent in the experience of trauma. Freud writes:

It may happen that a man who has experienced some frightful accident — a railway collision, for instance — leaves the scene of the event apparently uninjured. In the course of the next few weeks, however, he develops a number of severe psychical and motor symptoms which can only be traced to his shock, the concussion or whatever else it was. He now has a ‘traumatic neurosis’. It is quite unintelligible — that is to say, a new — fact. The time that has passed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is described as the ‘incubation period’ [ . . . it is this] characteristic that might be described as ‘latency’. (309-10)

Latency is a useful concept for understanding some important features of testimonial life-writing’s process of writing-through post-colonial trauma. In narratives that testify to trauma, we see repeated confrontation and struggle with traumatic material. This is because traumatic memory eludes narrativisation and, contradictively, demands to be articulated and integrated into the life-story of the testifier. Traumatic experience is difficult to contain and control in narrative form and continually re-enacts itself, irrupting into the narrator’s life until a sense of integration is achieved. It is the complexities of this not knowing, coupled with the urgency to know, that Aboriginal testimonial writing elicits, and which psychoanalytic theory can to some extent explicate. The life-writer/testifier is the site of this ‘unknowing’ and the site of the desire to know, and in the
project of representing him or her self the life-writer/testifier embodies the complexity of this contradiction.

The traumatic material addressed in testimony directly affects the temporal structure of the retrospective narrative characteristic of most life-writing. Traumatic material does so because it disrupts the effective operation of memory in the present and, thereby, the ability to narrativise the past. In this sense, testifying to traumatic experience is a strongly present-centred activity rather than simply a retrospective one because it aims to establish narrative control over traumatic material that directly disrupts the very capacity to narrativise. Dori Laub argues that the process of testifying to trauma is an effort to tell the story for the first time. While problems of memory are at times acknowledged in traditional autobiography, the vagaries of memory that it may contain are not often the direct result of an injustice and its attendant traumas, which is often the case in testimonial life-writing. In traditional autobiography, the present-centred “uncertainties, false starts [and] momentariness” are smoothed out in the retrospective narrative (Pascal 5).

The latency inherent in the experience of trauma creates difficulties in representing and knowing that experience. It is this ongoing negotiation with an undisclosed but actively toxic past that structures the present (it is both present and non-present) that leads Cathy Caruth to ask and answer: “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of survival” (Unclaimed Experience 7). The legacy of trauma is the trauma itself, and testimonial life-writing’s negotiation with trauma is the record of living through trauma. Trauma defies being witnessed, but simultaneously demands to be
witnessed due to its repetitive intrusion into the life of the subject. For example, Langford Ginibi’s journey to her birth place, the Bundjalung country, is one of discovery and recovery in which she confronts the effects of her people’s collective trauma, that is, the disruptiveness effected by colonial dispossession and its continual presence in their survival. It is for this reason that it becomes important in reading testimonial life-writing to trace “the movement of [. . .] not knowing within the very language of [. . .] telling” (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 37).

Such tracing is found in Morgan’s My Place, in which a great portion of the book is concerned with working-through family history in a project of establishing identity. This novel is filled with figures of detection because, apart from aiming to create suspense for the reader, it is Morgan’s particular performance of “the movement of [. . .] not knowing within the very language of [. . .] telling” (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 37). Morgan writes:

On my return from Sydney, Mum met me at the airport. ‘What did you find out?’ was her first eager question.

‘Quite a lot’, I replied. ‘I’m really glad I went. I never found out anything startling, but I think sometimes you learn more from what people don’t tell you than from what they do’. (170)

Likewise, after Morgan listens to her uncle Arthur’s life-story, she writes, “[h]owever, in an odd way, we also experienced a sense of loss. We were suddenly much more aware of how little we knew about Nan and about the history and experiences of our own family. We were now desperate to learn more, but there appeared to be few obvious leads left” (214). Morgan’s My Place is essentially the story of her and her family’s journeys (physical and psychical) to discover their place. As such, it is a project of identity formation concerned with, like Langford Ginibi’s My Bundjalung People, establishing
non-metaphorical facts, such as who Morgan’s grandfather is, who her relations are, where they came from and the ways in which they lived.

Before traumatic experiences can be narrativised in order to establish some degree of narrative and affective control over them (thus articulating what was not comprehended as it was experienced (latency)), Laub argues that it is necessary to establish ‘non-metaphorical facts’. These consist of non-metaphorical statements that form the foundation of the history that will be developed throughout the testimony. These ‘facts’ are, as the authors frequently state, intended by the authors to be read as true in order that the testimony is effective both politically and therapeutically. In Aboriginal life-writing a great deal of effort is spent presenting non-metaphorical facts. For example, Langford Ginibi begins her testimony by establishing when her father and uncle came to northern New South Wales, who they worked for, as well as detailing the family tree. Langford Ginibi lists the Aboriginal families who moved to the mission area and which particular clan groups within the larger Bundjalung group they belonged to (My Bundjalung People 35-37). Facts such as the amount of land allocated by the Australian Government to each family are noted, as well as the names of the white mission managers who played a role in the mission, specific racist policies targeting Aborigines are identified, and the names of Boys’ Homes and prisons that have impacted on Aboriginal families are listed. A particularly interesting example of establishing non-metaphorical facts is the description of sacred sites in Langford Ginibi’s Bundjalung country.

Brigitta Olubas, writing on Wilson Harris, states:

There is also the way that literary texts interrelate with, interpenetrate the landscape. The effect of this is to textualise the landscape, but this textualising takes place within a broad historical context, involving myth,

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26 The need to establish ‘facts’ for the successful re-externalisation of the traumatic event appears to contradict the point that the construction of a referent erases the reality of the traumatic event. However, to establish ‘facts’ does not mean that one exhausts the meaning of the event. Rather, it is a point from which to begin to explore that event.
eclipsed discourses — for example Aztec astrology and astronomy — the reading of those myths, and the conscious and/or unconscious reading and re-visioning of those myths at later times. (“Wilson Harris’s Essays” 72-73)

This quotation alerts us to the fact that the differences between Aboriginal and settler textualisations of the landscape are important because they determine how the landscape is experienced. It is through Langford Ginibi’s presentation of the Aboriginal visioning of the Aboriginal relationship with the landscape, based on cultural and oral history, that the reinscription of Aboriginal cultural identity occurs. The facts lie not in an ultimate truth but in the cultural cosmology that generates and orders the signifying systems governing culture and land. The displacement of such codes is linked to the inscription of new colonial codes that in the Australian context functioned to circumscribe Aboriginal experience of the land within fringe-dwellings, camps, missions, children’s homes and prisons. The fact is that Aboriginal cosmologies were historically displaced and denied from occupying traditional Aboriginal lands. The testimonial project of reinscribing them demands acknowledgment by non-Aboriginals of Aboriginal cosmologies as legitimate so that the process of cultural recovery through the reinscription of cultural and narrative control over the land is effective. Langford Ginibi’s testimonial reinscription of Aboriginal sacred sites on to northern New South Wales is a process of working-through the tensions of two or more (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) textualisations of the landscape and what is at stake in this process of working-through is cultural identity itself.

The project of establishing the history of the dispossession of Aboriginal textualisations of the land as fact is prerequisite for the project of re-personalisation and re-culturation because it forms a basis for the “re-externalization — and thus historicization — of the [traumatic, colonial] event” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 70).
Dominant sites of significance in Langford Ginibi’s country such as Wollumbin, Dooloomi, Nymbunji, Julbootherlgoom and Dirrawong are central to the Bundjalung people’s cultural practices and personal identity. While Langford Ginibi has spent most of her life living in the largest urban centre in Australia, these cultural sites structure her life and are a source of traditional cultural meaning. Moreover, her familiarity with them also works to establish the narrative authority of the text for the reader. This is not to say that Langford Ginibi’s culture is not that of a city-dweller because her experiences of the city also form a large part of her life-story and life-writing. It is only to say that traditional cultural cosmology is an essential part of her identity and it is the project of reinforcing this cultural identity that leads to her repeated trips from Sydney to northern New South Wales.

Langford Ginibi introduces her testimonial *My Bundjalung People* thus:

I wanted to travel back to the country where I was born to find my roots. It had been forty-eight years since I had left the mission at Box Ridge and although I was excited, I still had some qualms about it. You see, the memories I had of that place were very painful and I was frightened that my visit would bring them back to haunt me.

In our own Koori way, we all want to go back to where we came from originally, it is like a magnet that keeps drawing us to the places where we were born to find our extended families. (*My Bundjalung People* 1)

The meaning sought in identity is sourced and fixed to a particular place and its history. This is the case because, as previously stated, they (culturally significant sites) form a “medium of re-externalization — and thus historicization — of the [traumatic, colonial] event” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 70), and their reinscription is a necessary process for countering identity-eroding forces that are experienced as a threat to personal and cultural
Similarly to Langford Ginibi, Jackie Huggins describes her and her mother’s life-writing project, *Auntie Rita*, thus:

Returning to my mother’s born country as she refers to it complemented my own sense of identity and belonging, and my pride in this. It was important that together we make this trip as she had been insisting for quite some time, pining for her homelands. We shared a special furthering of our mother-daughter bond during this time, although we argued incessantly about nothing as usual or, as she calls it, ‘fighting with our tongues’. I began to gain an insight into and understanding of her obvious attachment and relationship to her country and how our people had cared for this place way before the Royal Geographic Society and park rangers ever clapped eyes on it. The way my mother moved around, kissed the earth and said her prayers will have a lasting effect on my soul and memory because she was paying homage and respect to her ancestors who had passed on long ago but whose presence we could both intensely feel.

The land of my mother and my maternal grandmother is my land, too. It will be passed down to my children and successive generations, spiritually, in the manner that has been carried on for thousands of years. Fate dictates that nothing will ever change this. As Rita’s daughter, I not only share the celebration and the pain of her experience but also the land from which we were created. (13)

Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart provide a good explanation for why the relationship between traumatic experience and narrative is so close. They distinguish between the operations of narrative memory and traumatic memory, describing the difference as follows: “in contrast to narrative memory, which is a social act, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable. Traumatic memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody [. . .] it is a solitary activity. In contrast, ordinary memory fundamentally serves a social function [. . .]” (163). This distinction between traumatic memory and narrative memory is helpful for understanding the process of establishing non-metaphorical facts in the project of working-through post-colonial trauma in
testimonial life-writing. The distinction is required to understand the importance of writing, literary and otherwise, to the project of transforming traumatic experiences into social and historical narrative. The process of transforming traumatic memory into social narrative addresses the problem of latency through creating a narrative of what was not fully witnessed as it occurred. This is vital to the subject for establishing narrative and affective control because in the process of transforming traumatic memory into social memory the traumatic material becomes for the first time an object that can be articulated and worked-through. In this way, traumatic material becomes an object that can be shared socially and, thus, it becomes, in contrast to traumatic memory, more flexible and variable because it is communicable. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, the ability to articulate an object of historical trauma so that it is socially recognised provides further control over traumatic material and, when that trauma is itself a result of, say, institutionalised racism, the process of articulating that trauma is central to challenging and transforming those institutions.

Van der Kolk’s and van der Hart’s distinction also identifies the way traumatic memory resists translation into social narratives and thus social history. The narrativisation of traumatic memory transforms the isolating and identity-eroding traumatic experience into social and historical narratives. This works against the alienating effects that the experience of trauma has on individuals by emphasising the social significance of trauma. Langford Ginibi touches on this issue when she describes the process of jointly writing her son’s (Nobby’s) life-story *Haunted by the Past*:

It was very painful for Nobby to talk about these difficult times for this book. As well as wanting to forget the years he was incarcerated, he’d locked the memory of his brother’s and sister’s deaths away in a very secret part of his heart. He’d never allow any of us to speak their names.
He’d say, ‘Don’t get talkin about them, Mum. They’re at peace now, resting. I can’t stand you talking about them.’ And he’d walk away.

But now I said, ‘Listen, son. We must talk about our loved ones, and not just lock them away as though they never lived, cause their life had meaning and they really lived, you know. And we just can’t lock them out forever. Besides, talking about them and how they were in the family with us keeps them close to us. I know it still pains you if anyone mentions their names. But if you want me to write your story with you, you’ve gotta sit down and talk to me and tell me things you couldn’t tell me before.’

So when we started talking together I felt it was bringing us closer together. You see, I never really knew what it was like from his side of the prison wall, and he never knew what it was like from our side. Telling the story together made for better understanding.

I learnt about Nobby’s feelings about death of loved family members, this incarceration, the whole corruption of the police and dicks — the so-called ‘keepers of the laws’ who turned out to be more corrupt than the people they were putting in jail. (26-27)

Individuals who experience the disruptions to narrative that trauma causes become isolated from their families, their cultural group, and broader society by virtue of not being able to articulate what they are experiencing. To say this is not to advocate overly normative familial and social behaviour, but rather to say that the disruptions to these relationships are identified by testimonial life-writers as painful and out of their control. Often, the sense of personal isolation is defined by Langford Ginibi, Rita Huggins and other Aboriginal testifiers as cultural isolation, wherein their cultural heritage is denigrated and effaced, as in the many instances of being the target of racist abuse recounted within Aboriginal life-writing.

Traumatic memory resists transformation into social narratives and thus social history. It is “inflexible and invariable”, resisting integration into a narrative by which the individual might gain some control over the traumatic material. This resistance to
integration is characteristically countered by Aboriginal life-writers through repetitive and partially successful confrontations with the traumatic material in an effort to master it. However, this does not mean that traumatic memory cannot be transformed into narrative memory. Transformation is precisely the role testimonial life-writing plays as a literature of re-personalisation and resistance or, in stressing the collective dimension, re-familiarisation and re-culturation.

In Aboriginal testimonials the reader witnesses a process by which traumatic material is constructed into social narrative and social memory. This is the crux of Langford Ginibi’s *My Bundjalung People* because the process of narrativising her traumatic past underpins both her project of cultural resistance and re-personalisation. Throughout Langford Ginibi’s writings there is a continual return to sites of trauma in her and her people’s past. In her many journeys from Sydney to northern New South Wales there are numerous sites of trauma that have profound significance for her and her people: gaols (Long Bay); boys’ homes (Kinchella); missions (Box Ridge and Main Camp, darkly tagged Mein Kampf by the local Aboriginal people); and sites where massacres have taken place (Evans Head and Myall Creek). Though most of these institutions no longer operate in their old roles and/or hold no visible signs of their historical significance, each is still what Laura Marks calls

a fossil in that it embodies the traces of events whose representation has been buried. When [. . . fossils] cannot be connected to a present situation, they become [and Marks quotes Deleuze here] 'strangely active fossils, radioactive, inexplicable in the present where they surface, and all the more harmful and autonomous'. Such traces are inscrutable on their own, but when we cut through the different layers and connect them, they tell a story. (253)
Langford Ginibi’s testimonials perform precisely this function, reclaiming her Bundjalung people’s and Australia’s history as she travels north connecting the sites of significance for her people to tell her people’s story.

Langford Ginibi writes, immediately following her page one statement of the importance of discovery her roots cited above, that

[i]n the past we have been divided by the dominant culture in Australia, and it is a very strong urge that keeps pulling us back to our ‘real belongin’’ places: the mission places or wherever we were born. I needed to go back home, and I guess so do a lot of Kooris like me, to establish our links with our extended families and our past, because that is where the truth is. (My Bundjalung People 1)

In this passage, Langford Ginibi identifies the connection between the process of re-personalisation and resistance by showing that it was the dominant culture in Australia that divided, that is, de-familiarised, her community. Her project is to return to her past to find ‘the truth’ and her ‘roots’. This necessarily entails recovering a history that counters the history of the dominant culture. As such, Langford Ginibi’s project exemplifies how post-colonial theory’s interest in testimony as a literature of resistance is compatible with psychoanalytic theory’s interest in testimony as a process of re-personalisation.

The traumatic material resulting from cultural dispossession uncannily returns to disrupt the Aboriginal testifier’s life and an understanding of that material continues to escape the testifier who lives in its grip and unwittingly experiences its ceaseless repetitions and re-enactments. Laub writes that “[t]he traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (“Bearing Witness” 69). An illustration of this is provided when Langford Ginibi discovers the testimony of Mrs Janet Gomes, recorded by T. J. Olive, concerning
the Evans Head Massacre of 1842. Gomes says, “[w]hite fellas started firing shots, there was no way out. They [the Aborigines] were chased across the river from the Bundjalung reserve; women with babies, little ones, swam the river; the others we never saw them anymore, they were all crying, there was this island in the river there . . . later they called it Weeping Island” (My Bundjalung People 77). In response to hearing this testimony, Langford Ginibi writes, “[w]e drove for a long while before we spoke. I think we were both stunned by the fact that we could be confronted with people telling us about these massacres as if they had happened only yesterday, even though I knew the two tribal elders mentioned, Granny Gomes and Granny Cowan, were dead” (78). Describing other reactions to reading records of the Evans Head Massacre, Langford Ginibi writes, “I read on, every line torturing me” and, “I read on, feeling like I was being kicked in the guts” (75). In these passages the reader witnesses Langford Ginibi attesting to her speechlessness, as well as the temporal disruptions the confrontation with traumatic material effects. The force with which the traumatic material returns from the past and irrupts in the present shocks Langford Ginibi. Furthermore, we see that the borders between one individual’s experience of trauma and another individual’s experience of trauma are removed by the communality of the event: Gomes’s story is Langford Ginibi’s story. Relatedly, the distinction between the crisis itself and the trauma of surviving the crisis is broken down, highlighting the way both disrupt time and continue to be significant. In addition, the double nature of testifying to trauma is conveyed, for instance, Gomes’s testimony has the power to evoke the traumatic event for Langford Ginibi, but Langford Ginibi can only attest to language’s failure to adequately register the traumatic material when she strives to convey it to the reader. This situation exemplifies the way in which the complexity of traumatic memory necessitates repeated confrontation with a traumatic past in an effort to integrate it into narrative, social and historical
memory. This irruption and interpolation of Aboriginal trauma into the testimonial text is fundamental to the radical breakdown of traditional categories that testimonial writing effects, such as self/other distinctions, demarcations between the past and the present, speech and silence, and the disciplined generic structuring of the traditional life-story.

**Theoretical Psychoanalysis: the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary**

At this point, I want to review general psychoanalytic theory before employing and challenging its potential applications. To repeat, Beverley asks, “[d]o testimonial narrators such as Rigoberta Menchú have an unconscious, and would a psychoanalytic reading of their narratives be useful? The answer on both scores, it seems to me, should be yes” (“The Real Thing” 268). What is Beverley inviting when he encourages a psychoanalytic reading? There are wide-ranging divergences between psychoanalytic theories, for example, between Freud and Jacques Lacan and feminist psychoanalytic theory (Elizabeth Grosz), between psychoanalysis and other psychotherapies. As should be clear, this study is primarily concerned with understanding the effects of traumatic experience on the testifier and, because of this focus, psychoanalytic theory will be explored only where it is relevant to trauma. As noted in the preceding chapter, trauma is a key concept in psychoanalytic theory on subjectivity. Subjectivity is of course a key concept in all psychoanalytic theory, yet this study is primarily concerned with those theorists who have explicitly discussed subjectivity in relation to trauma. I am going to begin by revisiting Lacan for two reasons: first, his schematisation of subjectivity has been very influential in literary studies; and, secondly, his concept of the Real has, I argue, something to offer for theorising traumatic experience.\(^2^7\) Other theorists discussed

\(^{27}\) It has been argued that although the Real is a useful concept, the Real does not exist. Contrary to the view that the Real does not exist, I argue, following Beverley, that “there are different Reals for different Symbolics”. Rather than figuring the Real as an abstracted, unlocatable concept, I attempt to anchor the Real as a particular Other to a particular Symbolic system.
in this section on trauma and subjectivity are Beverley, LaCapra, Elizabeth Grosz, Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Zizek.

Lacan’s theoretical framework, like the anti-realist arguments discussed in Chapter One, employs Saussurean linguistics to discuss the formation of subjectivity. Lacan argues that basic rules of language construction are also the rules governing the construction of subjectivity. In demonstrating this, traditional Lacanian analysis argues that the formation of the subject passes through three stages: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The first stage, that of the Real, precedes any sense of identity or subjectivity and the ‘subject’ is in a condition of complete undifferentiation. This stage can be considered as an unordered corporeality that exists before any development of sensory motor control or of a nascent sense of subjectivity. The stage at which a nascent form of subjectivity arises is the Imaginary stage, and it is at this stage that there begins to develop a basic sense of the self/other distinction. During the Imaginary stage, the ‘subject’ develops a visual image of itself (the imago) that locates and orders the subject in space before it has any physical control over space. This stage is the first movement away from the affective immediacy of lived experience into that of the representational domain of language. The complete separation of these two functions, the Real and the Symbolic, is effected by the child’s entry into the Symbolic via Oedipal triangulation. The Symbolic is the stage upon and within which the nascent subject attains the speaking subject position of ‘I’. Thus, to understand Lacan’s schema of the formation of the subject, it is essential to refer to the rules of language because they are central to and coterminous with the three stages through which the subject emerges.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) What is crucial to note here is that such a myth of the emergence of the subject effaces specificity, particularly, cultural specificity. It needs to be asked how an Aboriginal Symbolic is different from a colonising Symbolic, although not in an attempt to make a crude binary. This is explored in more detail in Chapter Five.
Like the anti-realists (Belsey) and the post-structuralists (de Man), Lacan inverts the Cartesian conception of subjectivity by asserting that the subject is created in language, wherein “[t]he subject cannot be considered the agent of speech; it is (through) the Other (i.e. the unconscious) that language speaks the subject. The subject is the effect of discourse, no longer its cause” (Grosz, Sexual Subversions 98). Just as the subject is generated and lost in/as language, so too is the referent generated and lost in/as the signifier: the laws of language are also the laws that constitute and govern the subject. To illustrate: Lacan substitutes the Freudian terms ‘condensation’ and ‘displacement’ (key psychoanalytic concepts employed to describe the formation of subjectivity) for the linguistic terms ‘metonymy’ and ‘metaphor’. In this way, he establishes the psychoanalytic subject as a linguistic subject and, thereby, psychoanalysis as compatible with the analysis of language in general and texts in particular. The predominance of representational systems in the formation of the subject is illustrated in Lacan’s theory of the development of the unconscious.

Lacan takes his account of the development of the unconscious from Freud, who argues that drives become attached to a memory or affect which, in turn, comes to signify that drive. It signifies the drive and also diffuses the power of the drive because it stands in its place only as a trace. Consequently, we see that the moment the drive is registered psychically it becomes subordinate to representational systems in an act of ‘primal repression’. The unconscious then develops by attracting other signs into itself that are similar to the primary significations. Similarities between signs are determined by the operations of metonymy and metaphor, which are thus the primary operations that form the unconscious. The important thing to take from this account is the acknowledgment of the centrality of representational and linguistic systems in the most fundamental formations of the subject.
As stated, Lacan’s use of metaphor and metonymy replace Freud’s concepts of condensation and displacement respectively. Metaphor is the substitution of one term for another whereby the overlaying of one term for another functions like condensation. Metaphorical condensation occurs when one signifier gets pushed below the bar by the weight of its substitute, which then comes to take the place of the original symptom. Metaphor “flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain” (Lacan 157). Metaphor, as Lacan himself suggests, can be understood as the vertical axis of language. Metonymy also functions by substitution and is equivalent with displacement. In contrast to metaphor, where one term is buried beneath another, metonymy exchanges terms that are contiguous. This means that both operations can function at once, sliding across a ‘plane of metonymy’ that can be understood as the horizontal axis of language. For Lacan, these rules of language generate and order both the unconscious and the law of the Symbolic.

The Real and Trauma

The concept of the Real was first developed by Lacan and has been used by literary theorists to discuss problems relating to representation and the question of what escapes, if indeed anything can escape, representation. The Real is figured as the Other to representational systems and therefore corresponds with the figuration of trauma as the unspeakable. As I will argue below, the operations of the Real have striking similarities to the operations of traumatic experience. The concept of the Real has been central to psychoanalytic arguments (from Lacan to Grosz) regarding the relation between representation and subjectivity and, consequently, I argue that theorisations of the Real
provide some useful resources for discussing trauma in relation to representations that strive to establish narrative and affective control over traumatic material.

How we conceptualise the Real (that which is Other to representation) and, in this study, how I conceptualise trauma as the Real, necessarily affects what we can say about representational systems. This is because what we determine to be outside of representation, to be the limits of representation, necessarily determines what can be represented. Traumatic material manifests itself as a tension between what can and cannot be represented in speech or writing. This tension at best creates a state of disruption and, at worst, a state of dangerous crisis for the individual. Such disruption to (or crisis of) identity comes about because traumatic material (bad memories, fears, cognitive confusions) structures an individual’s experience, yet the individual has slight control over that material. Traumatic experience determines the painful manner in which an identity experiences the world, but that identity has little recourse to alter that pain.

While traumatic experience structures the traumatised identity, that identity is not properly integrated with that structuring force. The traumatised identity is an identity at odds with itself. The process of reconciling disruptive traumatic material within the subject is a process of establishing narrative and affective control. It might be said that some identities would benefit from disruption and that an overly comfortable identity may be an overly normativised one. However, traumatic disruption is of an order of experience where the survival of the individual (not the survival of a rather odd conception of the subject) is threatened. Traumatic material is often expressed as potentially fatal violence towards oneself and others. Efforts of the person suffering from trauma to establish an integrated identity are repeatedly undermined and a functioning identity cannot be established because a personal life-story cannot be established until the traumatic material itself has been narrativised.
The concept of the Real is useful for understanding post-colonial conditions and the processes of cultural retrieval and reinscription. In the following passage Beverley introduces the concept of the Real as a tool for understanding post-colonial processes, writing that “the Real is not the same thing as the concept we are perhaps more comfortable using, the ‘reality effect’, as it is used in Barthesian or Althusserian criticism. When [...] the blind man crashes against the stone post, [...] he is] experiencing the Real, not a reality effect” (“The Real Thing” 274). Thus, the Real needs to be distinguished from the terms ‘realism’, ‘reality’, and the ‘reality effect’ as discussed in Chapter One, although it is related to the notion of ‘reality’ discussed in the examination of realism. The three latter terms are to be distinguished from the Real in that they are operations of the Symbolic, whereas the Real is pre-Symbolic. As we saw in Chapter One, realism is problematic because it effaces ‘reality’s’ constructedness, and so the term ‘reality effect’ is employed in anti-realist criticism to identify that writing which aims to be read as faithfully presenting reality. In this manner, the ‘reality effect’ is an operation of the Symbolic, that is, an operation of the dominant signifying codes that, by virtue of being dominant, generate a repressed Other. The terms ‘reality-effect’ and the Real are opposites in that the ‘reality-effect’ is part of the dominant Symbolic that determines and suppresses the Real. Thus, the Real does not exist as an entity in itself but is better envisaged as that which is Other to the Symbolic, where the Symbolic is a specific and dominant configuration of the signifying process. As Lacan would argue, it is the figurative operations of metonymy and metaphor that generate the Real.

Beverley highlights a connection between the Lacanian Real and post-colonialism, writing:

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29 Lacan’s ‘Real’ and the ‘reality’ of realism differ because Lacan’s use of the term specifically identifies a traumatic otherness. However, they operate similarly because they both are the referent that language seeks to represent.
the Real is, like the subaltern itself, with which it is connected both conceptually and ‘really,’ not an ontological category but a relational one, historically, socially, and psychically specific. Just as there are different strokes for different folks, one might say there are different Reals for different Symbolics. As subjects our (non)access to the Real is necessarily through the Symbolic. (“The Real Thing” 273)

The connection between the Real and post-colonial ‘reality’ is a consequence of the fact that colonial practices, in their function as mechanisms of discursive control, generate extra-discursive silences; active silences that render some subjects mute. Not all colonial practice operates in the same way and, thus, the re-emergence of the Real in a post-colonial context takes different forms in, say, Australian and Canadian settler/invader cultures than it does in South African Apartheid. As Beverley puts it, “there are different Reals for different Symbolics” (273). Beverley continues to tie together the Real, subalternity and testimonial life-writing when he writes that “[testimonio] was the Real, the voice of the body in pain, of the disappeared, of the losers in the rush to marketize [neo-colonise], that demystified the false utopian discourse of neoliberalism, its claims to have finally reconciled history and society” (281). Here we see that the Real, as testimonio, is generated by the “utopian discourse of neoliberalism”, that is, the Symbolic as neoliberal ideology. Beverley has provided a starting point for understanding the convergence of post-colonial and psychoanalytic theory in his use of the Real because, for Beverley, there is an equivalence between the Real and the experience of trauma.

It is also important to note that when Lacan uses the term ‘stages’ to denote the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic, he not only uses it to designate a moment or series of moments in time, but also to signify a place, for example, a stadium or a theatrical stage. Thus, these stages are not only teleological (moving from one to the other) but also omnipresent (active at any one time) — the Real is not confined to the past. The notion of stages, in conjunction with Lacan’s use of Saussurean linguistics, is deeply influential
in Lacan’s deconstruction of a self-knowing Cartesian-like subjectivity. As we saw in Chapter One, Saussurean linguistics has been employed to show “that the elements composing the sign, as well as the sign itself, can only have identity by virtue of their pure difference” (Grosz, Sexual Subversions 93). Precisely the same operation is employed in de Man’s deconstruction of the autobiographical subject, that is, the referent is subsumed to the signs that attest to it.30

To mark the special significance of the Real, Beverley restates Lacan’s use of the word ‘thing’ and shows that Lacan’s analysis of the original German term das Ding was used, following Freud, to distinguish das Ding from the German term die Sache, which designates “‘a product of industry and of human action as governed by language’ in the sense of a created or linguistically elaborated object [. . .]” (“The Real Thing” 266). In contrast, das Ding “designates a traumatic otherness that cannot be represented or incorporated by the subject in language [. . .]” (266). Earlier we saw that de Man employed the trope prosopopeia to describe this opposition between the linguistic object and ineffable ‘otherness’. Lacan’s Real performs an almost identical operation as de Man’s referent, in that both elude representation or are displaced by Symbolic representation, or as Kristeva figures the condition, “I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (Kristeva qtd. in Yúdice 27).

In a post-colonial context we could rephrase this to say that the colonialist symbolic abjects itself within the same motion through which it establishes itself. In a post-colonial context, Kristeva’s point is dubious because it renders self-privileging as abjection. It suggests that the establishment of an abjected post-colonial subaltern, as experienced by living embodied persons, is a form of self-abjection. Kristeva’s abjected object is the unrealised possibilities available for subjective becoming, in distinction from

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30 The reader will also remember that the term ‘classic realism’ was used by post-Saussurean linguistics to designate writing that created an effect or illusion of reality. In Lacan’s case, the ‘reality effect’ creates an illusion of a subject that is distinct from the language that attests to it.
determining forces such as racist discourses that construct selves and worlds. In this sense, the criticism of the referent as the denied Other is based on a retreat into the self as abstracted possibility. De Man’s and Kristeva’s post-structuralist move to, and emphasis on, the defaced referent and the ‘always already’ effaced Real instantiates epistemological impasse. LaCapra identifies the potentially crippling consequences of such a move:

Theory itself in this context may take necessary critical and self-critical inquiry — including inquiry into one’s own assumptions — and autonomize or fetishize it until it becomes an externally predictable but internally compelling process of disarticulation, disorientation, destabilization, dismemberment, and so forth. The discursive symptom of this understanding of theory is the repeated, moth-to-flame movement toward the paradox, aporia, or impasse that ‘sublimely’ brings language to a halt and renders impossible (or situates as helplessly naive) any form of recovery or viable agency. (Representing the Holocaust 192)

LaCapra suggests that although we can concede that traumatic material behaves like the Real, or a he sometimes puts it, the ‘sublime’, there is still the potential for symbolic purchase of it. The Real, as repressed traumatic material, as the Other to the dominant Symbolic, uncannily returns and disrupts the Symbolic, similar to the way traumatic material continually disrupts the subject who lives in its grip.

Again: “The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality” [. . .]” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 69); and, das Ding denotes “a traumatic otherness that cannot be represented or incorporated by the subject in language [. . .]” (“The Real Thing” 266). Thus, the irruption of the Real, in its otherness and irreducibility, is similar to the experience of trauma. Post-colonial trauma, as experienced

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31 The Real and the Sublime are related concepts in that they are beyond the scope of representation.

32 It is important to consider how trauma relates to Lyotard’s notion of the differend. The language gap between different cultures that divests the plaintiff of the means to represent his or her self is further complicated by traumatic material because even if one had an adequate cross-cultural means of representing oneself, the traumatic material remains difficult to access. Thus, trauma is another order of the differend.
by the dispossessed Other to the colonial Symbolic, even if historically repressed, disrupts that Symbolic, its legacies, and similar neo-colonial formations. It undermines the claims to normativity of colonial ideology. Often such disruption is literary.

Testimonial life-writing is structured around the intrusion of the Real which, according to Lacan, as cited by Beverley, is “that which resists symbolization absolutely” (266). As my argument above suggests, I am in disagreement with Beverley regarding the Real’s absolute resistance to symbolisation because I agree with him that there are different Reals for different Symbolics. Just as there are differences between cultural Symbolics and dynamic changes within them, and because there are different Reals for different Symbolics, it follows that the Real shifts with shifts in the Symbolic.

The experience of trauma corresponds with the Real in its defiance to be spoken, but unlike the Real, it manifests itself over and above the sign of absence — *prosopopeia*. The Real supposedly can never be spoken because it is purely asymptotic, whereas trauma defies being spoken while simultaneously manifesting itself through repeated affective and linguistic disruptions. This is what distinguishes my analysis of post-colonial subaltern agency from deconstructive positions like that of de Man’s or Kristeva’s which state, to use Foucault as an example, that while “‘the ‘other’ is ‘that absence in the interior from which the work paradoxically erects itself” (Foucault 66), it does not exist” (Yúdice 22-23). In contrast, subaltern life-writing’s negotiation with traumatic post-colonial material that resists representation is not a “‘representation’ [. . .] born of the exclusion of the ‘limiting otherness’ [. . .] but, rather, by dialogue and interaction with it” (Yúdice 27).

Yúdice further defines the implicit difference between the practices of subaltern life-writers and what he terms ‘hegemonic postmodernity’, that is, infinitely regressing, impasse-enacting deconstructions, writing:

33 The *nahual* is “[t]he word given to the double, the alter-ego, be it an animal or any other living thing, which, according to Indian belief, all human beings possess. There is a relationship between the *nahual* and a person’s personality” (Menchú 250).
Again, in contrast with the hegemonic postmodern text, in which the ‘I’ is expelled as vomit, in which the body transforms into vomit, that which is expelled, separating it from nature (mother and father), thus making dialogue impossible — ’I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself’ (Kristeva, 1982, 3) — Menchú’s text is, rather, a testimonial of incorporation, embodiment. (27)

The same problematic theoretical position that states that the Other is that which it is impossible to have dialogue with can be seen in the work of Lacan’s scholarly disciple, Zizek. In discussing trauma and the Real, LaCapra describes Zizek’s position thus: “The ‘sublime object of ideology’ itself emerges as the Lacanian Real — an unsymbolizable limit or unrepresentable kernel of experience. Indeed, in Zizek the sublime seems to involve fixation on a radically ambivalent transvaluation of trauma as the universal hole in Being or the abstractly negative marker of castration” (Representing the Holocaust 206). Furthermore, LaCapra argues that Zizek identifies Lacan “with Hegel as the negative dialectician who subverts speculative synthesis or wholeness (Aufhebung) and validates alienation and infinite desire as the horizon of thought and action” (206).

If traumatic material can function like the Lacanian Real in the way that it eludes representation, as I have argued, and if, in contrast to the Lacanian Real, it is often successfully articulated and narrativised in testimonial writing, I maintain that we can say considerably more about it than Lacan’s schema allows theorists to do. This means that the deconstruction of voice can be contested. In contrast to Lacan’s notion of das Ding as “a traumatic otherness that cannot be represented or incorporated by the subject in language [. . .]” (“The Real Thing” 266), testimonial life-writing, as a process of working-through trauma, demonstrates that it is possible to transform traumatic memory into narrative memory. Trauma, as the closest approximation of the Real, can be spoken and, I think that, following LaCapra, “instead of becoming compulsively fixated on or symptomatically reinforcing impasses, it [testimonial narrative] would engage a process
of mourning that would attempt, however self-questioningly and haltingly, to specify its haunting objects and (even if only symbolically) to give them a ‘proper’ burial’ (Representing the Holocaust 193). The difference between impasse-enacting deployments of post-structuralism and subaltern negotiation with post-colonial trauma is as follows: post-structuralism contends that the Real is always negatively inscribed through narrative and, thereby, the self cannot represent itself without effacing possibilities of itself; post-colonial negotiation with trauma suggests that the Real, or the closest approximation of it, traumatic experience, can be productively represented in language and, in fact, demands to be represented in language in order for it to be integrated into the individual’s life-story and cease being a disruptive force. Such representation is an act of survival. The former position dismantles and risks crippling subaltern agency and the latter affirms agency, demonstrating the effectiveness of its position by the therapeutic benefits provided by narrativisations of trauma that are claimed by testimonial life-writers. Evidence of this success is that testimonial life-writing comes to form an important and empowering written history for the testifier/writer, their family and cultural community and, in the case of contemporary Australia, an important contribution to the vocabulary of debates on national identity and history.

In testimonial life-writing’s claim to represent the Real/trauma, it aligns itself with the mimetic practice of realism discussed in Chapter One. But, while testimonial life-writing may explicitly align itself with realism, it need not necessarily be categorised as such. In the case of Aboriginal life-writing, testimonial life-writing might be categorised as a variety of projects aimed at historical object-specification within a process of mourning. Nevertheless, object-specification is a process that is never entirely completed because, as Lyotard explains, “that what remains to be phrased exceeds what we can
presently phrase” (13). Testimonial life-writing is not best described by the broad brush strokes of realism or impasse-oriented deconstructions, but is better described as a literary practice oriented towards specifying particular historical events that by their nature are both transparent and opaque, phraseable and beyond phrasing.

The existence of a desire to reduce traumatic post-colonial events to theoretical categories may be the result of confusing what LaCapra calls historical trauma and structural trauma. He writes that it is important to argue for a problematic distinction between structural or existential trauma and historical trauma that enables one to pose the problem of relations between the two. [. . .] It is deceptive to reduce, or transfer the qualities of, one dimension of trauma to the other, to generalise structural trauma so that it absorbs historical trauma, thereby rendering all references to the latter merely illustrative, homogeneous, allusive, and perhaps equivocal, or, on the contrary, to ‘explain’ all post-traumatic, extreme, uncanny phenomena and responses as exclusively caused by particular events or contexts. Indeed the problem of specificity in analysis and criticism may be formulated in terms of the need to explore the problematic relations between structural and historical trauma without reducing one to the other. (History and Memory 47-48)

LaCapra provides evidence of the desire to collapse historical trauma into structural trauma with reference to Zizek, citing him thus:

All the different attempts to attach this phenomenon [concentration camps] to a concrete image (‘Holocaust’, ‘Gulag’ . . .), to reduce it to a product of a concrete social order (Fascism, Stalinism . . .) — what are they if not so many attempts to elude the fact that we are dealing here with the ‘real’ of our civilization which returns as the same traumatic kernel in all social systems? (qtd. in LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust 206 fn. 2)

LaCapra comments on this: “One should also not forget that these various historical cases have different valences and pose specific problems [. . .]. Zizek’s stance often seems to
be that of the high-altitude theorist obsessed with the Real and its putative effects” (206 fn. 2). There is damage to be done in collapsing historically specific traumatic events into instances of the structural operations of trauma because the complexity of the experience is concealed by generalisations.

In discussing trauma with colleagues and students I have found most people fall into one of the two following positions: one that argues that traumatic experiences may be understood as ahistorical instances of traumatic structures and that different historical instances of trauma are commensurate; and, in opposition, the view that historical instances of traumatic experience are always incommensurable. Such an opposition presents an either/or conception of the problem that may ultimately limit understanding of historically specific trauma, such as post-colonial Aboriginal trauma. For example, not only do Apartheid and settler/invader forms of colonialisation differ, they both differ from the Holocaust or a Sudanese war, and all differ from the killing fields of Cambodia. Furthermore, the individual experience of trauma within each of these tragedies differs one from another. However, it is important to note that the functions of structural trauma are not necessarily at odds with historical trauma. As with my discussion of different Reals for different Symbolics, the analysis of structural trauma benefits from historically specific analysis.

The relationship between Holocaust Studies and the cultural memory work underway in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a productive one for addressing issues of cross-cultural commensurability and incommensurability with regard to trauma. As I have shown, the theoretical work on cultural memory and trauma has been most extensively undertaken in Holocaust Studies. This is the reason this study has employed many of the insights and the vocabulary of Holocaust Studies to think through processes that are involved in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. It also explains why some of the
most dominant public voices in the debate on the traumas of Australia’s Stolen Generation employ a theoretical framework based on Holocaust Studies. For instance, Inga Clendinnen’s *Reading the Holocaust* and Robert Manne’s *The Culture of Forgetting* precede their public engagement with the Stolen Generations debate and provide them with a vocabulary with which to articulate the issues involved. As I discuss below, some of the issues that have demonstrated cross-cultural significance are the importance of, and the disruption to, personal memory and, by extension, cultural memory, the destructive effects of trauma, inter-generational toxicity, the importance of telling stories that need to be told, and the ethical significance of listening to those stories.

However, it should be asked, as Gillian Whitlock does: is there damage to be done by articulating Aboriginal testimonials of trauma through a structural vocabulary template of Holocaust discourse? Whitlock writes:

As I have argued, the geographies of Holocaust work on cultural memory have been fundamentally important in the emergence of a response to [Aboriginal] testimonies. [. . .] But the Holocaust template doesn’t quite capture an element of the anxiety induced by these testimonies, and why discursive justice is so difficult to produce here. Why do we, the second person, the witness, the non-indigenous element in the transaction, why do we have to be told so didactically, so repetitively, what our response should be? (207)

Whitlock is not suggesting that Holocaust discourse is not relevant or useful for discussing Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, but is drawing attention to the cross-cultural differences between the two. This study, as part of an overarching theoretical approach, argues that it is important to employ both tactics, that is, draw ever closer historical linkages while simultaneously underlining difference. The difference Whitlock is interested in is the position of the addressee in Aboriginal autobiography. Whitlock writes:
Holocaust testimony draws all of us into a horrified questioning of what it means to be human. In response to this, there is almost always some kind of compensatory movement in that we can install the Nazi as the Other, and so displace our immediate responsibility. We can imagine that we might refuse to become that figure, that third person who is the object of the testimony, the perpetrator of the crime [. . . whereas in] interracial narratives there is a quite different movement [. . . wherein] the second person, who is the witness and the narratee, is called upon to witness her own complicity and implication in the loss and suffering which is finally being spoken. (209)

I address the particular concerns related to interracial relationality and witness positions in Chapter Four. At this point, it is important to realise that cross-cultural differences exist not only at the level of the addressee, but also in the very event and experience of trauma itself.

To complement this interest in difference, it is also useful to investigate similarities that exist between supposedly incommensurable historical instances of trauma, for instance, in the disruption of temporality (in the phenomena of latency and flashback), the disruption of narrative control and cosmological security, in inter-generational toxicity, the role of memory in the process of coming-to-terms with trauma, and the importance given to the recognition of trauma by the wider community. It seems clear that the subjective experience of trauma cannot be reduced to being either absolutely cross-culturally commensurate or incommensurate. An instance of commensurability is seen in the way Australia’s *Bringing them Home Report* was developed. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) recommended to the Inquiry that

‘Support be provided for the collection and culturally appropriate presentation of the stories with the approval of those who experienced separation policies’ (submission 684 page 18). Link-Up (NSW) called for the establishment of an Aboriginal Oral History Archive. This Archive would be ‘modelled on the Shoah Foundation set up to record the oral
histories of Jewish victims of the Nazi holocaust’ and would ‘fund and facilitate the collection of oral histories of Aboriginal survivors of our holocaust’ (submission 186). (Bringing them Home 21)

Here we see Australia’s peak Indigenous body borrowing the language of and forms of memorialisation from Jewish responses to the Holocaust. In addition to the similarities I have outlined above, the commensurability between the Jewish and Aboriginal responses to trauma arises in part from the active, performative modelling of one experience on another.

Writing on inter-personal relationality, Paul Redding writes, “[a]s mutually presupposing but differently embodied and located self-consciousnesses, [. . . subjects] are linked by recognition, a relation that maintains difference as essential; they are not submerged within some overarching supermind” (125). One can expand this insight into the cross-cultural relationality of trauma: traumatic events are events connected neither by an overarching supermind nor absolutely separate, but are rather intersubjective and relational. Just as subjects are generated within the relational systems of their communities as well as cross-culturally, so too does traumatic experience range across a spectrum of similarity and difference. Thus LaCapra invites exploration of the problematic relation between structural and historical trauma and, by extension, between the commensurate and incommensurate. To repeat, the best approach is not to emphasise structural trauma or historical trauma, incommensurability or commensurability, realist transparency or the opacity of impasse-oriented deconstruction, but rather to emphasise phenomena that lie between these extremes.

To present different material as being either commensurate or incommensurate, transparent or opaque, A or B, is a recurring and illogical tendency I have encountered in
discussing the theory in this study.\footnote{A similar tactic is used in banalised versions of deconstruction, such as hegemonic postmodernism, wherein criticism consists solely of demonstrating that A is not A.} If one assumes A (commensurability) and evidence proves this assumption to be false, there is a tendency to assume B (incommensurability): if not A then B. Writing on examples in trauma theory of the ‘if not A then B’ kind, where A is a false assumption to begin with, LaCapra argues that trauma theory itself may be correlated with two complementary ways of responding to trauma that may mistakenly be seen as alternatives. One response involves denial or repression, for example, in a redemptive, fetishistic narrative that excludes or marginalizes trauma through a teleological story that projectively presents values and wishes as viably realized in the facts, typically through a progressive, developmental process. (\textit{Representing the Holocaust} 192)

With regard to the complicit and opposite tendency, LaCapra writes:

The second and complementary response tends intentionally or unintentionally to aggravate trauma in a largely symptomatic fashion. This may be done through a construction of all history (or at least all modern history) as trauma and an insistence that there is no alternative to symptomatic acting-out and the repetition compulsion other than an imaginary, illusory hope for totalization, full closure, and redemptive meaning. (193)

Thus there is a tendency in theorising trauma to simulate typical either/or logical responses to trauma itself. Often, trauma theory either argues for redemptive narratives that mirror victims’ desires for redemption from traumatic experience, or argues that any attempt for narrative or affective control results in another traumatising impasse — a position that mirrors the destructive acting-out witnessed in victims of trauma. LaCapra discusses the proposition of an extreme version of totalization [. . . which serves] as a foil to its radical undoing. An extreme and compulsively repeated undoing may nonetheless bear witness to the attraction of totalization and remain within

an ‘all-or-nothing’ frame of reference. For the extreme reaction to an assumption that everything ultimately makes sense may be the assumption that ultimately nothing makes sense. Or, through an overly generalized theory of romantic irony, one may believe that one always remains suspended between sense and non-sense in a manner that stymies all possible judgment and action. (191)

The structure of traditional autobiography is in a certain way geared to effect redemptive narratives. This is due in part to the strong split between the narrator and protagonist whereby the narrative voice retrospectively bestows an order that never existed for the protagonist. The desire for redemptive closure is also found in testimonial life-writing that works-through traumatic injustices. Relevant to both traditional autobiography and testimonial life-writing is LaCapra’s insight into the desire for closure:

Ideologically, the achievement of full identity or closure is the telos of totalization, and the full redemption of meaning and value is the very essence of discourse. Mourning in this sense is a process that succeeds to such an extent that it negates or overcomes itself, and (to paraphrase Hegel) the wounds of the past are healed without leaving any scars. (191)

The either/or approach in responses to trauma, the desire for full identity or the complete collapse of identity, is a strategy available to both traditional autobiographical and testimonial life-writing.

However, to better understand the complex narrative engagements with trauma found in testimonial life-writing one must forego the either/or approaches outlined above and instead focus on more subtle interstitial approaches. Responding to the need for these latter approaches, LaCapra writes, “[o]ne may nonetheless insist on a third sense of theory related to Freud’s notion of working-through” (193). A desire for a third way of theory and practice can be found in the work of various theorists, such as the work of feminist stand-point theorists Haraway and Sandra Harding, in Deleuze and Guattari, and in Redding’s reading of Hegelian dialectics — each explored in more detail below.
LaCapra also identifies this desire for a third way in Jacques Derrida’s notion of ‘generalised displacement’ when he writes that a certain displacement “must accompany the reversal of hierarchically arranged binary opposites if one is not to remain entirely within their frame of reference” (Representing the Holocaust 193 fn.18). Reading testimonial life-writing’s negotiation of traumatic material requires such displacement and the psychoanalytic practice of working-through can be such a ‘third’ way of dealing with it.

**Working-Through/Writing-Through Trauma**

The above discussion of testimonial life-writing outlined two dominant and flawed strategies for grappling with traumatic experience: redemptive narratives and impasse-enacting narratives. I have also argued that effective post-colonial historicism requires an ability for both historical specificity and cross-cultural reach. Such an approach is necessary to account for the incommensurability between different historical contexts while maintaining openness to the structural commensurability between cross-cultural experiences of trauma. The concepts of structural trauma, historical trauma, redemptive narratives and impasse-enacting narratives, and historical and cultural incommensurability were discussed. While I examined the above three oppositions separately, they are connected in important ways in testimonial life-writing. Structural trauma is complicit with a comparative historicism that argues for the commensurability between different historical instances of trauma, while historical trauma emphasises the incommensurability of different historical instances of trauma. Both strategies are capable of emphasising either redemptive narratives or impasse-enacting narratives and to avoid this we must balance the work of historical object-specification with that comparative work that highlights structural similarities.
Central to the project of specifying historical objects of trauma that disrupt cultural agency is the concept of working-through, or as I sometimes term it in the case of testimonial life-writing, writing-through. Working-through functions to defetishise the compulsion towards narrative impasse and aims to establish narrative control over traumatic material. Working-through requires a distance between the present and the past and “involves the attempt to acquire some perspective on experience without denying its claims or indeed its compulsive force” (LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust 200). LaCapra writes:

working-through, as it relates both to the rebuilding of lives and to the elaboration of a critical historiography, requires the effort to achieve critical distance on experience through a comparison of experiences and through a reconstruction of larger contexts that help to inform and perhaps to transform experience. One’s sense of one’s own problems may change to the extent one comes to see their relations both to the experience of others and to a larger set of problems, some components of which may escape one’s purview. (200)

Langford Ginibi’s writing is a case in point with regard to the building up of larger contexts in the process of writing-through post-colonial trauma. As discussed in Chapter Two, Langford Ginibi’s writing begins to take on a significantly stronger testimonial style after the writing and publication of her more autobiographical text Don’t Take Your Love to Town. The vicissitudes of her personal life increasingly come to be connected to larger cultural and racial experiences. There is a strong sense that the process of working-through her personal life and its hardships is the cause of the increasing politicisation in her later books. The titles of her books suggest a widening out of her concerns. From a personal title like Don’t Take Your Love to Town, her later books are titled My Bundjalung People and Real Deadly (which deals with Aboriginal specific humour). Real Deadly aims to highlight the significance of Aboriginal humour in countering the
corrosive effects of cultural dispossession. These later titles evoke her place in her Aboriginal community. Her writing moves from being distinctly autobiographical to distinctly testimonial in tone. A later publication, *Haunted by the Past*, focuses on her son’s struggles with crime and the justice system, explicitly connecting his struggles with cultural dispossession. In the narrative reconstruction of her life the reader witnesses “the effort to achieve critical distance on experience through a comparison of experiences and through a reconstruction of larger contexts that help to inform and perhaps to transform experience” (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 200).

Repetition is central to the process of establishing wider contexts for interpreting personal experience in writing-through post-colonial trauma. To illustrate: large textual chunks in Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town, My Bundjalung People* and *Haunted By the Past* deal with the same material. A sense of finalisation regarding particular political and traumatic issues is not comprehensively achieved, rather there are repeated approaches to deal with the same traumatic events. LaCapra offers an insight into why this is the case:

> the radical ambivalence of repetition — its ‘undecidability’ if you prefer — implies the possible role of counter-vailing forces that may not entirely heal wounds but that allow mediated ways of surviving survival — forces such as mourning itself, where grief is repeated in reduced, normatively controlled, and socially supported form. (*Representing the Holocaust* 199)

Repeated approaches towards traumatic material allow a space for the person experiencing traumatic material to gain narrative and affective control over that material. As I have noted, traumatic material continues to irrupt into the sufferer’s life and is a destructive force. Repetition in a “normatively controlled, and socially supported form” (199), like that of testimonial life-writing narratives, allows greater purchase on traumatic material.
Testimonial life-writing becomes progressively more politicised through the process of repeated confrontation with personally traumatic material, as illustrated in Langford Ginibi’s life-writing. Her writing moves from an engagement with the personal to an engagement with her cultural group to the nation as a whole, and back again, in a dialectical movement that broadens the stories’ significance. LaCapra, citing J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, writes: “[i]ndeed, for them ‘working-through might be defined as that process which is liable to halt the repetitive insistence characteristic of unconscious formations by bringing these into relation with the subject’s personality as a whole’” (Representing the Holocaust 209). Furthermore, as I have been arguing for the social, rather than strictly personal, significance of psychoanalytic theory, the process of writing-through trauma in testimonial life-writing not only brings traumatic material “into relation with the subject’s personality as a whole”, but also brings it into relation with the nation as a whole (209). In a post-colonial context the process of writing-through trauma is a process of specifying the material that needs to be reinscribed in post-colonial cultures. Importantly, it is also effective in countering neo-colonial and racist practices.

A similar process of repetitive engagement with traumatic material is seen in My Place in which Sally Morgan’s grandmother initially resists discussing her Aboriginality because she is ashamed of it but progressively attains a sense of pride in it. For instance, the different colours of the grandmother, mother and grandchildren are a source of shame in the family. When Morgan’s grandmother first describes herself as black, it is done in an emotionally pained manner. The narrator, ostensibly Morgan, writes, “[s]he [Morgan’s grandmother] lifted up her arm and thumped her clenched fist hard on the kitchen table. ‘You bloody kids don’t want me, you want a bloody white grandmother,

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35 In this instance, I would simply define ‘whole’ as not too strictly demarcated.
I’m black. Do you hear, black, black, black!’ With that, Nan pushed back her chair and hurried out to her room” (97). And later:

Mum and I had small conversations about the past, but they weren’t really informative, because we tended to cover the same ground. Sometimes, Mum would try and get Nan to talk. One day, I heard Nan shout, ‘You’re always goin’ on about the past these days, Glad. I’m sick of it. It makes me sick in here’, she pointed to her chest. ‘My brain’s no good, Glad, I can’t ’member!’ (145)

Such shame is transferred to the younger generations of the family. When Morgan discovers through her sister Jill that she is not Indian but Aboriginal, Morgan identifies her family’s sense of shame in being Aboriginal. Jill describes her family in derogatory and racist terms, a consequence of internalising white racist views, an internalisation that is at conflict with their Aboriginal identity. Morgan quotes her sister: “‘You still don’t understand, do you’, Jill groaned in disbelief. ‘It’s a terrible thing to be Aboriginal. Nobody wants to know you [. . .]. You can be Indian, Dutch, Italian, anything, but not Aboriginal! I suppose it’s all right for someone like you, you don’t care what people think. You don’t need anyone, but I do!’” (98). Yet, through Morgan’s insistence throughout the text on confronting and acknowledging the family’s Aboriginality, there are moments of breakthrough in the process of working-through in which the acknowledgement of Aboriginality as an act of object specification leads to a sense of pride in Aboriginal identity:

About this time, Nan’s favourite word became Nyoongah. She’d heard it used on a television report and had taken an instant liking to it. To Nan, anyone dark was now Nyoongah. Africans, Burmese, American Negroes were all Nyoongahs. She identified with them. In a sense, they were her people, because they shared the common bond of blackness and the oppression that, for so long, that [sic] colour had brought. It was only a small change, but it was a beginning.
In a strange sort of way, my life had new purpose because of that. (138)
Likewise, the family’s journey up the West Australian coast to connect with their Aboriginality is an act of working-through a sense of lost identity. Morgan recounts the journey on which she was accompanied by her mother, husband and children. On meeting two older Aboriginal women, Topsy and Nancy, it takes some time for these women to identify the connection between them all. In fact, they grew up with Morgan’s grandmother and great aunt. They tell Morgan about her aunt and their early life at Corunna Downs. The discovery of this information about Morgan’s family history is an instance of working-through important and difficult material connected with Aboriginal identity. Morgan writes:

I pointed to the photo containing Nanna as a young girl and got them to look at it carefully. Suddenly, there was rapid talking in Balgoo. I couldn’t understand a word, but I knew there was excitement in the air. Topsy and Nancy were now very anxious about the whole thing.

Finally, Gladys turned to me with tears in her eyes and said, ‘If I had have known Daisy’s sister was Wonguynon, there would have been no problem’.

‘Who’s Wonguynon?’ I asked.

‘That’s Lilla’s [Morgan’s great aunt] Aboriginal name. We only knew her by Wonguynon. [. . .] She was related to my father. I am your relation, too’.

Topsy and Nancy began to cry. Soon, we were all hugging. Gladys and I had tears in our eyes, but we managed not to break down. [. . .] ‘They lived as one family unit in those days’, Gladys explained. ‘They lived as a family group with Daisy and Lily and Annie. This makes them very close to you. They are your family. Daisy was sister to them. They call her sister, they love her as a sister.’

By this time, we were all just managing to hold ourselves together. I tried not to look at Gladys as she explained things, because I was trying
to keep a tight lid on my emotions. It wasn’t that I would have minded crying, it was just that I knew if I began, I wouldn’t be able to stop. It was the only way to cope.

Later, we retraced our steps back down through the Reserve [. . .]. By the time we reached the other end of the Reserve, we’d been hugged and patted and cried over, and told not to forget and to come back.

An old full-blood lady whispered to me ‘You don’t know what it means, no one comes back. You don’t know what it means that you, with light skin, want to own us.’

We had lumps in our throats the size of tomatoes, then. I wanted desperately to tell her how much it meant to us that they would own us. My mouth wouldn’t open. I just hugged her and tried not to sob.

We were all so grateful to Gladys for the kind way she helped us through. Without her, we wouldn’t have been able to understand a word. Our lives had been so enriched in the past few days. We wondered if we could contain any more. (228-29)

Finally, on their return to Perth, a different and more complete sense of their relationship to their own Aboriginality is experienced:

That afternoon, we reluctantly left for Perth. None of us wanted to go, Paul [Morgan’s husband] included. He’d been raised in the North and loved it. We were reluctant to return and pick up the threads of our old lives. We were different people, now. What had begun as a tentative search for knowledge had grown into a spiritual and emotional pilgrimage. We had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it.

Mum, in particular, had been very deeply affected by the whole trip.

‘To think I nearly missed all this. All my life, I’ve only been half a person. I don’t think I really realised how much of me was missing until I came North. Thank God you’re stubborn, Sally.’

We all laughed and then, settling back, retreated into our own thoughts. There was much to think about. Much to come to terms with. I knew Mum, like me, was thinking about Nan. We viewed her differently, now. We had more insight into her bitterness. And more then anything,
we wanted her to change, to be proud of what she was. We’d seen so much of her and ourselves in the people we’d met. We belonged, now.

We wanted her to belong, too. (233-34)

A similar sense of completion is identified when on leaving Morgan’s uncle Arthur’s wife’s house, Morgan writes, “We felt very full inside when we left. It was like all the little pieces of a huge jigsaw were finally fitting together” (232).

Of course, there is always a risk involved in working-through post-colonial trauma of falling into totalising redemptive narratives or impasse-oriented racial and cultural divisions. The failure to work-through racial and cultural conflict is described by LaCapra in a psychoanalytic sense:

Here deceptive transfiguration is necessarily supplemented if not displaced by what may be an equally deceptive disfiguration or disarticulation. This reaction becomes particularly compelling in a posttraumatic context, particularly when the object of mourning is concealed or foreclosed and the process of mourning is arrested by (or even identified with) continual melancholy and the acting out of a repetition compulsion. (Representing the Holocaust 192)

However, writing on the benefits and risks of working-through trauma and by extension of testimonial life-writing, LaCapra suggests that

the nonfetishistic narrative that resists ideology would involve an active acknowledgment and to some extent an acting out of trauma with the irredeemable losses it brings, and it would indicate its own implication in repetitive processes it cannot entirely transcend. But it would also attempt to conjoin trauma with the possibility of retrieval of desirable aspects of the past that might be of some use in counteracting trauma’s extreme effects and in rebuilding individual and social life. (199)

In the language of Holocaust Studies:

One may agree with the view that the Holocaust is, in a manner that would have to be further differentiated, ‘a communal wound that cannot heal.’
But does this view entail that countervailing tendencies in the lives of victims — and by seeming implication in modernity in general — are merely constitutive of a surface life or murmur that is somehow less authentic than what is argued to lie beneath? (196)

Similarly, I argue for a non-totalising view in the manner of LaCapra, one that posits a mutable array of presences and silences, different Realts for different Symbolics, and is capable of identifying the different successes and failures involved in working-through post-colonial trauma. LaCapra cites Phillip K.’s (a testifier for the Fortunoff Video Archive of Holocaust Testimonies at Yale) testimony, which argues that there are as many ways of surviving survival as there have people to survive.36 LaCapra writes that Phillip K.’s observation “points to the danger of homogenizing or overgeneralizing about the experience of victims and survivors. I think one may also argue that it indicates the danger of massive generalizations about modernity and points instead to the importance of careful comparative history” (197). LaCapra further argues that Lawrence Langer (an important theorist of Holocaust trauma) “may go too far in the opposite yet complementary direction” towards salvationist, heroic narratives of surviving the Holocaust (197).37 In place of either extreme, LaCapra argues that values have to a significant extent been jeopardized by trauma and evacuated by banalization, and they may be invoked as mere clichés or rhetorical topoi by those who do not believe in them and may not be shocked when they are radically distorted or transgressed. In this respect, there is a need for a discourse on values that is not purely transcendent or detached from social and historical inquiry but critically related to problems of empirical research as well as to the rebuilding of agency,

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36 Phillip K.’s last name is withheld by the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies to protect his anonymity.

37 LaCapra criticises Langer for his ‘strategy of reversal’, his ‘opposite yet complementary’ approach to redemptive narratives. LaCapra writes: “He [Langer] explicitly states that historical investigation of the Holocaust ‘cannot promote life’” (Representing the Holocaust 198). However, on page 202, LaCapra cites Langer to illustrate that Langer often holds a less absolute position.
which is required for the situational transcendence of existing relations toward more desirable possibilities. (201-202)

As LaCapra argues:

One may nonetheless suggest that certain discursive movements [. . .] indicate how one might approach the issue of working-through in its relation to acting-out. A principal conceptual means would be the relation of the Imaginary to the Symbolic (with the notion of the Real defetishized to allow for other possibilities in the response to trauma). (207-208)

I contend that testimonial life-writing and its theoretical explication in this chapter can be viewed as such a discursive movement. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing defetishises the Real through its faith in the political and therapeutic efficacy of the writing process, while this study theoretically defetishises the Real by insisting on its specificity and thereby the potential for it to be leveraged in different ways at different times. The relationship between working-through and acting-out in testimony and theory provides the opportunity to extend vocabularies and imaginaries for responding to post-colonial trauma. In the next chapter I explore how the performativity and off-setting of working-through and acting-out, in relation to working-through episodes of derealisation, may be therapeutically and intellectually valuable. However, there is always the risk of re-traumatising subjects by off-setting working-through with acting-out and by not providing adequate conceptual tools through which to specify traumatic objects and establish narrative control over the traumatic material being activated. Yet, when such object-specification is achieved, a sense of closure may result.

However, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and the theory of this study is not interested in working-through post-colonial trauma simply to close it off. It is also about opening out traumatic experiences on to the world and through doing so enriching Aboriginality and tracing the progressions and regressions of social imaginaries. Closure, as employed in this study, does not signify the presentation of a final story. Indeed,
testimonial life-writing, rather than partaking in the practice of closure, presents the disjunctions between what can be phrased now and what is yet to be phrased; a disjunction that creates a dynamic identity rather than a rigid and illusory authenticity. The concept of closure is better understood as the increased descriptive and exegetic power of language whereby what was not phrased but needed to be phrased can now be phrased. Closure is concerned with object-specification, not conclusiveness.

The concept of trauma itself is an example of a concept/object that has proved a useful tool for thinking through the effects of colonial dispossession and has increased the vocabulary available to Aboriginal peoples for better articulating their experiences. Trauma is also a useful concept for literary critics who wish to better explicate the processes involved in testimonials. What once was not phrased and which now can be better phrased assists in establishing narrative control and thereby identity. Such concepts ought not to be understood as simply prescriptive but rather as useful points from which to develop important conversations. The openness, rather than closedness, of this conception of language-work is also shared by the affective dimensions of trauma-work because affect is also open to productive rearrangement and rearticulation in ways that are richer than currently experienced. One ought not work-through traumatic material to close it off and finish with it but rather work to better articulate it and in so doing transform that traumatic material. Moreover, transforming traumatic material through better object-specification creates a vocabulary that holds traces of its path to articulation, its history of linguistic and affective development. This concept of specificity is addressed in more detail in Chapter Five.
Chapter 4

Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Recognition Theory

The preceding chapter discussed different strategies for writing-through traumatic material and explored how Aboriginal life-writing is useful for establishing narrative and affective control over post-colonial traumatic material. As noted earlier, there are “three separate, distinct levels of witnessing [. . .]: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (Laub 75). The previous chapter focussed on the first and third of these three levels of witnessing trauma. This chapter sets out to further explore these three forms of witnessing through analysing various recognitive structures, specifically focussing on Laub’s second category of witnessing, that is, how the reader witnesses Aboriginal testimonial life-writing.

The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Redding on Hegel’s recognition theory is helpful for understanding the complexities involved in the patterns of recognition found in the author/reader, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. Gadamer, in his essay “Hegel’s Dialectic of Self-Consciousness”, writes, “we see that the structural identity between the life processes of what lives and self-consciousness demonstrates that self-consciousness is not at all the individualized point of ‘I=I,’ but rather, as Hegel says, ‘the I which is we and the we which is I’” (58). Central to the analysis of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing’s generic specificity in Chapter Two was an exploration of the way in which the co-extensivity of the narrator with his or her cultural group is strongly emphasised through framing the narrator’s life-story within the broader story of the colonial dispossession of the narrator’s cultural group. Whereas Chapter Two explored the ‘I’ at the heart of the ‘we’ in that it
focused on the narrator’s connection with his or her cultural group, this chapter focuses on what Hegel terms above “‘the ‘we’ which is ‘I’” (58), that is, the broader social world within which the testimony is circulated. Such a distinction is really a matter of emphasis, but whereas the ‘we’ analysed in Chapter Two was the connection between the Aboriginal narrator and the broader Aboriginal community, this chapter analyses the relationship between that collectivity and the broader reading public in order to develop a better understanding of the complexities of recognition involved in reading Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. It argues that understanding the processes of recognition involved in the relationship between Aboriginal narrators, their cultural collective and the non-Aboriginal readership is central for understanding the negotiations involved in achieving the political and therapeutic goals of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing.

The way in which any self comes to self-consciousness through the ‘we’ of the broader social world involves the operation of a profound ambiguity. The ambiguity of the dialectic of recognition of self and other (singular or plural) is of central importance for understanding author/reader relations. This is the case because recognitive ambiguity between the self/author and the other/reader precedes and structures other important dialectical structures such as the “‘dualisms [. . .] culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion [. . .]” (Haraway 177). This is the case because these dualisms can operate only to the extent that they are acknowledged and negotiated within a recognitive framework. This study’s interest in Hegelian dialectics and the maintenance of the ambiguity of recognition is also a point from which to distinguish it from post-structuralist studies that reject Hegelian dialectics on the basis that they efface
difference by gathering them up into an absolute monological perspective. This chapter argues that establishing successful ethical relationships between the self and others relies on maintaining difference in the operations of recognition and argues that Hegelian thought, as formulated by Redding, provides a sound basis from which to explore these operations. Testimonial life-writing is rich in material conducive to exploring the ethical issues involved in the dialectics of recognition and difference between self and others.

As I have argued previously, the foregrounding of issues of ethical significance in testimonial life-writing is one feature that distinguishes it from other forms of life-writing. It is true that other forms of life-writing involve issues of ethical significance and function representatively of larger groups: for example, life-writing that addresses discourses of gender, race, and class. However, such writing, usually autobiographical, places stronger emphasis on the individual. In contrast, testimonial life-writing always places heavy emphasis on the collective features of the dialectics of recognition due to the centrality in testimonial life-writing of negotiating discourses of social justice of relevance to the broader community.

The way in which testimonial life-writing’s ethical material implicates the reader in a more complex engagement with the dialectics of recognition is the focus of this chapter. As has been discussed, testimonial life-writing employs a collective voice that addresses the ‘I’ of the reader and emphasises the reader’s historical and cultural constructedness as part of a group implicated in colonial injustice, that is, non-Aboriginal (white) Australia. This form of address interpellates difference into the reading subject as

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38 Some critics of Hegelian dialectics of recognition criticise it because they view the process as one that negates difference in the resolution of dialectical poles into Absolute Reason or something approximating it — see Rosalyn Diprose’s *Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*. However, I agree with Redding’s interpretation of Hegel which argues that “when we understand Hegel’s spirit as constituted by intersubjective relations of recognition, we will see the error of equating spirit with any transcendental ego or the absolute ego, the error encouraging the view [. . .] that for Hegel intersubjective relations are ultimately subsumed within a ‘monological’ relation to self which allows no alterity.” (122). This position is in line with the general theoretical approach of this study, which focuses on the negotiation of difference — not merely the assertion or denial of it.
opposed to the interpellation of identification between author and reader seen in traditional autobiography (as discussed in Chapter One). Such traditional autobiographical texts speak to the ‘I’ of the reader, transforming the subject position of the ‘I’ from a historically located and specific subject into a transcendent subject position that is shared by the author and the reader — the position of the abstracted and sovereign subject — and in so doing, efface the complexities involved in the dialectics of recognition.

Before exploring different forms of author/reader relations it is important to recapitulate the notion of the interpellation of author/reader positions in traditional autobiography in order to understand the narrative techniques by which the addressee is constructed in testimonial life-writing. In Chapter One, I argued that the reader of autobiographical texts is encouraged to identify with the author. As Paul John Eakin states: “I am arguing that this proto-autobiographical tendency — this identification of reader with autobiographer — constitutes the fundamental motive for the reader’s interest in autobiography in the first place” (Touching the World 36). Or as Paul de Man puts it: “[t]he autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution” (70). I argued that such identification may be considered a form of Althusserian interpellation whereby “the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’” (Althusser 182). In Althusser’s model, the individual becomes subject[ed] to the Subject — the use of the common proper noun ‘Subject’ indicating the abstracted universality of the category. Likewise, much life-writing produces an abstracted and transcendent authorial position that interpellates the
reader through the proto-autobiographical desire of the reader to identify with the author. The plurality of perspectives available to authors and readers is gathered up in a unifying mono-perspective that suspends plurality temporally through retrospective narrative and spatially through a single viewpoint. As Lloyd writes, the narrator “see[s] each event in its fixed relation to a past which has presumably achieved its final form. The past self [...] is seen as having a completeness which it could not attain while present. The retrospective narration constitutes the self as a coherent object, grasped from the stance of immutable truth” (174). Such an authorial position invites the reader to identify with that position — an attractive invitation/interpellation because the mastery that the author maintains over the narrative material is transferred to the reader. This interpellation of the reader reinforces the illusion of a sovereign subjectivity and it is from this point that the reader, like the author, maintains a detached distance from the fate of the protagonist. Such interpellation creates a space from which the subject can detach itself from ethico-political historical forces that act upon and form selves and their relationships with each other. It is “[i]n this way [that] classic realism constitutes an ideological practice in addressing itself to readers as subjects, interpellating them in order that they freely accept their subjectivity and their subjection” (Belsey 69). The cognitive relationship between the reader and author as it is figured in this structure means that there is an experience of subjective mastery over narrative indeterminacy that is shared by the reader and author. These abstracted forms of subjectivity persist because the privileges of power and mastery assumed in adopting a transcendent authorial or readerly position are attractive.

However, this mastery is illusory because it is predicated on the exclusion and ignorance of other subject positions and perspectives. Such illusion is cause for ethical concern because it places detrimental restrictions on the expressions of subjectivities that lie outside this particular author/reader relationship. New literary forms arise through
authors’ rejection of such dominant literary figurations of author/reader cognitive relations as inadequate for the expression of new subjectivities and their experiences. Furthermore, new subjects and writing practices need to be accompanied by innovative interpretative frameworks to better understand them and it is to these new literatures, subjects, and interpretive tools that I now turn.

**Recognitive Structures of Testimonial Life-Writing**

The complexities of the dialectics of recognition involved in the black/white, author/reader relations found in Aboriginal life-narratives undermine recourse to transcendent subject positions like those found in traditional forms of life-writing and work against simplistic conflation of reader and author. A philosophical explanation for the inadequacy of Cartesian-like (transcendent, abstracted) subjectivities in author/reader relations can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s contention that the Cartesian subject/cogito itself relies on a cognitive basis:

> the *cogito* itself can not be a point of departure for philosophy; in fact it can be born only in consequence of my appearance for myself as an individual, and this appearance is conditioned by the recognition of the Other. The problem of the Other should not be posited in terms of the *cogito*; on the contrary, the existence of the Other renders the *cogito* possible as the abstract moment when the self is apprehended as an object. (236)

Here we see that the double movement of recognition precedes the establishment of the Cartesian subject/cogito and consequently discredits discourses that privilege this subjectivity as foundational. In the ‘Key to Special Terminology’, the definition of *Cogito* reads: “Cogito[:] Sartre claims that the pre-reflective cogito (see ‘consciousness’) is the pre-cognitive basis for the Cartesian cogito” (630). If the Cartesian *cogito* cannot be defended as a foundation on which to base the dialectic of recognition and yet, as I
argue, it is the dominant imaginary/subject in traditional forms of life-writing, a problem exists that needs to be addressed.

The claim that the Cartesian cogito is the dominant vehicle for the epistemological assumptions found in much traditional life-writing finds support in the notion that there is a distinctive European cosmology as distinguished from non-European cosmologies. Th. C. W. Oudemans and A. P. M. H. Lardinois in *Tragic Ambiguity* define the differences between separative (European) and interconnected cosmologies:

In Europe we are confronted with a cosmology which is based on separation of entities and categories and subsequent unification, whereas in the other cosmology entities and categories are distinguished as well, but the distinctions are not so absolute: they hide various implicit connections. The former type of cosmology is called separative, the latter interconnected. (32)

The emphasis in Western cosmology and Cartesian epistemology on the “separation of entities and categories and subsequent unification” corresponds with author/reader relations that are disconnected from the profound and dynamic ambiguity of recognition (32). Just as the ambiguity of self/other recognitive structures precedes the Cartesian cogito, so too the ambiguity of recognition precedes separative cosmologies and their distinctive systems of ordering the world:

To the Cartesian mind, it is almost incomprehensible that pollution and purification could be identical, that purification may take the shape of transgression and pollution. In an interconnected culture, blood that trickles and clots outside the veins is a source of pollution, but in ritual the same blood is a salutary force imparting healing. (55)

This chapter explores forms of author/reader relations other than the Cartesian-like forms found in traditional forms of life-writing. It sets out to do this through exploring forms of post-colonial life-writing that interpolate the text with more complex forms of author/reader relations. It analyses the ambiguity involved in recognitive structures and
aims to provide a theoretical foundation and framework that is capable of articulating the centrality of recognition in terms other than that found in Cartesian epistemology.

Redding writes:

The *intersubjective* dimension of recognition [. . .] undermines the individualistic Cartesian approach to subjectivity while at the same time not reducing individual intentional beings to mere moments of social structure. Furthermore, when we understand Hegel’s spirit as constituted by intersubjective relations of recognition, we will see the error of equating spirit with any transcendental ego or the absolute ego, the error encouraging the view, such as is held by Gadamer and Rosen, that for Hegel intersubjective relations are ultimately subsumed within a ‘monological’ relation to self which allows no alterity. (122)

Authorial and reader subjects, according to Redding, fall into error when their relations assume a shared transcendental or absolute ego like that found in the Cartesian-like author/reader relations of traditional forms of life-writing. Such a move fails because “relations are ultimately subsumed within a ‘monological’ relation to self which allows no alterity” (122). Difference is effaced via identification with a transcendental subject position. Instead of this, author/reader relations ought to posit subjects “[a]s mutually presupposing but *differently* embodied and located self-consciousnesses [. . .] linked by recognition, a relation that maintains difference as essential; they are not submerged within some overarching supermind” (125).

Testimonial life-writing can be identified by the special role it constructs for the addressee — a position that complicates the addressee’s identification with the author in a Cartesian-like manner because it implicates the addressee in an ethical dilemma. This is due, in part, to the presence of ethical issues surrounding injustice and the urgency expressed by the author to address those issues and communicate them to readers in public literary and political domains. Testimonial life-writing challenges the reader to act
as a witness to issues of injustice. As Beverley writes, “[t]estimonio [. . .] always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability and complacency of the reader’s world must be brought into question” (Beverley and Zimmerman 178). As discussed in Chapter Two, this generic feature of testimonial life-writing distinguishes it from other forms of life-writing such as autobiography. The author/reader identification found in much life-writing — that is, the interpellation of the reader as a transcendent subject — is much more difficult to sustain when reading texts dealing with injustices associated with post-colonial trauma, particularly when the reader’s ethical integrity is addressed. I intend to show that reading ethically charged material that implicates the reader in the history of colonial dispossession forces an ethical response from the reader that can either fail or succeed in working towards providing just outcomes for testifiers.

Testimonial life-writing functions to locate the reader in an ethico-political historical context via literary techniques that locate, accuse, make demands of and restrict responses from the reader. In this way, it works against readers’ desires to escape into the kind of abstractions discussed above: recourse to abstracted notions of temporality and viewpoint (as discussed by Lloyd); recourse to an experience of the sublime (negative or positive); and denial (LaCapra).39 It is necessary to note that ethical reading responses are not the sole domain of testimonial life-writing and there are many examples in the literary canon in which ethical issues are addressed and projected on to the reader. Concerning ethics and literature, Parker writes: “[a]s ever, novels, plays, and poetry continue to be published, and some of these continue to show why literature is rightly esteemed as a highly particularised, complex and richly contextualised mode of ethical reflection [. . .]” (12). However, in testimonial life-writing, ethical consideration is

39 Also see Laub’s list of defensive reading mechanisms discussed below.
strongly foregrounded because the issues are addressed in a realist literary mode that aims to implicate the reader in a present-centred ethical dilemma.

**Implicating the Non-Aboriginal Audience**

Often in testimonial life-writing, the reader is evoked not as an accomplice but rather as the target of the text’s criticisms of ethical failure. Dalziell writes of the way that testimonial life-writing mirrors the Judeo-Christian form of testimony:

> Consideration of Aboriginal autobiography as *testimonio*, involving revelation of shame, raises the issue of reader response. The reader of *testimonio* has been likened to that of a jury in a court room. But in the religious tradition from which the genre derives, courtroom scenes where testimony is given are generally narrated so that the positions of jury and accused are reversed: the testimony of the accused implicates the hearers in some form of moral deficiency. (131-32)

Textual evidence of the way testimonial life-writing implicates the reader in serious ethical issues can be found throughout the Aboriginal life-writing examined in this study. For example, in *My Bundjalung People*, Ruby Langford Ginibi completes the book with the following remonstration of the white reader:

> Finally, I will finish this history of my Bundjalung people with some words from my first book: ‘That we are here! and [sic] always will be here!’, with this added bit of information:

> Don’t be goggingh-miggingh [greedy guts] and take everything from us. You white people have to learn to give something back. You cannot take forever from us, because in the end, you will destroy yourselves too! Give back our mother earth. You’ve desecrated her and my people long enough!

> NINGINAH! STOP! (212)

Clearly this passage implicates the white non-Aboriginal reader in the history of colonial injustice. The white reader is evoked as a desecrating greedy guts and any move on the
part of the white reader to identify with the author is problematised, if not foreclosed. However, it does provide a position internal to the reader through which they can recognise themselves differently, that is, it effects an othering of the self and, thereby, opens up new positions from which to recognise the Aboriginal narrator.

The same ethical questioning of the reading jury is found in other Aboriginal life-writings. Dalziell writes:

The intentionality of [Charlie] Perkins’ narrative is comparable to his purpose in addressing white audiences about Aboriginal issues, that is, to lead them to a conviction of their own racism ... [and] Langford Ginibi, in *My Bundjalung People*, records her impressions of white audience response at the Lismore Club after her forthright presentation of white racism: ‘We looked at their faces and oh! They were a mournful lot! So many sad faces; they looked like stunned mullets!’ (133)

Both Perkins and Langford Ginibi aim to implicate the white audience in Australia’s history of colonial racism. As I have argued, such implication works to bar white audiences from recourse to abstractions that disengage them from their connection to Australian history — abstractions like the Cartesian *cogito* examined earlier. By foreclosing such disengagement, Aboriginal life-writing locates the white audience within Australia’s colonial history which, in turn, may force parts of the audience to recognise themselves differently. Such writing relativises white readers by implicating them as the desecrating other and in doing so emphasises their difference from the testifier. The dialectics of recognition function not only to demand confrontation with the Other but also a confrontation with the self as a relative and particular subject. In addition, testimonial life-writing implicates the white reader in Australia’s colonial history with the aim of shaping their response to it by providing an Aboriginal perspective. For instance, Langford Ginibi gives her son’s legally appointed parole officer copies of her books in order to shape the parole officer’s response to her son’s (Nobby Langford) life-story:
I also presented her with my two books so she could get to know all about Nobby. I thought the books would supply her with more information than the court papers she had about my son’s so-called ‘violent, criminal life’. Perhaps in reading my book she’d get a more personal view, from our Koori side, of the situations we are confronted with every day of our lives in this country. *(Haunted by the Past* 102)

This particular strategy is investigated in more detail below in a discussion on modelling the witness.

**Reader Response**

Whitlock examines non-Aboriginal reading response through focusing on non-Aboriginal autobiographical responses to Aboriginal testimony found in Aboriginal life-stories and *The Bringing them Home Report*. Whitlock writes:

this understanding of complicity, this implication of the second person through response to testimony, is vital to the reconciliation process. It is at the heart of self-fashioning in and through the politics of reconciliation. In this respect the testimonies are part of a social process which is engaged in forming an appropriately ethical national citizenry. […] one of the most radical outcomes of the stolen generations narratives as a discursive event is their potency in bringing home to non-indigenous Australians that they too have a radical identity. (211)

Elsewhere Whitlock writes:

Stolen Generations stories have been around us for a long time. We must ask why and what do we hear now, and what the political effects might be. It is a misrecognition of these kinds of autobiographical acts to understand their speaking position in terms of a truth, fullness, and authenticity which is available to an indigenous first person and constrained by the non-indigenous editor. What they can tell in the first person, and what we will hear as the second person, are always sharply circumscribed, one by the other. Both telling and listening are performative. (209)
For the reader to acknowledge the reality of the trauma effected by colonialism raises the issue of how best to recognise it. LaCapra writes that

>[t]estimony is a crucial source for history. And it is more than a source. It poses special challenges to history. For it raises the issue of the way in which the historian or other analyst becomes a secondary witness, undergoes a transferential relation, and must work out an acceptable subject-position with respect to the witness and his or her testimony. Transference here implies the tendency to become emotionally implicated in the witness and his or her testimony with the inclination to act out an affective response to them. (*History and Memory* 11-12)

Related to LaCapra’s and Whitlock’s discussion of reader response, Laub sets out six defensive responses that are counter-productive to hearing testimony and fail to establish an acceptable reader-subject position. I suggest that these are relevant to reading Aboriginal life-writing:

[1] A sense of total paralysis, brought about by the threat of flooding — by the fear of merger with the atrocities being recounted.

[2] A sense of outrage and of anger, unwittingly directed at the victim — the narrator. [. . .] We are torn apart by the inadequacy of our ability to properly respond, and inadvertently wish for the illness to be the patient’s responsibility and wrongdoing.


[4] A flood of awe and fear; we endow the survivor with a kind of sanctity, both to pay our tribute to him and to keep him at a distance, to avoid the intimacy entailed in knowing.

[5] Foreclosure through facts, through an obsession with factfinding; an absorbing interest in the factual details of the account which serve to circumvent the human experience. Another version of this foreclosure, of this obsession with factfinding is a listener who already ‘knows it all,’ ahead of time, leaving little space for the survivor’s story.
[6] Hyperemotionally [sic] which superficially looks like compassion and caring. The testifier is simply flooded, drowned and lost in the listener’s defensive affectivity. (“Bearing Witness” 72-73)

Instances of the above responses can be found in non-Aboriginal reader responses to Aboriginal testimony.

Brigitta Olubas and Lisa Greenwell analyse an instance of point six in Laub’s list of defensive reader responses, that is, “hyperemotionally [sic] which superficially looks like compassion and caring. The testifier is simply flooded, drowned and lost in the listener’s defensive affectivity” (Laub 73). Through a reading of Carmel Bird’s *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, which employs extracts from *The Bringing them Home Report*, Olubas and Greenwell argue that Bird’s “publication of the first person narratives as ‘extracts’ from the Report severs the stories from the public context of representation and engagement opened up by the Report, and restores them to a narrative of unending maternal loss” (*Re-membering* part 2, par. 2). In this way, it depoliticises these testimonial narratives and “the field of speech is once again taken up with the voices of those already privileged, thus overdetermining modes of listening” and “[i]n this way the text’s affect works as a form of imaginative capture, re-figuring the tellers of the stories for all time as children” (part 2, pars. 3-4).

A similar, although less worrying, form of imaginative capture is performed by Kay Schaffer when she criticises Robert Manne for homogenising Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in a way that effaces differences within and between these groups. Schaffer writes:

Heterogeneous national subjects evoke varied responses to the Stolen Generation issue for the nation. On one side of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide stand an array of nationally constituted subjects claiming various identities — as 6th generation descendents from convicts, settlers and colonial administrators, generations of silenced Afghan and Chinese Australians,
Jewish survivors of the holocaust, pre- and postwar migrants from Eastern Europe, post-Vietnam immigrants and refugees from Asia and migrants from other locations, differently constituted not only as national subjects but also as mothers and daughters and sons . . . . We all have alternative histories, different national and personal investments, and differently constituted subject positions within the nation. (part 1, par. 7)

While this is an accurate and very important point in debates concerning the acknowledgment of different subject positions in Australia, it is a point that does not reflect the concerns of the Aboriginal testimonial texts examined here, in which the primary object of criticism is white non-Aboriginal Australians. In this sense, Schaffer’s comments reflect broader academic debates on difference rather than the views expressed in Aboriginal testimonies, ironically enacting precisely what she is criticising. Like Bird, Schaffer performs a type of imaginative (academic) capture of the testimony that fails to register the specificity of concerns expressed in the testimonies, one of the most important being that the white non-Aboriginal reader holds a distinct position as the primary object of the Aboriginal testimonies’ criticisms. Her approach draws attention away from the specific grievances of the testifiers towards the multiplicity of possible reader responses, and underplays the centrality of colonial discourses of homogeneity that are the principal target of the testimonies. Chinese, Afghan, Jewish and Vietnamese Australian readers are not the addressees of the testimonies examined here.

A matter of concern regarding Manne’s and Clendinnen’s respective discussions on Aboriginal history is that they might risk too closely connecting Aboriginal testimonials with Holocaust studies which, while extremely useful (my use of Laub’s classification of responses to Holocaust testimonies attests to this), might work against other forms of listening. As a response to that history, it could risk an imaginative and theoretical capture of Aboriginal people’s trauma through the tools of Holocaust Studies. This study has employed many insights from Holocaust Studies as tools for reading
Aboriginal testimonials, but acknowledges the profound differences between the two histories while identifying similarities. It is necessary to be aware of the risk of imaginative capture when reading testimonies so that differences are not effaced but rather articulated.

Other responses to *The Bringing them Home Report* and the discussion of the Stolen Generations by some Australians demonstrate recourse to Laub’s second and fifth defensive hearing/reading responses: “[2] A sense of outrage and of anger, unwittingly directed at the victim — the narrator. [. . .] We are torn apart by the inadequacy of our ability to properly respond, and inadvertently wish for the illness to be the patient’s responsibility and wrongdoing” (“Bearing Witness” 72). And,

[5] Foreclosure through facts, through an obsession with factfinding; an absorbing interest in the factual details of the account which serve to circumvent the human experience. Another version of this foreclosure, of this obsession with factfinding is a listener who already ‘knows it all,’ ahead of time, leaving little space for the survivor’s story. (72)

Andrew Bolt, in a journalistic article that received national attention titled ‘I Wasn’t Stolen’, responded to Lowitja O’Donoghue’s careful distinction between the word ‘removed’ and ‘stolen’ in describing her specific experience of family separation by effectively dismissing the trauma involved in her family’s separation. Her particular experience of family separation was clearly part of a spectrum of practices associated with racist, colonialist and assimilationist policies. Yet, as Manne convincingly demonstrates in “In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right”, such a distinction was used not only to attempt to disqualify O’Donoghue from speaking about the history of racist discrimination but also to cast doubt on the truthfulness of Aboriginal testimony to experiences of dispossession as a whole.
Manne discusses how Bolt’s article formed part of a campaign undertaken on several fronts by the ‘punditocracy’ to discredit the traumatic history of Aboriginal family separation. As part of the “foreclosure [of traumatic history] through facts” and factfinding (Laub 72), the same writers reduced the Aboriginal experience of colonial dispossession to their obsession with determining the exact numbers of Aboriginal people killed throughout colonial settlement. As a discursive tactic it is a form of metonymy whereby discrediting the exact numbers of those killed functions by association to discredit the history of trauma resulting from colonisation, that is, the “absorbing interest in the factual details of the account [. . . serves] to circumvent the human experience” (72). As a reading response, it undermines the process of working-through trauma, ethically failing the testifier in a psychoanalytic context by failing to reinforce the reality of the traumatic event as the first step towards establishing a degree of narrative and affective control over the traumatic material (see Chapter Three). In this sense, it works to reactivate the trauma because how one survives the legacy of trauma is part of the traumatic experience itself. As Alan Lawson has argued, such responses to moments of crisis in the negotiation of national identity often function zeugmatically to “invoke outmoded colonialist tropes” (2000). The responses of Bolt and company demonstrate the importance of being aware of such a discursive tendency in responses to national crises.

**Establishing Truth-Believing Paradigms**

The reader of testimonial life-writing repeatedly encounters declarations of the truth of the narrative and the necessity that the reader respond to the testimonies as true. Johnston, in her ‘Foreword’ to *My Bundjalung People*, writes, “[e]ssentially, [. . . *My Bundjalung People*] is the only documented history of the Bundjalung people that is made
up of *their* views, *their* feelings, *their* facts. So it is true. It is a story of profound cruelty and injustice that begs for wrongs to be righted. It is also a story of hope and laughter and jokes, survival and love” (Langford Ginibi xiii). Jean-Francois Lyotard goes so far as to say in his analysis of how to establish truth-making paradigms that, in hearing a statement like Johnston’s “So it is true”, the reader must accept testimonial life-writing as such to avoid divesting “the plaintiff [. . .] of the means to argue and becom[ing] for that reason a victim” (9). Shoshana Felman writes, “[t]o testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* — in speech — for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences” (204). Felman identifies here how testimonial life-writing’s extra-personal dimension contributes to its claim to truthfulness. Testimony aims to set the story straight and thereby presents ethical considerations that demand to be addressed in the context of providing just responses. The decision to listen or not must be taken seriously because it either implicates the reader in continuing to not hear an already dispossessed group or involves him or her in the work of establishing an ethical citizenry. The textual construction of the reader in testimonial life-writing presents a choice to the reader: either fulfil the second criterion for establishing Lyotard’s truth-believing paradigms, that is, grant the testimony the status of truth or not.

Laub explores the necessity of establishing a truth-believing paradigm in a psychoanalytic context. He argues that the relationship between the testifier and the listener is crucial for the successful articulation and construction of traumatic experience into narrative. As I discussed in Chapter Three, traumatic experience involves the disruption of the capacity to witness the traumatic event as it occurs. This is the phenomenon of latency as formulated by Freud. Laub writes, “the very process of
bearing witness to massive trauma [...] does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence [...]”; it is “a record that has yet to be made” (“Bearing Witness” 57). Later, Laub writes that “[t]he traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (69). The testimony of those who have experienced trauma, in its function of re-externalising the event, moves to reinstate the lost sense of temporality and identity described in the above quotation. Testimony, in constructing a narrative, is a often a necessary process for the reintegration of the traumatic experience into the life-history of the subject, be it an individual or collective subject.

The aim of testimonial life-writing that works-through traumatic experience is to establish a sense of ‘normal’ reality. As Laub puts it, this work involves establishing a ‘normal’ sense of temporality and thus causality and sequence. In addition to establishing a sense of normality in the life of the testifier, testimonial narratives are also a record of the processes involved in establishing this sense of normality. Furthermore, when personal identity is so closely linked with cultural identity, it follows that the establishment of personal identity is simultaneously embedded in the establishment of cultural identity. Testimonial life-writing narratives are part of the process of reintegrating traumatic experience into the life-history of the testifier and of the testifier’s cultural group.

However, the establishment of personal and cultural identity cannot occur in a vacuum. Laub writes:

re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a
reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalisation of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim. (69)

Prior to telling the life-story, the testifier works to establish facts that function as the basis from which the re-externalisation of the traumatic event through the life-story can begin. Laub explains how this consists of establishing non-metaphorical statements that form the basis of the history that will be developed throughout the testimony. Such ‘facts’ appeal to the reader to hear them as true in order that the testimony is effective, and we see in Aboriginal life-writing a large amount of text given to presenting non-metaphorical facts. For example, Langford Ginibi begins her testimonial life-story in *My Bundjalung People* by establishing when her father and uncle came to northern New South Wales, who they worked for, as well as detailing the family tree. Langford Ginibi lists many of the Aboriginal families that moved to the mission area and the particular clan groups within the larger Bundjalung group they belonged to. Facts like the amount of land allocated to each family are noted, as well as the names of the white mission managers who dominated the mission. To establish these facts is a prerequisite for the project of re-familiarisation and they form a “medium of re-externalization — and thus historicization — of the [traumatic] event” upon which can be built the testimonial life-story (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 70).

The reader/listener who appreciates the importance of the truth claims of the testimonies performs a crucial role in the testifier’s re-externalisation of trauma and, thereby, a crucial role in the project of re-personalisation and re-culturation. As I have argued, to contest such a reality on the grounds that it excludes other perspectives, as do anti-realists, undermines the process of re-externalisation in a therapeutic context. The

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40 I have shifted here from referring to the ‘writer’ of the testimony to the ‘speaker’ of the testimony, from writing practices to the primacy of the oral in the interviewer/interviewee relationship of psychoanalysis. This raises an important question about whether the dynamics are the same for oral and written testimony, for instance, how feedback occurs. Later in this chapter I explore in detail how the dynamics of oral testimony are recast within the testimonial text.
appeal to the reader that the testimony be read as true is one reason why testimonial life-writing employs a realist literary mode and, thereby, why it is fruitfully explored through a realist paradigm. The rejection of the reality of testimony further renders invisible an already effaced history. The choice to undermine or reinforce the truth of testimony is the prerogative of the reader and, thereby, an ethical decision. Furthermore, the texts themselves set out to show how appropriate responses can be made.

**Modelling the Witness**

As we have seen, testimonial life-writing aims to influence reader response in a variety of ways. Over and above the ways already discussed, many of the testimonies examined in this study aim to guide reader response by writing the position of the witness to the testimony into the text itself. In this manner, the reader does not solely hold the position of the witness to the testimonies. This feature distinguishes testimonial life-writing from that life-writing which posits a transcendent subject position held by the author and the reader. Rather than a transcendent subject position, the testimonies examined in this study place the position of the witness within the text and thus manipulate the identificatory and distancing impulses of the reader according to Aboriginal objectives. Because of the strong presence of a character in the text who acts as the witness to the testimony, I term this figure the ‘model witness’.

Johnston and Burgos-Debray, who write the ‘Foreword’ and ‘Introduction’ to Langford Ginibi’s and Menchú’s testimonies respectively, act as models for the reader for how to witness the testimonies. Johnston accompanies Langford Ginibi on her journey back to her ‘belongin’ place’ and describes herself as “Ruby’s driver, companion, sound recordist, photographer, and general dogsbody [. . .]” (*My Bundjalung People* xi). As I have previously shown, Johnston tells the reader that the testimony is as “solid and
immutable as that word, "always" (xi). Not only does this claim demonstrate the strong sense of Aboriginal agency operating in testimonial life-writing because it constructs Aboriginal experience as solid and immutable, it also alerts the reader that he or she is being asked to witness the testimony as true. Both the testifier and model witness strategically refuse to acknowledge that the text contains fictional elements. This applies not only to the narrative voice of My Bundjalung People but also to the many testimonial records it incorporates from different northern New South Wales historical archives and those provided by private sources. My Bundjalung People is the record of Langford Ginibi’s journey to record the story of her people and thus of herself. Its appeal to the reader to accept that the testimony is a truthful documentation of Bundjalung history places demands upon the reader to share in the process of bearing witness to the historical truth of post-colonial trauma. It is this appeal, made by both the model witness and the testifier, that gives the testimony much of its ethical force.

In Haunted by the Past, Johnston, as the model witness, writes:

People say Australia is not like Chile or Argentina or South Africa. They say that we are more civilised. We Aboriginal people wonder about that as we look at what has been done in our land and to our own people by civilised nations. Nobby Langford has lived this history. We always hope for justice and even now as you read his story, we hope that he will be seen and considered for what he is — a Bundjalung man whose boyhood, youth, and early manhood have been stolen from him by the oppressor nation. (xx-xxi)

In this passage, Johnston invokes an Aboriginal collectivity through her use of the plural pronoun ‘we’ (a common feature of the testimonial mode), but the non-Aboriginal reader is not invited to share in that collective. Instead, Johnston encourages the non-Aboriginal reader to witness Nobby Langford’s story with empathy for the Aboriginal view of Australia’s colonial history and, in doing so, encourages an Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal
coalition in regard to understanding Australia’s colonial legacy. While Langford Ginibi’s reader is recurringly personified as white, Johnston’s reader is not specifically cast as white and the coalition she encourages is not simply one between white and black. In this manner, a coalition is encouraged between black and white, Aboriginal and all non-Aboriginal people, that maintains a complexity of recognitive positions that are not collapsed into a single viewpoint. Yet, regardless of the reader’s position, all readers are encouraged to empathise with the Aboriginal perspective as it is written in the text. For instance, throughout *Haunted by the Past*, Langford Ginibi interprets Nobby Langford’s testimony with the goal of shaping reader response. Nobby Langford recounts:

*Darruk was the first boys’ home I went to. I didn’t last long there, I took off in the first three minutes, but I was caught again, and later did my sentence. The [sic] I got out and, with all the silly Koori mates in Redfern, it didn’t take me long to get into trouble again. So I ended up in Mt Penang at Gosford like me true to form, there for a little till me old legs got the better of me and I took off again. (21-22)*

Langford Ginibi immediately frames Nobby Langford’s recollection for the reader thus:

> Although he’d spent time in the boys’ homes for petty things, Nobby was not a hardened person. So he was knocked for a loop by the deaths of his brother and sister. They died within eight months of each other in 1969-1970. [. . .] Nobby couldn’t accept the fact of their deaths. It had a terrible effect on him. Besides, I was always saying to him, ‘You’re the eldest son now. You must be very responsible.’ I sometimes think that

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41 It is important to note here that the Aboriginal reader of the Aboriginal testimonial text is never addressed but rather invoked with the plural pronoun ‘we’. In this sense, the differences within Aboriginal culture are effaced in a similar way to how difference is in traditional autobiography. However, as discussed in Chapter One, in traditional autobiography the reader, as the target of the text, is encouraged to identify with that transcendent authorial position, whereas in the Aboriginal testimonial text such identification between the testifier and the non-Aboriginal reader is limited on cultural grounds and difference is maintained and reinforced. In this manner, the testimonial mode is a distinctive one because *some readers* are strongly cast as the Other of the narrator’s position and the identificatory impulse is strictly circumscribed.
my telling him that was very frightening to him, making him throw all caution to the winds, and get into trouble. (22)

As with Langford Ginibi’s testimonial life-writing, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is introduced by a model witness, in this case, by the first witness of her testimony, Burgos-Debray, who functions as interlocutor and amanuensis for Menchú. Burgos-Debray describes her role thus: “I soon reached the decision to give the manuscript the form of a monologue: that was how it came back to me as I re-read it. I therefore decided to delete all my questions. *By doing so I became what I really was: Rigoberta’s listener* (emphasis added)” (xx). Burgos-Debray tells us that Menchú is “a privileged witness [. . . who] has survived the genocide that destroyed her family and community and is stubbornly determined to break the silence and to confront the systematic extermination of her people. She refuses to let us forget” (xi). Later, identifying herself with the Latin American reader and guiding him or her in the way in which to experience the testimony, Burgos-Debray writes:

*We* [emphasis added] Latin Americans [. . .] tend to forget that we too are oppressors and that we too are involved in relations that can only be described as *colonial*. [. . .] That is why we have to listen to Rigoberta Menchú’s appeal and allow ourselves to be guided by a voice whose inner cadences are so pregnant with meaning that we actually seem to hear her speaking and can almost hear her breathing. (xii)

Similarly to Johnston, Burgos-Debray outlines the way the testimony should be read. Not only does she encourage the Latin American reader to experience the testifier’s voice as a presence that is so close that the reader can almost hear her breathing, she also implicates that reader as oppressor. In contrast to the interpellation of a transcendent subject position that was a feature of classic realism, the testimonial text interpolates a more historically specific and located (even biased) reading subject into the text itself, that is,
the model witness, and this witnessing subject, in turn, locates some readers in the history of oppression.

Laub, in addressing issues surrounding the videotaping of oral Holocaust testimonies in the context of interviews, stresses the importance of the role the listener plays in the construction of trauma narratives. His insights are useful for exploring testimonial life-writing because the role of the interviewer in eliciting oral testimonies is similar to that of the model witness (companion to the narrator/testifier) in testimonial life-writing. The model witness’s relation to the narrator often functions in the manner Laub attributes to the interviewer/interviewee relationship at work in recording oral testimonies to the Holocaust. This is seen in the collaborative role played by Johnston, Jackie Huggins and Burgos-Debray in constructing the testimonial text. To illustrate: when powerful memories affect the narrator of *My Bundjalung People*, her companion, Johnston, “has to respond very subtly to cues the narrator is giving that s/he wants to come back, to resume contact, or that s/he wishes to remain alone [. . .]” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 71). Not only is this sensitivity to the testifier present within the texts, but the texts also demand, due to their ethical urgency, a similar level of attention from the reader of testimonial life-writing.

Each interview conducted by Kevin Gilbert in *Living Black* contains introductory and/or concluding comments made by Gilbert to orientate the reader to the issues to be aware of when reading the interviews. In this way, the interviews’ introductory and concluding remarks replicate the figure of the model witness found in Langford Ginibi’s, Huggins’s, Morgan’s and Menchú’s writing. Issues highlighted for the attention of readers in Gilbert’s framing remarks include the restrictive legislation that governed the lives of Aboriginal peoples, incarceration, reserve life, alcohol abuse, the importance of spirituality (both traditionally Aboriginal and Christian), negative self-image,
mobilisation of political resistance, tribal law, and urban Aboriginal family and social issues. These framing comments further emphasise the strong presence of political dimensions in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing.

Much of the text in *Auntie Rita* is derived from the taped testimony of Jackie Huggins’s mother, Rita Huggins. Jackie Huggins, like Gilbert, frames her narrative contributions around these oral testimonies. Jackie Huggins italicises her contributions to the text to identify the different speaking/writing subjects. These italicised sections comment on, interpret, explain, contextualise, and provide responses to the story provided by her mother in taped recordings. The use of recordings, transformed into text, again shows the close links Aboriginal testimonial life-writing has with oral sources of history. Jackie Huggins’s italicised responses form a dialogue with her family and cultural history and the text’s oscillation between taped oral history and written response embodies the process of working-through that history. By formatting the witnessing process in such a way, the text works to interpellate the reader as witness — the reader reads witnessing rather than simply reading the story. As a writing device, this strategy models reading response and works to restrict the multiplicity of responses — a strategy that works against the grain of reading practices pursued by anti-realists.

Likewise, *Haunted by the Past* distinguishes between the writer’s/editor’s voice and the voice of the oral informant through italicising the latter’s testimony. Langford Ginibi writes, “[w]riting Nobby’s story I wanted to include *his* recollections of the past. So we sat down together and I asked him, ‘Tell me your memories of your childhood, son; what you remember of me draggin you around from pillar to post with the rest of the family. Don’t feel you need to withhold anything’” (9-10). Like many other Aboriginal testimonial life-stories, *Haunted by the Past* is created through inter-generational dialogue, which again demonstrates testimonial life-writing’s emphasis on the collective
rather than the individual in generating and negotiating post-colonial Aboriginal history, while also demonstrating the use of the model witness.

**Performing Testimonial Life-Writing**

Exploring discursive figures, such as the model witness, through which reader response is manipulated is important for balancing the interest in the extra-textual operations of traumatic material and political resistance. Elżbieta Sklodowska’s work on testimonio focuses on what she terms testimonio’s ‘discursive armature’ in an effort to achieve this balance. Sklodowska’s focus on the discursive construction of testimonio aligns her work with Colás’s criticism of Yúdice’s desire for what is beyond representation, LaCapra’s criticism of Lawrence Langer’s claim that the Holocaust is unrepresentable, and Whitlock’s focus on the performativity of Aboriginal testimonial life-narratives. The emphasis by some critics on material in testimonio that is beyond the scope of representation leads Sklodowska to write critically of Beverley, Zimmerman and Yúdice that their definitions of “testimonial writing [are] politically principled and strongly action-oriented, which detracts from exploring its discursive armature” (86). Sklodowska addresses this deficit by seeking to “clarify how testimonio’s technique actually works” in a move that aims to go beyond simply providing “a list of more or less distinct traits and relations” that characterise the genre (86). To do this, she employs the concept of the *differend* as formulated by Lyotard to explore “the intricate tension between the indeterminacy of experience and the closure of discourse, between the act of living/surviving/witnessing and the act of testifying/transcribing” (87).

The concept of the *differend* (a concept formulated, it is of interest to note for this study, during Lyotard’s contemplation of the Holocaust) was developed to identify processes where “the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that
reason a victim” (Lyotard 9). To overcome this problem Lyotard posits a testimonial contract that demands particular criteria be met in the effort to construct any truth-believing paradigm. Sklodowska structures her essay by addressing each of the four criteria (the position of the addresser, the position of the addressee, a language capable of signifying a referent, and a case that will suffer an injustice if it is not represented) in turn, with the aim of establishing if testimonio fulfils the criteria. Through a reading of Miguel Barnet’s and Esteban Montejo’s The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave, Sklodowska concludes that testimonio does not fulfil the criteria of Lyotard’s truth-believing paradigm. In doing so, she rejects Beverley’s, Zimmerman’s and Yúdice’s claim that testimonio is a discursive site that can “‘summon truth,’ ‘denounce,’ ‘exorcise’ and ‘set aright’” because, by doing so, they “overcompensate for the internal discord we may find in specific texts, [. . . directing] our attention away from the problematic inscription of the differend” (97). Sklodowska acknowledges “that there is a fine line between invalidating testimony and acknowledging, self-critically, ‘that what remains to be phrased exceeds what we can presently phrase’” (98).

Working this fine line to phrase what cannot be presently phrased is the work of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and theorisations of that writing, wherein testifiers and theorists work to re-externalise post-colonial trauma and create vocabularies and imaginaries that better articulate post-colonial conditions. It is in tracing the discursive history of how such vocabularies and imaginaries are developed that we can trace some of the history of Aboriginality and non-Aboriginal/Aboriginal relations. Such a practice accords with LaCapra’s and Colás’s argument that it is important to maintain a vitalising tension between the representative and the represented (further explored in Chapter Five). Such an argument is an important one because it is only by identifying the discord we find in testimonial texts through analysing the fraught inscription of the differend that we
maintain a form of analysis that works to establish closer links between texts and post-colonial realities and avoids simplistic narrative closures.

Analysis of discursive construction is useful for understanding performative aspects of the narrative voice in testimonial texts and the way such performativity works to guide reader response. Reader response is a productive site for exploring the discursive construction of the testimonial text because so much space is given in these texts to appealing to the reader to bear witness to the legacy of colonial dispossession. Whitlock, in an analysis compatible with Sklodowska’s project of analysing the discursive armature of testimonial life-writing, focuses on the question of why testimonial life-writing is written in the way it is at particular points in cultural history. Whitlock writes that testimonial texts must authorize the narrator, and must offer clear signals on how the narrative is to be read and what constitutes its truth to be witnessed by a believing reader in an appropriate way — what I have earlier called an appropriate ethical responsiveness. These texts maneuver for their public, and the story they tell needs to be read in terms of a particular culture and particular readerships. What must be told to, and what will be heard by these readerships is limited, and negotiated with care. The occasion requires ‘truth,’ a culturally specific and appropriate presentation of subjectivity and experience. This is because in the interracial autobiographical contract that is made here witnesses are necessarily made aware of their own racial identity, their own implication in the politics of race. (208)

Whitlock views truth as “a culturally specific and appropriate presentation of subjectivity and experience” because it is a performative act (208). Like performing for the camera in *cinema vérité*, Whitlock argues that the author performs the realism of testimonial life-writing as part of his or her aim to establish a formal recognitive contract between the addressee.
Performativity is an important concept because it encourages readers to separate the system of signs that attest to reality from any claims of access to an uncontestable reality. It invites the reader to analyse factors that contribute to the production of texts and subjects, such as contesting ethico-political forces of a changing society. It allows the reader to ask how a text is what it is: what is gained and lost in not ordering the text another way; why is the text sequenced the way it is; what is effaced; and what subtextual associations are made. However, performativity is a concept that resonates with multiple meanings and, because of this multiplicity, is problematised when deployed.

Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Performativity and Performance* identify some of the multiple uses of the concepts ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’:

Given these divergent developments, it makes abundant sense that performativity's recent history has been marked by cross-purposes. For while philosophy and theater now share ‘performative’ as a common lexical item, the term has hardly come to mean ‘the same thing’ for each. Indeed, the stretch between theatrical and deconstructive meanings of ‘performative’ seems to span the polarities of, at either extreme, the *extroversion* of the actor, the *introversion* of the signifier. […] But in another range of usages, a text like Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* uses 'performativity' to mean an extreme of something like *efficiency* — postmodern representation as a form of capitalist efficiency — while, again, the deconstructive ‘performativity’ of Paul de Man or J. Hillis Miller seems to be characterized by the *dislinkage* precisely of cause and effect between the signifier and the world. At the same time, it's worth keeping in mind that even in deconstruction, more can be said of performative speech-acts than that they are ontologically dislinked or introversively nonreferential. Following on de Man's demonstration of ‘a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text’ (298), one might want to dwell not so much on the nonreference of the performative, but rather on (what de Man calls) its necessarily
‘aberrant’ relation to its own reference — the torsion, the mutual perversion, as one might say, of reference and performativity. (2-3)

Other aspects of performativity are analysed in more detail in Chapter Five. However, I want to concentrate here on the question of who has access to the privileges of performativity. Discussing J. L. Austin’s formulation of performativity, Parker and Sedgwick note that “Austin tends to treat the speaker as if s/he were all but coextensive — at least, continuous — with the power by which the individual speech act is initiated and authorized and may be enforced” (7). Yet, as I will show, this is not the case.

Performativity can be disaggregated into several types in terms of who has access to it. It can refer to consciously manipulated subject roles, or culturally programmed subject roles that a subject may or may not be aware of, and to the argument that being itself is necessarily performative. In the first instance, the subject consciously performs roles to manipulate the world. In the second instance, the subject is an unconscious, passive filter for socially inscribed performative roles such as gender, class and racial roles. In the third instance, being itself is necessarily performative. A useful distinction can be made between the roles that are performed and the consciousness that one is performing roles. Permutations of these two dimensions of performativity are as follows: the absence of an awareness that one performs socially inscribed roles; the awareness that one performs socially inscribed roles yet possesses no, or only limited, ability to manipulate them; and, the awareness of the roles and the freedom to manipulate them. All the above instances are found in the strategies employed for reading and writing Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. Emphasis on and access to one or other of these positions involves different ethical considerations for theorising performativity.

In a post-colonial context, wherein subaltern agency is at risk of effacement by colonialist discourses, the notion of performativity is potentially problematic. Different subjects’ relationships to performativity are characterised by different levels of access to
ways in which identity is performed, particularly those ways relating to conscious manipulation of identity. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agents have been historically less and more privileged in how they access different performative modes and roles. White non-Aboriginal access to performative modes and roles is highly privileged and, in the case of colonialism, is secured through multiple coercive techniques, many of them violent. Non-Aboriginal privilege provides greater scope to work with unconscious aspects of performativity, such as addressing structural gender and class inequities among non-Aboriginal peoples. Non-Aboriginality also bestows greater access to modes of performativity wherein roles are consciously manipulated. In contrast, colonialist discourses exclude Aboriginal peoples from performing many roles. Legislation forbade Aboriginal people from choosing where to live and whom to marry, voting, and having the rights of citizenship. It also strictly prescribed and enforced roles through segregation, non-culturally specific education, racist persecution, and judicial and police powers. Aboriginal resistance to colonially inscribed modes of performativity was dangerous, as the punitive practices of colonial power have demonstrated. Because of such risks, acts of resistance, when undertaken by Aboriginal agents, were often necessarily more subtle and nuanced than acts of resistance aimed at gaining greater access to the privileges of performativity undertaken by non-Aboriginal agents.

These considerations show that it is important when using the concept of performativity to clearly designate its referent. As a concept, performativity can easily lend itself to being interpreted too generally because the spectrum of human performance encapsulates everything from theatrical productions to eating to survive. One can speak of the performativity of genocide, racism and dispossession just as one can speak of the performativity of practices and discourses that oppose them. The fundamental risk with analyses that do not adequately distinguish between different modes of performativity is
that difference is effaced through treating all discourses similarly, that is, such analyses simply identify the structural biases of discourses that order experience through analysis of their performativity. There also exists a risk in some critical analyses of overplaying the self-unweaving, self-referential threads of ordering discourses and overemphasising their internal instability. Such analyses might lose the benefits of criticism that undertakes comparative analyses of why one way of ordering experience is ethically or aesthetically better than another one. As Richard Rorty has argued, the reach of a discourse’s vocabulary, its power of description and interpretation, is one measure of a discourse’s worth. To render over the differences between discourses on the basis that they are structured unduly limits the scope of analysis.

John Frow, writing on the testimonies in *The Bringing them Home Report*, states that “the Report replaces a language of lies and blame, not with praise but with release; it breaks the hold of a false language, indeed a false reality, a reality which 'should not have happened'”. Its function is thus performative as well as descriptive, or rather it uses a description as the basis for a performative act” (Screen 1, par.18). Performative in this case carries Austin’s sense of the performative, that is, statements that accomplish, in their enunciation, an action that generates effects rather than simply describe some state of affairs (Parker and Sedgwick 3). Testimony is performative in this sense because it constructs the text for the purpose of achieving ethico-political goals while simultaneously reinforcing the reality of traumatic events through its very telling. Nevertheless, the notion of performance is further complicated in a post-colonial context because testimony as ethico-political performance can at times conflict with testimony as therapeutic performance. The interaction between testimony as post-colonial resistance and testimony as working-through trauma as discussed in detail in Chapter Three
produces tensions and conflicts that disrupt the smooth operation of testimonial performance.

Whitlock correctly argues that the discursive construction of the testimonial life-story is an important site for critical interest. Such a focus encourages articulation of the dynamism of identity instead of getting lost in the task of proving the truth of stable ahistorical identities. However, the truth claims of testimonial life-writing themselves do not have to be understood as simply the presentation of an authentic, ahistorical identity, but are better understood as the presentation of identity-in-becoming. The presentation of Aboriginality in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing need not be understood only in terms of a strategic and highly constructed response to mainstream culture. It is not only a performance of Aboriginality for non-Aboriginal culture, but is also a process of establishing Aboriginality for Aboriginal authors and people through developing new vocabularies and imaginaries for creating and articulating it. Testimonial life-writing is a performative event that creates new territories for Aboriginal people in post-colonial history. In this context, it is important that performativity is understood to be necessary for identity formation and survival in order that Aboriginal identity-as-becoming is not viewed as illegitimate because it may not perform itself according to non-Aboriginal readers’ expectations. This position argues for an analysis of performativity in terms of the discursive construction of author and reader, and against the idea that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing presents an ahistorical Aboriginal identity. Most importantly, it argues that performativity is being itself. Such identity-work is intimately connected to survival because the reinforcement of Aboriginal reality is an act that works against traumatic derealisation. Aboriginal testimony-as-performance is not only directed towards non-Aboriginal readers, but is also an engagement with post-colonial trauma within the lives of the testifiers and their communities. In this sense, testimony-as-
performativity can be understood to be the working-through of post-colonial trauma in the project of establishing and reinforcing Aboriginal identity.

It may be asked, if reality reinforcement is performative, why is not derealisation performative? The answer seems to be that traumatic derealisation involves a loss of affective and narrative control that jeopardises the survival of the sufferer of trauma. Such derealisation undermines performativity of one’s self as an act of agency establishment because traumatic derealisation is the unconscious, out of control acting-out of traumatic material that fragments the self rather than establishes it. Conscious engagement of derealised states may be, although I believe rarely, an act of identity establishment geared to access different affective and cognitive functions. Such a process can be seen as a sophisticated but risky off-setting of acting-out with working-through. It is also true that certain performative patterns can be seen in those undergoing traumatic derealisation but that is hardly the same thing as highly constructed, conscious, audience-orientated performativity. Traumatic derealisation is usually a failure of self-recognition, and testimonial life-writing’s reinforcement of identity, culture and history, through the positing of non-metaphorical facts, works against such derealisation.

It must also be remembered that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is not aimed at deconstructing and/or derealising identity but rather at establishing and reinforcing the reality of Aboriginal identity. This does not mean that there are no Aboriginal testimonial texts, or texts to come, that aim to do the former. As I argue, different engagements with identity and post-colonial trauma have generationally specific determinants. For instance, first generation survivors of the Holocaust focus on establishing non-metaphorical facts while second generation survivors often undertake more complicated, self-reflexive forms of narrative engagement with trauma. It seems clear that there are different orders of narrative engagement with identity construction and trauma, which means that there are
very different modes of performativity. Performativity-as-survival may be a first order function of narrative engagement with trauma that is crucial and prior to more complex levels of self-recognition. It is certainly distinguishable from performativity-for-others and for strategic purposes. It seems that responses to traumatic material demand certain kinds and sequences of performative response. This discussion of performativity as vital for understanding the processes and challenges facing the establishment of Aboriginal agency is further explored in a psychoanalytic sense in Chapter Five. At this point, it is still necessary to show how Aboriginal testimonial texts negotiate the conflicts between testimony as the performance of post-colonial resistance and testimony as psychotherapeutic working-through.

In her ‘Foreword’ to *Auntie Rita*, Rita Huggins discusses what can and cannot be spoken of in her testimonial life-story:

There are some parts of my life that I probably didn’t want to have in the book because to me they are shame jobs. But they are part of the story and Jackie tells me, in her loving way, that I don’t need to feel ashamed. Look who’s talking! My story is not rare among Aboriginal women.

There are, though, other things that I just cannot speak about because they are too painful to remember. These things I must keep to myself. Much has been done to me and my people that we find hard to talk about. One of the things that amazes people is that we have managed to survive without a huge amount of outward bitterness. Aboriginal people of all generations, and for very good reasons, withhold their bitterness about the injustices that have happened and still continue to happen today. I’m not sure why I let go of my bitterness. I certainly remember those feelings but try to replace them with more positive feelings. That is how I have survived, and remain feeling strong. (2)

A similar self-censorship and self-fashioning is found in Gilbert’s *Living Black*, which consists of what Gilbert himself terms the ‘testimonies’ of older Aborigines gathered from interviews recorded on to tape. In *Living Black*, the interviews are organised into
chapters that form a series of short testimonial narratives that can be usefully contrasted with the more complex narratives found in longer testimonial texts. Their small length facilitates identifying the defining characteristics of testimonial narrative. The interviews consist of first person narratives that address issues of racist injustice experienced by the testifiers. Within the generic spectrum of life-writing, which contains many generic features, these interviews clearly display testimonial features more strongly than autobiographical features. Gilbert identifies the performative aspects of testimonial life-writing as follows:

The original aims of this book were to show the actual condition of Aboriginal people in Australia through their own testimony and from this to show how they think about themselves and their background. The interviews fulfil the second of these aims, but not the first. Aboriginals have been acutely aware of their white audiences for a long time now and the presence of a tape recorder and the knowledge that a book is to be written causes an automatic self-censorship which is understandable considering that the majority of Aboriginals are deeply ashamed of what they know is the truth about their people today. So, together with many sympathetic whites, they embrace and propagate a number of myths about themselves: that Aboriginals share freely; that they have a strong feeling of community; that they don’t care about money and lack the materialism of white society; that they care more deeply for their children than do white parents; and so on. Such fallacies are generally believed by both black and white people. Unbigoted whites believe them because the human desolation that is Aboriginal Australia is not yet understood in this country. The prejudiced lack understanding of, and honesty about, causes and in consequence they lack compassion, too. Those who are not prejudiced, but also not understanding, search for more favourable stereotypes. (1)
The reality that I am talking about is only hinted at in these interviews. So, there are the uneasy musings of Elsie Jones, or Kate Lansborough will say ‘There were some other things I could tell you but I don’t think I’d better put them on this tape. Personal things that happened when I was little.’ Or as Shirley Smith puts it ‘... there’s a loyalty ... some things you can’t talk about.’ The experiences hinted at are what have created the thinking of people who, in the words of Betty Watson, can say of themselves ‘Actually you was nothing, an Aboriginal.’

The real horror story of Aboriginal Australia today is locked in police files and child welfare reports. It is a story of private misery and degradation, caused by a complex chain of historical circumstance, that continues into the present. (1-2)

As Gilbert argues, and Morgan’s grandmother and Rita Huggins demonstrate, there are some things Aboriginal life-story tellers will not tell. The declaration that one is speaking the truth and the practice of maintaining silence on issues that are personally traumatic alerts the reader to the self-censorship and self-fashioning of the testifiers, that is, to a performance of the self geared to foster a recognitive contract aimed at establishing an ethical citizenry.

Self-censorship is more common in older Aboriginal people and it is not surprising that Gilbert’s interviews were conducted with older Aboriginal people during the nineteen-seventies. In the past thirty years, generational differences between older and younger Aboriginal people have occurred in the patterns of revelation and censorship. Rita Huggins and Gilbert’s interviewees are older Aboriginal people and their testimonial style differs from younger Aboriginal writers such as Langford Ginibi. Morgan identifies a similar generational difference regarding the censorship of the family’s Aboriginality by her mother:

‘All those years, Mum’, I said, ‘how could you have lied to us all those years?’.

‘It was only a little white lie’, she replied sadly.
I couldn’t help laughing at her unintentional humour. In no time at all, we were both giggling uncontrollably. It was as if a wall that had been between us suddenly crumbled away. I felt closer to Mum than I had for years. (135)

This generational difference is explained by Whitlock’s argument that “[w]hat must be told to, and what will be heard by these readerships is limited, and negotiated with care. The occasion requires ‘truth,’ a culturally specific and appropriate presentation of subjectivity and experience” (208).

Generational shifts and the changing political and cultural environment structure testimonial narratives differently. In addition to Whitlock’s point, it is important to note, in the spirit of commensurability, that a similar generational difference is also seen in responses to the Holocaust, wherein very different strategies are employed by first and second generation survivors for constructing their testimonies. It has been suggested that this is a consequence of a common sequence of response to traumatic events whereby the first testifiers to a traumatic event concern themselves with establishing non-metaphorical facts about the traumatic event, while second generation survivors create more complex narratives of surviving trauma based on these facts. Jackie Huggins identifies such a shift in the past twenty-five years to a greater and more creative exploration of Aboriginal history when she writes:

> However, these moves towards cultural genocide failed and instead Aboriginals have become successively more visible and vocal in the face of attempted annihilation, and a great store of historical and cultural knowledge has begun to surface. Oral histories, storytellings, philosophy, biography and autobiography are coming to be published. I feel humble to be a recipient of this knowledge. Recording and publishing the memories of elderly Aboriginals is an especially urgent task, otherwise important aspects of Australian history that our elders can pass on will be lost forever. (Auntie Rita 5-6)
The urgency associated with recording the testimonies of older Aboriginal people that Jackie Huggins alerts the reader of *Auntie Rita* to contributes to the focus found in older Aboriginal people’s testimonies on establishing non-metaphorical facts.

Generationally specific sources of shame are factors that affect self-censorship and the focus on non-metaphorical facts. The move to greater openness in the testimonial narratives of younger Aboriginal authors, and the publication of more and yet more life-stories, is a consequence of generational shifts regarding sources of shame. Writing on generational differences and the impact they have on the process of constructing a testimonial narrative, Jackie Huggins writes:

> This book is the result of my mother’s and my combined efforts and of our mutual Aboriginality. It is born out of so many years of our talking. During the book’s writing, we have had many arguments (fighting with our tongues, as Rita calls it) and some of this has not been resolved, continues and remains evident in these pages. In our talking are reflected both the things we have in common and the differences that arise between two Aboriginal women a generation apart; one born in 1921 and raised on a mission, the other born ‘free’ in the 50s. Our differences reflect changed political groundings. For instance, for Rita, ‘Black’ is only used among ourselves and with those non-Aboriginal people we trust, because to use it publicly raises negative connotations and prejudice, whereas for my generation Black has been reclaimed with pride. (Auntie Rita 3)

*Auntie Rita* and *Living Black* demonstrate that testimonial narratives employ a large amount of material obtained from oral mediums like interviews and eye-witness reports provided by older Aboriginal people who aim to provide historical evidence of Aboriginal lives. Langer argues that the style of the oral testimonial narrative is not designed to make us complicit with the text as do literary narratives and this prohibits “intellectual or emotional dialogue with the contents […] because the testimonies are not based on common experience or an imaginable past, real or literary” (16). Langer points
out that “[a] written narrative is finished when we begin to read it, its opening, middle, and end already established between the covers of the book. This appearance of form is reassuring [. . . whereas] oral testimony steers a less certain course [. . .]” (17). An example of the difference between oral and literary representation is given when Langer recalls a survivor stopping her oral testimony to read a passage from her autobiography dealing with the same event (18). The memory lapses associated with her oral testimony are countered by reference to a completed narrative. Langer further writes on the difference between written and oral testimony: “[w]ritten memoirs, by the very strategies available to their authors — style, chronology, analogy, imagery, dialogue, a sense of character, a coherent moral vision — strive to narrow this space [between narrator and reader], easing us into their unfamiliar world through familiar (and hence comforting?) literary devices” (19). Later, Langer provides examples of highly ‘literary’ styles to contrast oral testimony with written memoirs (41).

In contrast with Langer, I argue that when reading the testimonies of, for example, Langford Ginibi, Rita and Jackie Huggins and Menchú, the reader encounters powerful distancing techniques and a ‘non-literary’ style — features that Langer attributes to oral testimony. Langford Ginibi’s and Menchú’s testimonial life-stories are highly constructed while simultaneously preserving patterns of oral speech that are less constructed, or constructed in such way to give the strong sense of presence characteristic of oral testimony.

Rivero, writing on testimony, argues that “[t]he ‘intrusive narrator’ [. . .] gives the text a high degree of intimacy, making the reader get close and turning him or her into an ‘accomplice;’ textual/real distance is eliminated by this process of reader involvement” (72). Rivero goes on to write of testimony that “[t]he speech, faithfully recorded on tape, transcribed and ‘written,’ is punctuated by a repeated series of
interlocutive signs, mainly interjections or verbal directives which stress for a reader of the text the sometimes phatic (contact-oriented) function of these markers: ‘You know?’ ‘See?’ ‘Get me?’ ‘You follow?’ ‘Look here’ ‘Like I said’” (72). Such phatic speech-acts occur throughout Langford Ginibi’s works, for example, with the repetitive use of the interrogative “aye?”

The resemblance between oral testimony and testimonial life-writing can also be demonstrated by juxtaposing testimony given in *The Bringing them Home Report* with excerpts from Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. The following quotation is confidential oral testimony given for the report addressing the inter-generational effects of being separated from one’s family:

There’s things in my life that I haven’t dealt with and I’ve passed them on to my children. Gone to pieces. Anxiety attacks. I’ve passed this on to my kids. I know for a fact if you go and knock at their door they run and hide.

I looked at my son today who had to be taken away because he was going to commit suicide because he can’t handle it; he just can’t take any more of the anxiety attacks that he and Karen have. I have passed that on to my kids because I haven’t dealt with it. How do you deal with it? How do you sit down and go through all those years of abuse? Somehow I’m passing down negativity to my kids. (222)

The following quote is from Langford Ginibi’s written testimonial text:

Nobby sounded so dejected. He wanted us to come and get him. When me and Jeffery arrived at his place, he was like a lost soul. He had a little bag packed and he was cuddlin his dog, Pippa. He was so sad and distressed. So hurt. I could see that he was falling apart. I can see him now, sitting in the back seat of Jeffery’s car, holding on to his dog. *(Haunted by the Past 48-49)*
There are numerous examples of the shared generic features between The Bringing them Home Report, Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation and Aboriginal testimonial life-stories.

**Testimonial Life-Writing, Secrets and Difference**

Significant tension may arise for the reader of testimonial life-writing who desires to identify with the author when that reader confronts the presence of secrets. Doris Sommer writes of Menchú’s testimonial that “[t]he book […] does not presume any immediacy between the narrating ‘I’ and the readerly ‘you’” (131). Menchú’s testimonial lets readers know that she is keeping information secreted from them and she is aware that this device might frustrate the desire in the reader to empathise with the narrator. Sommer observes that such a desire hides a controlling disposition “that amount[s] to construing the text as a kind of artless ‘confession,’ like the ones that characterized surveillance techniques of nineteenth-century colonizers […]” (131). Associated with empathy is a desire for the presence of, and intimacy with, the narrator of the testimonial life-story that may be appropriative and prohibitive of the difference between the reader and the writer.

We have seen that some theorists (Beverley, Rivero, Dalziell) argue that empathy is a positive effect of the positioning of the reader in the testimonial life-story because it cultivates solidarity. However, Sommer is critical of its effects. Menchú’s thwarting of empathetic interest through her refusal to reveal her secrets shows a “more active and strategic [agency] than our essentialist notions of authenticity have allowed” (133). Sommer further writes: “[t]he unyielding tropes add up to a rhetoric of particularism that

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42 While the reader is often asked to empathise with the Aboriginal perspective, the thwarting of empathy in these texts through the non-disclosure of secrets works against full identification by the reader with the narrator. Aboriginal testimonies encourage the reader to identify with the political and therapeutic agenda presented in the texts but discourage identification with Aboriginality itself.
cautions privileged readers against easy appropriations of Otherness into manageable universal categories” (133). In this way, Menchú’s secrets form part of “organized resistance as a narrative speech” (139), because Menchú assumes the reader’s desire to know. Sommer writes, “[i]f we happen not to be anthropologists, how passionately interested does she imagine the reader to be in her ancestral secrets? Yet her narrative makes this very assumption, and therefore piques a curiosity that may not have preexisted her resistance” (137). Her refusal to disclose metaleptically constructs a questioner and the usual sequence of cause and effect is reversed. Through the use of this special form of metonymy (metalepsis), Menchú registers Quiche agency. Relatedly, Menchú’s persona depends on her making careful omissions in her representation of herself and her family, such as her reticence concerning the alcoholism of her father. To achieve the powerful representation of Quiche people that I Rigoberta Menchú does, it is necessary for Menchú to break with that tradition and omit facets of it. Such artifice is a testament to subaltern agency rather than a de-legitimation of it and alerts the reader to the technical devices involved in constructing a successful interventional testimonial.

Sommer distinguishes autobiography from testimonial life-writing by arguing that the autobiography invites identification with the ‘I’ whereas testimonial life-writing, through the use of narrative techniques like those outlined above, discourages identification. Borrowing from Sacvan Bercovitch, Sommer writes, “[r]ecognizing our limitations [for empathy and identification] is ‘enabling,’ because such an act has a double valence: acknowledging what we cannot know and what we can” and this in turn “defends us from any illusion of complete or stable knowledge, and therefore from the desire to replace one apparently limited speaker for another more totalizing one” (143). Such an approach maintains a respect for the differences that exist between the reader and the narrator and such “distance can be read as a lesson in the condition of possibility for
coalitional politics” (157). Menchú’s testimonial text continually evokes a ‘limit experience’ through her refusal to divulge secrets and in this way the text ensures that difference is maintained in the cognitive relationship between author and reader.

Limit experiences are also involved in the process of producing testimonial texts in addition to the process of reading them. Because of the polyphonic quality of testimonial texts that results from the multiple sources involved in writing group history, the information that comprises the life-story has to be carefully negotiated with other family members. *My Place* presents family secrets to create narrative tension and identifies the types of negotiation involved in writing family history. Morgan writes:

‘Glad [Morgan’s mother], you’re always goin’ on about the past. You and Arthur [Morgan’s great uncle] are a good pair, you don’t know what a secret is.’

‘It’s not a matter of secrets, Nan’, Mum reasoned. ‘You seem to be ashamed of your past, I don’t know why. All my life, you’ve never told me anything, never let me belong to anyone. All my life, I’ve wanted a family, you won’t even tell me about my own grandmother. You go away and let Arthur talk, at least he tells me something.’

Nan opened her mouth to reply, but Arthur cut her off with, ‘If you don’t go, Daisy, I’ll tell them your Aboriginal name’.

Nan was furious. ‘You wouldn’t!’ she fumed.

‘Too right I will’, said Arthur. Nan knew when she was beaten, she stormed off. (148)

And:

‘Where was Nan born, Mum?’ I asked her one day.
‘Oh, I don’t know. Up North somewhere.’
‘Has she ever talked to you about her life?’
‘You know she won’t talk about the past. She says she can’t remember.’
‘Do you think she does remember?’
‘I think so, but she thinks we’re prying, trying to hurt her’. (138)
How a reader responds to secrets in reading testimonial texts differs from how secrets are responded to and negotiated within families producing those texts. The revelation of secrets that may be considered vital for the establishment of the testifier’s and family’s cultural history may not be considered appropriate by the testifier for publication.

To respect the non-disclosure of secrets is an example of basing cognitive relationships on an appreciation of difference. Such a cognitive structure between author and reader is a practical example of the positive forms recognition can take in contrast to the collapsing of viewpoint found in proto-typical autobiography. To recapitulate, using Redding’s description of Hegel’s dialectics of recognition, “Hegel’s thought [. . .] thematizes precisely that element of recognition, its dimension of ‘releasement,’ which allows subjects to be reconciled by the ‘word of reconciliation’ in such a way that their singularity is neither eclipsed nor absorbed into a single unified self-consciousness” (133). Marcia Langton makes a similar point when she argues that a model of relationality that takes account of intersubjectivity is “generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue, where the individuals test and adapt imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension” (81). As such, the reading of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing “is the progressive expansion or development of patterns of theoretical and practical cognition together with that of the patterns of recognition within which they are able to function” (Redding 129), that is, deeper and more knowledgeable world-views are dependent on generous intersubjective recognition. Even negative and violent forms of relation are dependent on recognition: “Conflict is one possible shape of intersubjective relation; it signifies the refusal of recognition. Conflict may be a type of intersubjective relation, but how the failure of recognition can be a ‘type’ or ‘shape’ of recognition is far from clear [. . .] struggle is both a ‘negation’ of and a type of recognition” (143). Reading and
writing Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is the execution of successful and unsuccessful struggles for recognition.

The work of cultural difference operating between author and reader is also registered through the subaltern’s use of the coloniser’s language. Against arguments that the subaltern cannot speak,\footnote{For instance, as argued by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1988.} it can be argued that difference is maintained when the subaltern uses the coloniser’s language and to some extent it is only by employing the language of the coloniser that these differences are registered. Against the essentialising implications of the notion that the subaltern’s voices cannot be heard, there is the possibility that subaltern differences are articulated in the coloniser’s language. Difference, which is essential for ethical recognitive structures and the successful narrativisation of trauma, is evoked by the discrepancies that result from translation. For example, in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the reader can only know that there are Quiche cultural secrets through Menchú’s attestation to them in Spanish.

Likewise, many of the Aboriginal testimonial life-stories examined in this study not only interpolate Aboriginal words into the English text, but also highlight the significance such interpolation has for registering Aboriginal identity. Jackie Huggins comments on the text of *Auntie Rita*:

*In the text are some words and expressions that will be unfamiliar to most non-Aboriginal readers. There are Pitjara, Wakka Wakka and Aboriginal English ways of talking. We made a decision not to differentiate these words in the text because they are part of our natural way of speech. This may cause some unsettling and confusing moments for a white reader. However, there is a glossary for those unfamiliar with our languages.*

*After getting many of Rita’s memories on tape, I began, through naivety, to translate my mother’s voice, trying to do it justice while knowing that this book would have a predominantly white audience. This was my first cardinal sin. (The second was losing the disk!) Although Rita
speaks a standard English, her voice often got lost amid my own as I attempted to ‘protect’ her from non-Aboriginal critics. Black writers grapple with this all the time. But Aboriginal ways of speaking need to be maintained and protected, for they are authentic, precious and irreplaceable. (3)

**Recognition Theory**

Testimonial life-writing opens up a space for dialogue and recognition (even if it be internal to the reader) between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Such writing works against collapsing the Other’s viewpoint into one’s own viewpoint and, as Redding notes, this is important for “preserv[ing] the sense that the other cannot be reduced to the recognizer’s interpretative concept” (122). Later, writing on Williams, Redding comments, “Williams glosses entlassen here with ‘granting the other the freedom to recognize or to withhold recognition . . . the recognition that really counts is the recognition from the other that is not at the disposal of the self”’ (123). This is precisely what Aboriginal testimonial life-writing does, that is, recognise non-Aboriginal readers in a way that they cannot recognise themselves.

Redding’s work on Hegelian dialectics provides a useful framework for understanding the various ways discussed throughout this chapter in which the non-Aboriginal reader of testimonial life-writing is relativised in relation to the testifier. Redding continues:

the realization is forced upon the combatant that the world is not simply as it appears from its subjective point of view: first, the combatant includes itself as an object in the world and not just as a knowing subject of the world; next, it includes its other as more than a cognizable object, and even more than an intentional subject mirroring its own intentions. It has to recognize the other as an intentional subject for whom it is a direct object, and this is an intentionality it itself could never directly have. In
fact, it would seem that if the element of releasement is a structural feature of acknowledgement per se, then indeed Hegel had described precisely that ‘third’ form of intersubjectivity that Gadamer attributes to genuine dialogue. (123)

Redding offers insights that are essential for the development of successful recognitive structures: firstly, the importance of moving from identifying the self solely as a subject to viewing the self as an object in the world and thus an object for others; and, secondly, the realisation that the Other embodies an unassimilable difference. It is crucial that this “singularity is neither eclipsed nor absorbed into a single unified self-consciousness” (133). When reading Aboriginal testimonial life-writing it is vital to not conflate the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewpoints and, if it is the case, to recognise one’s position as a non-Aboriginal reader, that is, as an object of Aboriginal consciousnesses implicated in the history of colonialism.

Aboriginal life-writing can be fruitfully read in terms of the recognitive structure of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* because “[i]n some sense the *Phenomenology* has taught us to see ourselves not as self-sufficient atomic beings but as beings whose existence is, in a strong sense, dependent on belonging to the recognitive structure of a community” (Redding 135). In reading Aboriginal testimonial life-writing there is an opportunity to take up a position in the recognitive structure of our community rather than dismiss colonial history through a strategic ignorance that has been fundamental for the execution of past colonial practices and is implicated in neo-colonial practices. The opening up of recognitive structures through the releasement that allows the Other to give or withhold recognition generates a “recognitive intersubjectivity [. . . which is] a necessary condition

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44 This third form of intersubjective recognition corresponds with this study’s position on much cultural theory such as representational theory and ways of working-through trauma, that is, it maintains a vitalising disjunction between the self and other and between the representative and the represented.
for self-consciousness (e.g., ‘human reality can be begotten and preserved only as ‘recognized’ reality’) [. . .]” (119).

While there is material in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing that is not fully known or witnessed because it is in excess of our current vocabularies and imaginaries, the importance of the quality of attention the model witnesses perform remains. To different extents in different contexts through history, the testifier and reader are both incapable of witnessing the traumatic event completely due to the effects of latency and the impasses traumatic material fosters. However, this limit point itself is something that can be shared between them. A witness who can say “I know”, claiming to fully empathise, fails to register the limit experience involved in the encounter with a traumatic event. In contrast to performing full empathy, the dialectics of recognition as discussed in this chapter provides a better framework with which to engage with testimonial texts because it maintains difference while opening spaces through which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples may recognise each other [] it supports a coalitional, relational intersubjectivity instead of an intersubjectivity characterised by the aim to achieve full identification between the testifier and the witness to the testimony. Similarly, it is through recognising the dialectic of knowing and not knowing, which defines the traumatic experience, that a link can begin to form between the narrator of testimonial life-writing and the reader of it. For the witness of testimony to claim that he or she can fully know the experience of the other’s trauma is to betray that experience because to say “I know” or “I saw”, in its “very establishing of a [. . .] referent, erases [. . .] the reality of an event” (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 29). Acknowledging limit experiences is essential for the process of working-through and re-externalising trauma because such acknowledgment acts as a point from which to begin to develop narratives that extend our understanding of traumatic histories.
Yet, equally, to believe that to hear trauma is categorically impossible risks prurently adopting victimhood. In instances of the valorisation of trauma as the unrepresentable Other (the negative sublime), the reader risks coopting historical trauma with structural trauma. As discussed in Chapter Three, this is a transhistorical move that collapses specific historical events into examples of transhistorical structures. By doing this, the secondary witness to trauma (the reader) assumes the position of the primary witness to trauma (the author/testifier). Instead of this, it is preferable that the reader “attempt to put [. . . him or her self] in the other’s position without taking the other’s place. (It does no one any good simply to become a surrogate victim, however compelling the inclination may at times be)” (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 198). On countering victimisation, LaCapra writes, “the radical ambivalence of repetition — its ‘undecidability’ if you prefer — implies the possible role of counter-vailing forces that may not entirely heal wounds but that allow mediated ways of surviving survival — forces such as mourning itself, where grief is repeated in reduced, normatively controlled, and socially supported form” (199). As I argued in Chapter Three, Aboriginal testifiers continue the hard work of working-through traumatic histories in order to establish narrative and affective control over traumatic material. Similarly, the reader’s engagement with these texts as a form of historical reenactment or repetition can also achieve positive results. As Dalziell writes:

If these texts have a major part to play in a process of reconciliation between black and white in Australia, ‘How is this to be done?’ One way, [Brady] suggests, is by sympathetic re-enactment, by involving others imaginatively in another’s experience and coming by way of re-enactment to an understanding of the others, ‘feeling with them’. (132)

However, as argued above, such imaginative involvement must avoid imaginative capture, and sympathetic re-enactment must avoid simply acting-out. It is preferable to
maintain and continue to negotiate the limit points that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, between what can be phrased now and what may be phrased in the future, between the affective and linguistic aspects of traumatic experience, and between acting-out and working-through, because these limits are equally points of connection and separation and of identification and difference. They must not be collapsed into redemptive narratives that seek full identification between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples or a non-situated transcendence of traumatic experience. Nor should these limit points of difference be reinforced as impasses that cannot be successfully negotiated and productively reconfigured. This is why the dialectical approach to recognition undertaken throughout this study is important because it endeavours to register and maintain the dynamic ambiguity at work in different forms of identity establishment.
Chapter 5

Aboriginal Testimonial Life-Writing and Schizo-Analytic Theory

Throughout this study I have argued that ways of conceptualising the subject in psychoanalytic and post-colonial theory provide a better vocabulary for articulating Aboriginal testimonial life-writing’s practices and goals than post-structuralist deconstructive method or abstracted formulations of subjectivity and language as found in Cartesian-like models. In contrast with the autonomous and sovereign subject discussed in Chapter One, psychoanalytic and post-colonial theory present a decentred subject whose sovereignty, in a post-colonial context, is displaced by forces such as post-colonial trauma and mourning. The processes involved in working-through these forces encourage an exploration of psychoanalytic and post-colonial theory that departs from post-structuralist theorisations that present subjects who disarticulate themselves in the very process of establishing themselves.

This chapter explores schizo-analysis’ highly mobile understanding of subjectivity to assess if it provides tools that are more responsive to post-colonial conditions and texts than other psychoanalytic, post-structuralist and realist approaches. For instance, post-colonial theorists have employed the notion of the rhizome as a metaphor for the post-colonial condition, but also as a metaphor for the possibilities of resisting colonial and neo-colonial practices (Ashcroft and Salter). The concept of the rhizome is used in a sense that is as much prescriptive as it is descriptive, that is, it describes the post-colonial condition as well as identifies the practices that may transform it. The following examination aims to show that schizo-analysis can be a more sensitive theoretical instrument for registering the post-colonial condition than the often over-deterministic theories reviewed elsewhere in this study. Nevertheless, despite embracing schizo-
analytic tools, I maintain that schizo-analysis’ understanding of the subject as highly dynamic and open to possibilities of subjective *becoming* must be balanced by an understanding of the ways in which the subject is strongly circumscribed and determined by the forces of post-colonial traumatic experience as discussed in Chapter Three. Yet, as Friedlander notes, it is important to have a dual project which “[i]n a sense [. . .] is the simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naive historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closure”. My use of schizo-analysis is compatible with Friedlander’s search “for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naive historical positivism” because it prescribes a dynamic model of post-colonial subjectivity (qtd. in LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 212), yet aims to avoid the tendency to overplay the possibilities of subjective becoming because such a tendency risks underplaying the determination of subjects by colonial forces.

The purpose of this chapter is to further draw upon developments in psychoanalytic models of decentred subjectivity and models of performativity to examine their usefulness for understanding post-colonial conditions as they are presented in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing. It moves from Lacan’s adaptation of Freud’s psychic typology to Kristeva and on to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s models of the subject to advance this examination. It argues that there has been a shift from a strict focus on language in Lacan and Kristeva towards the development of conceptual frameworks for thinking about extra-linguistic, affective systems pertinent to the discussion of traumatised subjects. It argues that some psychoanalytic theory’s prioritisation of language and of concepts such as Oedipalisation and other psychic complexes is a universalising, difference-effacing strategy. Such an exploration is important for showing that there are formulations of subjectivity that characterise the subject as more highly dynamic and
mutable than traditional conceptualisations. These formulations of the subject are necessary for thinking about the processes involved in working-through post-colonial trauma because they can better articulate the complex co-production of social forces and subjects in specific historical contexts. They stand in contrast to Cartesian-like models of the subject as well as redemptive totalisations and impasse-oriented narratives that unnecessarily restrict the possibilities open to traumatised subjects for working-through trauma. This chapter focuses on the need to theorise the specificity of different subjectivities and their embodied histories, maintaining that psychoanalytic concepts like working-through and acting-out are useful even though their deployment as mere parts of larger complexes is outmoded.

Kristeva is used as a link between Lacan and Deleuze and Guattari because she focuses on pre-linguistic affective systems as do Deleuze and Guattari while remaining committed to Oedipalisation as does Lacan. Of these theorists, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theory most strongly embraces itself as a figurative practice and focuses on the specificity of the metaphorical clusters that produce subjectivity. Such theoretical mobility allows the specificity of different subjects to be better articulated and means that schizo-analysis avoids the tendency in some theory to adopt the ‘god-tricks’ of relativism and totalisation which “promise [...] vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully” (Haraway 191). In contrast to schizo-analysis, traditional (Freudian) psychoanalytic theory argues that systems of representation govern subjectivity, yet neglects to acknowledge that its modelisation of subjectivity is figurative and generates subjectivity in the same instance that it claims to reflect it. In this sense, traditional psychoanalytic theory, in its guise as a science, effaces itself as a figurative discursive practice. Schizo-analysis forgoes the universalising claims of Lacanian and Kristevan psychoanalysis in order to develop conceptual tools that are capable of discussing the
specificity of subjectivity and cultural and political conditions. The specificity of schiz-analytic theory makes it compatible with LaCapra’s project of recovering agency through object-specification and the careful balancing of acting-out with working-through in dealing with traumatic material.

It is important to contextualise Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work within the history of psychoanalysis, particularly in relation to their development of Lacan’s psychoanalytic models, to show its continuity with and development of psychoanalysis’ interpretive schema. In Chapter Three I discussed how Lacan reinvigorated Freud during the 1950s and 1960s by reconfiguring Freud’s structure of personality within Saussure’s linguistic structure. In the discussion of realism in Chapter One, I showed how Saussurean linguistics argued that signification has no positive identity but is rather the consequence of differences within a linguistic system. Saussure broke up signification into its constituent parts, the signifier and the signified, and showed “that the elements composing the sign, as well as the sign itself, can only have identity by virtue of their pure difference” (Grosz, Jacques Lacan 93). Yet, where Saussure saw the construction of the sign as a result of an equal influence by the signifier and the signified, Lacan gave the signifier the privileged position, arguing that the signified is simply another signifier. Lacan represents this as S/s where the signified (s) is simply a signifier (S) that has crossed over the bar (/), “[f]or in so far as it is itself only pure function of the signifier, the algorithm can reveal only the structure of a signifier in this transfer” and in no way can the signified be revealed (152).

Though Lacan’s account of the subject has proven valuable for many literary theorists, this study has argued that there are texts and subjects that exceed his models.45

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45 In Lacan’s model, subjectivity and the text interrelate in the following way. A nascent form of subjectivity arises in the Imaginary stage. At this stage, the infant begins to develop a basic sense of the self/Other distinction. During the Imaginary stage, the child develops a visual image of itself (the imago) that locates and orders the child in space before it has any physical control over space. This stage is the first
Aboriginal testimonial texts are taken to exemplify the return of the repressed, that is, the emergence of a particular Real into a particular Symbolic. Furthermore, because these testimonial texts are characterised by the way in which they foreground issues of collective significance, it is important to note here that Lacan’s (and traditional psychoanalysis’) emphasis on the individual is a shortsighted application of psychoanalytic concepts. Central to this study is the broadening of the relevance of such concepts from the individual to communities, societies and nations. LaCapra writes on this point that “it may be worth contending that psychoanalysis is misconstrued as a psychology of the individual: its basic concepts should be understood as undercutting the binary opposition between the individual and society [. . .]” (Representing the Holocaust 173).

Lacan argues that the emergence of the repressed produces subjects and texts that are susceptible to an experience of mental breakdown. Consequently, some may argue that those interested in the liberating potential of the breakdown of the Symbolic glamorise madness and traumatic experience. While there are obvious reasons why the experience of mental breakdown should be avoided, the prospect of identifying liberating processes in the breakdown, or rather reworking, of the Symbolic is attractive.

An inquiry into the effects on thinking about language use and textual production that a reconfiguration of Lacan’s model offers is a productive exercise in several ways for examining processes for reworking the Symbolic. Identifying potential ways of opening movement away from the immediacy of lived experience (the Real) into that of the representational function of language (the Symbolic). The separation of these two functions, the Real and the Symbolic, is effected by the child’s complete entry into the Symbolic via the Oedipal complex. The Symbolic is the stage upon and within which the child attains the speaking subject position of ‘I’. Thus, to understand Lacan’s schema of the formation of the subject, it is essential to refer to the rules of language that he argues are central to and coterminous with the three stages through which the subject emerges. Lastly, as mentioned elsewhere in this study, the term ‘stage/s’ does not refer solely to temporal stages but also to ‘stage’ in the theatrical sense of a site of performance.
up Lacan’s model changes the basically repressive structure of language production that he presents. On the limits and possibilities of Lacan’s model, LaCapra writes:

Actively disengaged from patriarchal assumptions and related instead to a transformed notion of normatively regulated interaction, the Symbolic would mark the entry into language in the specific sense of usage that would not definitively transcend all blind spots, bring total integration, or even serve as a ‘cure’ for ‘psychosis’ but would at least enable (while never ensuring) a viable role for critical judgment and responsible action.

(Representing the Holocaust 208)

Lacan’s conception of the acquisition of the Symbolic implies acquiescence to patriarchy and other cohorts of the Symbolic and, thereby, forecloses alternative ways of occupying the Symbolic. Extending this position in regards to post-colonial agency, Lacan’s conception of the Symbolic forecloses the possibility of subaltern acquisition of the dominant Symbolic because such acquisition necessarily suppresses subaltern agency, just as it suppresses the ‘feminine’ or anything viewed as non-normative. LaCapra’s notion of the Symbolic cited above is more useful for thinking about subaltern subjects by virtue of the fact that it allows the registration and even transformation of suppressed elements. In the psychoanalytic theory of Kristeva and Lacan, the disruption of the Symbolic can only occur through the irruption of the Imaginary or the Real (usually as a form of madness) and the Symbolic cannot be contested within its own terms.

Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari have each identified problems with Lacan’s model of subjectivity. Guattari writes that “[a]s a Universe of emergence, a sensitive plate registering all incorporeal becomings, the emergent self can in no way be assimilated to a psychogenetic phase, such as the oral phase” (Chaosmosis 66), nor to “a maternal-oral stasis, nor to a language stasis, although they incontestably participate in it” (75). If the subject cannot be reduced to discrete psychogenetic phases (individual or social phases) as Guattari argues, an inquiry into other frameworks of psychogenesis is required.
Kristeva’s notion of the relations between the semiotic, thetic and symbolic provides one point of departure from Lacan that allows access to pre-Symbolic material and opens the possibility of the registration of subaltern experience.

Like Lacan, Kristeva links the development of subjectivity with textual practices. However, her conception of textuality or systems of signification in general differs from Lacan’s because she does not view the Real as that which is impossible to signify or as absolutely repressed. Rather, Kristeva argues that the Real or, as she terms it, the ‘semiotic’, continues to exert an influence after the subject’s entry into the Symbolic.

Kristeva envisions the semiotic as that process through which physical drives and energies circulate, mapping out a space for the subject to exist in. It organises the body within pre-linguistic systems like those Freud termed ‘mnemic’, which are based on “different associative principles [. . . like] simultaneity [. . .] similarity, homophony, antipathy, cause and effect [. . .]” (Grosz, Jacques Lacan 86), or “energies, rhythms, forces and corporeal residues necessary for representation” (Grosz, Sexual Subversions 43). These pre-linguistic systems are seen as necessary in any formation of linguistic representation that occurs in the Symbolic. They not only foreshadow these later representational systems but continuously shadow them, acting as disruptive and vitalising forces, both preconditioning and reconditioning the Symbolic.

Kristeva terms pre-linguistic, affective signifying systems the ‘genotext’, and linguistic signifying systems the ‘phenotext’. Later in her work, these terms are replaced and supplemented by the terms ‘process’ and ‘unity’ respectively (Grosz, Sexual Subversions 51). These terms do not operate as a simple dualism wherein when one pole is active the other is deactivated. Rather, they function together, although one will be dominant at any particular time in any subject/text. Any irruption of the genotext is

46 The semiotic or the chora performs a similar role to Lacan’s Real.
always contained and Kristeva sees this as a result of the repressive forces within the
phenotext that are required to maintain unity. However, they are never entirely successful
and the genotext continues to act disruptively. Both exist simultaneously in a dialectical
interchange that is never resolved, and they are as representative of any textual production
as they are of any production of subjectivity. Because Kristeva provides scope for the
registration of the genotext within the phenotext, her theorisation of the subject is one that
allows for the possibility for subaltern subjects to gain access to and transform the
Symbolic.

The relationship between the subject and the text is an intimately connected one.
The subject cannot precede the text, be it the genotext or the phenotext, because “[t]he
subjectivity to which Kristeva refers is constructed within the text. This discursive ‘I’ is
not entirely distinct from the living social subject: the latter is to a large extent socially
structured and positioned by the discursive construction of the ‘I’ in the symbolic”
(Grosz, Sexual Subversions 55). This point is crucial for understanding the profound
nature of representation, for “the original and proper meaning of ‘representation’ is not a
‘second presentation,’ but a ‘presentation to the self’ [. . .]” (Nancy 148). The subject is
born in the act of presenting itself to itself. In a post-colonial context, the subaltern is not
represented in the Symbolic mimetically, that is, as a second presentation. Rather,
because Symbolic representation cannot be separated from the subaltern’s first
presentation of itself to itself and, because in Kristeva’s framework, the repressed
reflexively reorders the Symbolic, Kristeva provides a space for the subaltern element to
reconfigure and transform the Symbolic. For Kristeva, the subject presents itself doubly
and repeatedly in a play between ‘process’ and ‘unity’. Unity resorbs process and process
resorbs unity and the two modes of subjectification/textualisation exchange one another.
Unity as repressive, State driven and canonical is subverted by the radical trinity
“madness, holiness and poetry” (Kristeva qtd. in Grosz, Sexual Subversions 52), in that they break “the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself and releasing from beneath them the drives borne by vocalic or kinetic differences, jouissance works its way into the social” (Kristeva qtd. in Grosz, Sexual Subversions 56). This is a utopian vision indeed and Kristeva, of necessity, tempers it with an outline of the way in which the Symbolic contains semiotic disruptions. She shows how the Symbolic can never be completely transformed and how the irruptions of the semiotic are always reformist.

Kristeva develops Lacan by propounding that liberating forces exist within the subject/text that precede the Symbolic. By showing the interconnection between subjectivity and textuality and the relationship between the two foundational textual modes, the semiotic and Symbolic, Kristeva has developed a conceptual framework and terminology for pre-Symbolic systems that allows them to be articulated and, thereby, more easily examined. This is a crucial step for moving beyond Lacan. Nevertheless, in developing concepts of the pre-Symbolic, Kristeva retains a conservative attitude towards more powerful expressions of the semiotic and, because of this, a more restricted unconscious that too strictly circumscribes the expression of subaltern agency. While her caution regarding this issue is understandable, I think that her account suffers from its commitment to Lacan’s model and her emphasis on Oedipalisation. Grosz writes, “Kristeva remains committed to psychoanalysis as an overarching framework or theoretical paradigm. While there are number of details she questions, alters or refuses to accept, there is no question of the necessity of something like psychoanalytic models of the unconscious and sexual drives” (Sexual Subversions 103). In order to address this, I will give an account of another, more radical, reevaluation of Lacanian psychoanalysis,
and endeavour to assess its value in terms of its potential to contribute to understanding post-colonial subjects and texts.

**Deleuze’s and Guattari’s Schizo-Analysis**

Concepts formulated by Deleuze and Guattari are central to many critiques of psychoanalysis. Deleuze and Guattari propose a different way of modeling subjectivity, termed ‘schizo-analysis’, to reinvigorate traditional psychoanalytic theory. This model is first given comprehensive exposition in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. The concepts and vocabulary of schizo-analysis are tortuous but nevertheless provide an important critique of foundational models of psychoanalysis. Where psychoanalysis (whether Freudian, Lacanian, or Kristevan) models subjectivity on a relationship between three stages of emergence (the Real/semiotic, the Imaginary/thetic and the Symbolic/unity), schizo-analysis views such models as reductive figurations of subjectivity. For example, Kristeva sees the development of semiotic systems that influence the character of unconscious irruptions as basically predetermined. In contrast, Guattari sees such formations as open to change asserting that it is possible to revitalise “complexions of alterity and rekindl[e] processes of semiotisation [. . .]” (*Chaosmosis* 85). Thus, Guattari views Lacan’s structural psychoanalysis and Kristeva’s development of it as no more than possible configurations that have no uncontestable purchase on truth. Guattari’s presentation of a dynamic framework for understanding the construction of identity and social worlds is attractive to the post-colonial theorist because it provides resources for mobilizing post-colonial forces to transform post-colonial conditions. As an imaginary it provides a vocabulary that allows for more complex figurations of post-colonial conditions and, thereby, more possibilities for theorising and performing agency. It is this opening up of the very foundations of
semiotic ontology that marks Deleuze’s and Guattari’s departure from other forms of psychoanalytic theory. Guattari writes:

A long time ago I renounced the Conscious-Unconscious dualism of the Freudian topoi and all the Manichean oppositions correlative to Oedipal triangulation and to the castration complex. I opted for an Unconscious superposing multiple strata of subjectivation, heterogeneous strata of variable extension and consistency. Thus a more ‘schizo’ Unconscious, one liberated from familial shackles, turned more towards actual praxis than towards fixations on, and regressions to, the past. An Unconscious of Flux and of abstract machines rather than an Unconscious of structure and language. (Chaosmosis 12)

In this passage we see dissatisfaction with Freudian psychic topography and, consequently, dissatisfaction with Lacanian psychoanalysis’ reconfiguration of this model in terms of Saussurean linguistics. Guattari views psychoanalysis, with its reliance on universal categories applicable to diverse subjects, as an over-determination of subjectivity. Traditional psychoanalysis’ analysis/reading of the subject/text reduces the subject into universal categories that fail to take account of the complexity of the social dynamic. According to Guattari, there is no universal structure of the mind as psychoanalytic theory assumes. To illustrate the differences between traditional psychoanalytic reading and schizo-analysis, Guattari refers to Franz Kafka’s interest in photographs:

Photographs are a constant theme of his work. There are several ways of looking at it. We might reduce the theme by interpreting it: photos could refer to a crystallization of the imaginary, the theme of the double, narcissism, whatever. [. . .] But wouldn’t it be much more interesting to try to find out how photos really function in the work, when they appear, what networks they modify, etc. [. . .] Instead of saying, ‘Hey, things are strangely resolved in identity, there is a duplication, etc.,’
schizo-analysis will find paths of differentiation which originate there.
(“Psycho-Analysis” 82)

A return to the *specificity* of the text and the subject through differentiation escapes overdeterminations of the subject and the text that characterise traditional psychoanalytic reading.

This focus on specificity is the attractive feature of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s schizo-analytic theory for post-colonial theory. It is the case that, for example, the father, rather than being a universal figure for every emerging subject is, in fact, a more specific character such as an engineer, a bureaucrat, a musician or alcoholic, and thus an element in a particular formation of the social/Symbolic system. As discussed in Chapter Three, there are different Reals for different Symbolics, and therefore different levers for reconfiguring particular Symbolics. Schizo-analytic theory accounts for and responds to this specificity and is useful in the post-colonial context for explicating the particular networks involved in different identity and social formations. Such explication is undertaken below with reference to the forms of identity construction found in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and theory. In the example of Kafka above, the traditional psychoanalytic view of the father and the Symbolic is dismantled and Oedipalisation is deuniversalised. This is the case because the unconscious is highly specific and it “relates directly to an entire social field, both economic and political, rather than to the mythical and familial coordinates traditionally invoked by psychoanalysis” (Deleuze, “Three Group Problems” 100).

After criticising the universalising claims of Oedipalisation and the Symbolic, Deleuze and Guattari proceed to reformulate the semiotic as a schizo-process. However, before outlining this reformulation, it is necessary to further clarify the meaning of the term schizo-analysis. While some theorists may criticise the glorification of madness that they find in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work, the term schizo-analysis is not used in such a
sense. As Guattari writes, “we never said: ‘identification of the analyst and the schizophrenic.’ We say that the analyst, like the militant, the writer, or whoever it may be, is more or less involved in a ‘schizo-process’ to be distinguished from the locked-up schizophrenic whose own ‘schizo-process’ runs aimlessly or is blocked up” (“Psycho-Analysis” 83). The schizo-process they refer to is the social/Symbolic order itself and not merely an effect of an aberrant relationship with it. Over and above this, the schizo-process is not confined within the Symbolic but is also characteristic of pre-linguistic, affective systems. In fact, when understood as a more pervasive condition, it begins to break down the traditional structures of subjectivity, because “[t]he dualities objective/subjective, [Symbolic/Real, linguistic/affective,] infrastructure/superstructure and production/ideology fade away, giving us access to the strict complementarity of the desiring subject of the institution and the institutional object” (Deleuze, “Three Group Problem” 101). There is a continual movement between the Symbolic and the pre-Symbolic and, in contrast to Kristeva’s formulation of this dyad, the structures of the pre-Symbolic and pre-thetic are not permanently set, but are just as open to change as social/Symbolic structures. Therefore, what was a vertical, hierarchical view of subjectivity in psychoanalysis is a horizontal, rhizomatic one in schizo-analysis.

Given that Deleuze and Guattari have finished with a vertical psychoanalytic model and instead posit a horizontal form of emergence, how do they describe this process and with what terms? Firstly, Guattari states (asks): “[w]e are faced with an important ethical choice: either we objectify, reify, ‘scientificise’ subjectivity, or, on the contrary, we try to grasp it in the dimension of its processual creativity” (Chaosmosis 13). Guattari opts for the latter and employs the concept of the ‘existential refrain’ as a means

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47 Kristeva’s view of the semiotic process as a set structure is supported by her view that only a male subject can speak it. As Grosz writes, “Kristeva seems to accept that phallic subjects alone, only men, can represent the unrepresented, subversive underside of the chora and the semiotic” (Jacques Lacan 164). This is a pervasive reduction of the power of the semiotic and suffers because of its commitment to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Oedipalisation.
to explore ‘processual creativity’: the *becoming* of subjectivity. I also adopt this approach because of the demands of theorising my particular post-colonial project, that is, formulating how Aboriginal testimonial life-writing works socially, politically, ethically, and culturally necessitates exploring more dynamic, interactive and historicised theories of subject formation. Guattari uses the concept of the existential refrain to answer the question of how “certain semiotic segments achieve their autonomy, start to work for themselves and to secrete new fields of reference?” (13). If we recall Lacan’s outline of ‘primal repression’ as the basis for a system of linguistic reference, whereby terms that are connected to the primal repression are pulled into the unconscious, the significance of Guattari’s model becomes clearer. Semiotic segments, of which primal repression is an example, create existential territories. Guattari gives the following example of an existential territory:

[w]hen I watch television, I exist at the intersection: 1. of a perceptual fascination provoked by the screen’s luminous animation which borders on the hypnotic, 2. of a captive relation with the narrative content of the program, associated with a lateral awareness of surrounding events (water boiling on the stove, a child’s cry, the telephone . . .), 3. of a world of fantasies occupying my daydreams. My feeling of personal identity is thus pulled in different directions. How can I maintain a relative sense of unicity. despite the diversity of components of subjectivation that pass through me? It’s a question of the refrain that fixes me in front of the screen, henceforth constituted as a projective existential node. (16-17)

This notion of a refrain that organises an existential territory explains the process through which subjectivity orders itself and the environment. It is a process involving more than ordinary signification because it also functions extra-linguistically in its organisation of the subject. The refrain organises a number of discrete elements and while their heterogeneity is conserved they “are nevertheless captured by a refrain which couples them to the existential Territory of my self” (17).
For Guattari, the refrain becomes a tool for analysis and reading, providing an interpretive key that does not need to refer to universals that have already posited the structure of subjectivity. The key to interpretation lies in the specific conditions of an event or a text and not in transhistorical structures, which means that there is no universal measure for understanding and evaluating a subject or text. Instead it is the event and the refrain that evokes the subject/text — like the example of Guattari watching television — that opens up new possibilities of reference and interpretation. The structures of subjectivity are created in the processual event, so it is to this that we need to look in any reading of post-colonial trauma. This model of subjectivity is one that stresses the praxis and performance of subjectivity and, in this sense, is extremely pragmatic. Both neurotic and psychotic traumatised behaviours may be understood as refrains or performances that become rigid — petrified representations manifested as obsessive rituals.

The concept of the refrain is useful for analysing testimonies to trauma. As discussed in Chapter Three, a diverse set of elements is involved when Langford Ginibi reads Granny Gomes’s testimony to a massacre of Bundjalung people. To recapitulate, Langford Ginibi responds to Gomes’s testimony thus: “[w]e drove for a long while before we spoke. I think we were both stunned by the fact that we could be confronted with people telling us about these massacres as if they had happened only yesterday, even though I knew the two tribal elders mentioned, Granny Gomes and Granny Cowan, were dead” (My Bundjalung People 78). Langford Ginibi is shocked by the force with which a historic traumatic event is felt in the present. As I have noted, the distance between the

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48 Lacan’s concept of the Signifier is an example of Guattari’s view of this tendency to universalise. Guattari sees it as homogenising because it loses the multi-dimensional character of many semiotic systems. Guattari views semiotics as more than just the linguistic and significational economy of language to which Lacan’s concept of the Signifier remains committed. Instead, Guattari posits “A-signifying semiological dimensions that trigger informational sign machines, and that function in parallel or independently of the fact that they produce and convey significations and denotations, and thus escape from strictly linguistic axiomatics” (Chaosmosis 4). This space is reminiscent of Kristeva’s concept of ‘process’, nevertheless, Kristeva still gives these processes a fixed character. According to Guattari, there is no univocal ontological plinth beneath the diversity of beings and no universal semiotic ‘process’ or ‘chora’.
crisis itself and the trauma of surviving the crisis is collapsed, demonstrating temporal disruption. Relatedly, the borders between one individual’s experience of trauma and another individual’s experience of trauma is blurred — Gomes’s story is Langford Ginibi’s story, and both are part of the collective Bundjalung story. Furthermore, the need to testify and the difficulty of doing so is shown — Gomes’s testimony has the power to evoke the traumatic event for Langford Ginibi, but Langford Ginibi can only attest to language’s failure to register the event.

In this manner, testifying to trauma breaks down distinctions between the self and the other, the past and the present, well-being and dysfunction, and speech and silence. Yet how are these diverse and contradictory elements organised? It is here that Guattari’s notion of the existential refrain is useful for explicating the textual organisation of diverse phenomena in post-colonial contexts. In the passage on watching television, Guattari describes how the refrain organises experience, and this passage is relevant to Langford Ginibi’s experience of hearing Gomes’s testimony. To repeat, Guattari writes, “[m]y feeling of personal identity is thus pulled in different directions. How can I maintain a relative sense of unicity, despite the diversity of components of subjectivation that pass through me? It’s a question of the refrain that fixes me in front of the screen, henceforth constituted as a projective existential node” (Chaosmosis 16-17). In Langford Ginibi’s case, the testimonial life-story establishes unicity from the diverse elements, discussed above, of her experience of post-colonial trauma. The testimonial narrative, like the television screen, functions as a “projective existential node” in that it is a performative act that collects and organises diverse elements of the post-colonial matrix into a story. As partly illustrated in Langford Ginibi’s response to Gomes’s testimony, Langford Ginibi’s testimonial life-story is concerned with organising language, traumatic affects, temporal disruptions, speech and silence, post-colonial history, ethics, and cross-cultural
recognition into a coherent narrative, even identity, where identity itself is an existential refrain ordered as a written text. Schizo-analytic tools when used in this way have great scope for articulating the various elements and processes involved in specific events in post-colonial history.

A refrain establishes territory out of relatively undifferentiated phenomena. Spatially, it is a unit of discrete elements and, temporally, it is a reiteration of that unit. It occurs within a wider context like a repeated phrase at the end of different verses. In this sense, it is a looped segment of a larger process. Traumatic material is a refrain in that it is a collection of charged elements that is split off from the personality as a whole and which repeatedly jeopardises that personality as much as it defines it. To repeat: LaCapra, citing J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, restates: “‘working-through might be defined as that process which is liable to halt the repetitive insistence characteristic of unconscious formations by bringing these into relation with the subject’s personality as a whole’” (Representing the Holocaust 209). Testimonial life-stories bring traumatic elements into relation through the presentation of the personality as a whole. The refrain acts as a defence against undifferentiated phenomena, the Real, trauma, the negative sublime. It establishes precarious territory in which the subject withstands being further traumatised by residue traumatic material. It is a horizon of approach and avoidance that corresponds with trauma’s demand and defiance to be spoken. In this way, the refrain is the off-setting of working-through with acting-out and every iteration is slightly different and reconfigured to allow for other possible responses to trauma.49 The schizo-analytic tool of the refrain complements LaCapra’s conceptualisation of working-through and can identify the various objects involved in off-setting working-through with acting-out.

49 This resembles William Harris’s practice of ‘rehearsal’ and may be a useful contribution to theory on this practice see Olubas’s “Wilson Harris’s Essays”, 1993.
Used together they can support more detailed post-colonial historical research and literary theory.

A particular refrain is the unique operation of working-through and acting-out in an individual life-story. Working-through and acting-out must function together in a therapeutic context because working-through requires a mediated form of acting-out. Working-through is the attempt to establish a distance between the present and the past and “involves the attempt to acquire some perspective on experience without denying its claims or indeed its compulsive force” (Representing the Holocaust 200). As discussed, LaCapra defines acting-out as “a mimetic relation to the past which is re-generated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription” (History and Memory 45). In contrast, mourning/working-through is defined as “a relation to the past that recognizes its difference from the present and enacts a specific performative relation to it that simultaneously remembers and takes at least partial leave of it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life [. . .]” (45).

Langford Ginibi’s repeated journeys to sites of post-colonial trauma involve instances of melancholy wherein the past is lived as if it were fully present, but her journeys progressively become instances of mourning that allow space for critical judgement by creating distance between past trauma and present experience. LaCapra writes that “working-through [. . .] requires the effort to achieve critical distance on experience through a comparison of experiences and through a reconstruction of larger contexts that help to inform and perhaps to transform experience” (Representing the Holocaust 200).

As discussed in Chapter Three, Langford Ginibi’s writing develops to address larger contexts of Aboriginal history and it is through off-setting acting-out with working-through that this is achieved. Langford Ginibi’s journeys are instances of working-
through and acting-out operating together as a therapeutic refrain unique to Langford Ginibi’s testimony.

Through employing concepts like the refrain to interpret different subjects’ experiences of the world, schizo-analysis does not reduce itself to universals and views theoretical approaches that do as necessarily limited. Models themselves are events that produce subjectivity. Models such as psychoanalytic theory produce subjectivity rather than mirror it and this is why Guattari argues that the theory of schizo-analysis is a ‘meta-modelisation’ and not simply a modelisation of the production of subjectivity. It is not a reinstatement of universal principles but a method “capable of taking into account the diversity of modelising systems” (Chaosmosis 22). It articulates a condition in which subjectivity can be produced again and again without reference to universals, because “what [Guattari is] aiming at with this concept of [the] refrain [is not] just massive affects, but hyper-complex refrains [. . .] crystallising the most deterritorialised existential Territories” (16). Content is no longer latent, as the unconscious was in Lacan’s model, but is opened outwards to the world and capable of creating new systems of reference and new existential territories.

Guattari opposes the notion of the ‘machine’ to that of structure, specifically the structures of Freud and Lacan. Structure assumes a degree of foundational stability for subjectivity while Guattari’s use of the concept of the ‘machine’ focuses on precariousness, finitude, uncertainty and deep mobility. To model the machinic nature of subjectivity, Guattari employs four ontological categories. He sees this number as significant because it breaks the traditional tri-partite systems that he believes always collapse into binary oppositions. These four ontological categories are called Flux, Territory, machinic Phylum and Universe. Guattari never explicitly defines these terms and a sense of their meaning only emerges through that with which he contrasts them.
These categories transfer the epistemological openness effected by post-structuralism into ontological openness.

The four categories are used as ‘meta-modelisers’, which means that their “primary purpose is to take account of the way in which the diverse existing systems of modelisation (religious, meta-physical, scientific, psychoanalytic, animistic, neurotic . . .) nearly always skirt around the problem of self-referential enunciation” (60). I take refusal to engage with the problem of ‘self-referential enunciation’ to mean the way the above meta-narratives efface the fact that they produce the objects they claim to reflect. As Cathy Vasseleau writes, “[the] very manufacture of metaphors, images, models, diagrams and analogies, and their simultaneous dismissal as just substitutes for or illustrations of the essential thing, [. . .] effaces itself as a figurative practice. It is avoiding the problem of how their ‘figurative strategies are constitutive of the objects whose essence they describe’” (59). Traditional modeling systems effect a violent ‘making equal’ in their representations of subjectivity and “there is no language (langue) in existence for which there is any question of its inability to cover the whole field of the signified, it being an effect of its existence as a language (langue) that it necessarily answers all needs” (Lacan 150).

Such a position maintains that signification generates subjectivity while appearing to reflect it and it is this violent rendering of subjectivity that schizo-analysis attempts to avoid. Guattari’s project is to no longer show the “[u]niversals or mathemes, nor [. . .] pre-established structures of subjectivity, but rather [. . . to show] domains of entities we detect at the same time that we produce them, and which appear to have been always there, from the moment we engender them” (Chaosmosis 17). Guattari is attempting to

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50 Spivak argues that the same insight is provided by Nietzsche, stating that “[i]n its simplest outline, Nietzsche’s definition of metaphor seems to be the establishing of an identity between dissimilar things. Nietzsche’s phrase is ‘Gleich Machen’ (make equal), calling to mind the German word ‘Gleichnis’ — image, simile, similitude, comparison, allegory, parable — an unmistakable pointer to figurative practice in general” (Translator’s Preface xxii).
give an ontological account of how subjectivities are produced, one that complements the current interest in how subjectivity is created linguistically but which does not privilege the linguistic and is not solely epistemological. Therefore, the term ‘meta-modelisation’ with its ring of ‘meta-narrative’ does not seek to move into reductionist accounts that simplify the complex conditions of subjectivity, but instead “work[s] towards [...] subjectivity’s] complexification, its processual enrichment, towards the consistency of its virtual lines of bifurcation and differentiation, in short towards its ontological heterogeneity” (61). An emphasis on ontological complexity rejects that psychoanalytic theory which sought to exclude the complexities of the signified and the thetic (the Imaginary) in favour of syntagmatic systems. Schizo-analysis does not seek to overthrow the insights of such psychoanalytic theory but seeks to broaden them by applying them to context-specific pre-verbal existential territories and, thereby, reanimate them and make them more relevant to the needs of diverse subjects and social worlds.

Schizo-analysis is part of a more general move in contemporary cultural theory towards using conceptual frameworks that reject universals, be they the positing of transcendental categories or universal abandonment of them. As I have argued throughout this study, both these tactics ultimately effect what Haraway calls the ‘god-trick’ of complete dislocation and are for this reason ‘mirror-like’ twins. Schizo-analysis manages to preserve an awesome mobility for theorising and practising identity and textual construction, more so than its antecedents. The conception of an unconscious that is opened out on to the world and its political and cultural structures is fundamental for the continuing relevance of the concept of the unconscious. Such a model provides a more dynamic and far-reaching vocabulary/imaginary with which to figure subjectivity. It encourages one to envisage the work of cartography and psychological modelisation in a dialectical relation with the individuals and groups concerned; the crucial
thing is to move in the direction of co-management in the production of subjectivity, to distrust suggestion and the attitudes of authority which occupy such a large place in psychoanalysis, in spite of the fact that it claims to have escaped them. (*Chaosmosis* 12)

Haraway writes, “[*t*he alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (191). Guattari and Haraway are responding to the universality of scientific and psychoanalytic discourse, but rather than moving into radical relativism, they propose “co-management in the production of subjectivity” (*Chaosmosis* 12) and welding “personal preferences and cultural tendencies [. . .] into progressive politics [. . .]” (Haraway 169). They resist claims to truth and radical relativism because “[r]elativism and totalization are both ‘god-tricks’ promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully [. . .]” (191). Guattari’s focus on the event and existential refrains shows him to be concerned with developing a method for theorising subjectivity in a way that avoids god-tricks; that is more dynamic than the operation of the universal categories of psychoanalysis, and yet remains an accountable framework that is supportive of detailed historical analysis.

Haraway describes the schizoid character of social processes as potentially liberating, writing in a tone reminiscent of Guattari: “It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities. What might be learned from personal and political ‘technological’ pollution?” (174). Haraway identifies the schizo-process as potentially liberating but also warns against “epistemological electro-shock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder” (186). Guattari also makes this point (cited above) when he stresses the need
for the reader to understand that schizo-analysis is not about being clinically schizophrenic. Talking of the schizoid condition of late-capitalism, Haraway writes:

I prefer a network ideological image, suggesting the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic. ‘Networking’ is both a feminist practice and a multinational corporate strategy — weaving is for oppositional cyborgs. [. . .] If we learn how to read these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions. (170)

This stands in contrast to Kristeva’s modelisation of subjectivity and politics that maintains the silence of women because it disembodies femininity and removes it from women. Kristeva’s commitment to psychoanalysis places her in a plot where women “have less selfhood, weaker individuation, more fusion to the oral, to Mother, less at stake in masculine autonomy. But there is another route to having less at stake in masculine autonomy, a route that does not pass through Woman, Primitive, Zero, the Mirror Stage and its imaginary” (Haraway 176). There is a strong compatibility between Haraway and Guattari in their rejection of universalising models of subjectivity and in their proposal for a theory of subjectivity that “passes through women and other present-tense, illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born, who refuse the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life” (Haraway 176). Such a theory is proposed because, as Haraway writes, “subjectivity is not a natural given any more than air and water. How do we produce it, capture it, enrich it, and permanently reinvent it in a way that renders it compatible with Universes of mutant value? How do we work for its liberation, that is, for its resingularisation” (135). Schizo-analysis offers a conceptual framework that supports post-colonial theory’s rejection of positions that efface the specificity of difference because of their commitment to relativistic or totalising theories. Schizo-analysis can support the post-colonial project undertaken in this study of

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51 Grosz critiques Kristeva in this way (Jacques Lacan 166).
articulating the specific figurative networks that characterise the presentation of Aboriginality in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing.

The history of psychoanalytic models of subjectivity shows that psychoanalytic theory began by decentring the traditional Cartesian subject. Psychoanalytic theory posited a model of fragmented agency in its theorisation of subjectivity wherein the subject is never fully self-present but rather deferred in psychic processes. Nevertheless, although psychoanalytic theory figures the subject as consisting of multiple forces, its model of subjectivity remains rigid. It universalises the process of the subject’s emergence, and ignores the profoundly different ways subjects become who they are and, thereby, limits the theoretical tools available for conceiving historical specificity. Although Kristeva adapts psychoanalytic theory in productive ways through her interest in pre-linguistic systems, she remains committed to the rigidity of Oedipalisation and the belief that women cannot speak themselves. The result is a model of the pre-Symbolic and pre-Imaginary that is inadequate for the conceptualisation of different subjectivities. In contrast, schizo-analysis offers an attractive extension of psychoanalysis, formulating a more schizo-unconscious that escapes the reductive universalisations of subjectivity that traditional psychoanalytic theory posits. It acknowledges that models themselves produce subjectivity and embraces itself as a figurative and metaphorical practice. By doing so, it shows itself to be a powerful figurative resource for theorising different post-colonial contexts. By acknowledging itself as a figurative and metaphorical practice it distinguishes itself from totalising theories, but this does not mean that it is a form of radical relativism. Rather, it offers itself as a resource for explicating the present-tense existential refrains that order the multiplicity of racial, gender, familial and economic forces that generate subjectivity. It is because of this specificity that it escapes both totalizing and radical relativist positions. Only with this degree of specificity can one
develop potential lines of resistance, therapeutic breakthroughs and new coalitions in the post-colonial Australian context. Of particular interest is the way schizo-analytic theory is suitable for identifying the figurative practices of Aboriginal theory and life-writing that are involved in dealing with post-colonial trauma and the way such theory and life-writing off-sets working-through with acting-out.

**Schizo-Analysis and Post-Colonial Trauma**

As discussed earlier in this study, LaCapra presents two concepts that assist in the process of better specifying the ways in which different subjects live and deal with traumatic experiences: working-through and acting-out. As stated, LaCapra opposes working-through/mourning to acting-out/melancholia and describes acting-out as “a mimetic relation to the past which is re-generated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription” (*History and Memory* 45). In contrast, mourning is described as “a relation to the past that recognizes its difference from the present and [. . .] simultaneously remembers and takes at least partial leave of it, thereby allowing for critical judgment [. . .]” (45). LaCapra argues that the concept of mourning is opposed to positivist historical accounts of total mastery and accounts “fixated on failed transcendence or irremediable loss in which any mode of reconstruction or renewal is seen as objectionably recuperative or naive” (46).

In the context of post-colonial Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, adopting the position of total mastery focuses on redeeming traumatic experience “through a teleological story that projectively presents values and wishes as viably realized in the facts, typically through a progressive, developmental process” (*Representing the Holocaust* 192). A position that focuses on irremediable loss is an inversion of redemptive totalisation and insists “that there is no alternative to symptomatic acting-out
and the repetition compulsion other than an imaginary, illusory hope for totalization, full-closure, and redemptive meaning” (193). LaCapra argues that these two responses to traumatic experience correspond with two different ways of construing theory: firstly, totalising narratives; and, secondly, those discursive symptoms that repeatedly move “toward the paradox, aporia, or impasse that ‘sublimely’ brings language to a halt and renders impossible (or situates as helplessly naive) any form of recovery or viable agency” (192). In terms of contemporary theory and its application to Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, these two positions correspond to the two models of representation I outlined in Chapter One; what Santiago Colás termed “the false dichoto[my] of realism and modernism” (164).

LaCapra presents another way of theorising trauma that “involve[s] a tense interaction between seeming opposites such as stability and the risk of trauma [. . .]”, and argues for a strategy that resist[s] redemptive totalization [and . . .] becoming compulsively fixated on or symptomatically reinforcing impasses, [but rather] engage[s in] a process of mourning that would attempt, however self-questioningly and haltingly, to specify its haunting objects and (even if only symbolically) to give them a ‘proper’ burial. (Representing the Holocaust 193-94)

Such a strategy is termed working-through or, better still in the context of literature, writing-through trauma, a phrase that emphasises this study’s dual focus on writing practices and theories of post-colonial traumatic experience.52

Guattari’s, Haraway’s and LaCapra’s insights into the need for interpretative and generative figurative systems that are highly specific, mobile and avoid straight realist or radical relativist approaches are useful for exploring Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, and for analysing theories of representation employed to read that life-writing. They

52 LaCapra writes that “[t]his third sense of theory may also be related to what Jacques Derrida terms ‘generalised displacement,’ which must accompany the reversal of hierarchically arranged binary opposites if one is not to remain entirely within their frame of reference” (Representing the Holocaust 193).
encourage theorists to discuss representation in a way that does not simply view it as being either completely generative or completely reflective of reality. This is important because the synergetic entwinement of representation, trauma and subjectivity means that affective, non-linguistic forces have to be taken into account in any theory of representation. It is also important to reconsider ways in which testimonial life-writing has been conceived within realist/anti-realist debates and explore other ways of conceiving of it that are compatible with the above presentation of schizo-analysis.

Colás, in response to Yúdice’s positing of an opposition between practice and representation, asks “[w]hat’s wrong with representation? Why does the construction of the testimonio as radical political object require its placement ‘beyond representation’?” (168). To answer the first question, Colás outlines what have been traditionally opposed models of representation — realist versus anti-realist — as they are presented by two theorists of testimonio, Miguel Barnet and Roberto González Echevarría. Colás presents the opposition thus: González Echevarría, “in the first of a series of ‘De Manian’ deconstructions [. . .] challenges the testimonio’s self-constituting extraliterary positioning” (161-62), whereas “[f]or Barnet, representation implies transparency, an open door offering access to the represented [. . .]” (162).53 Colás argues against both the realist view (Barnet) and the modernist/relativist view (González Echevarría) — and the list of theorists who rank in one position or the other is extensive — while proposing another way of conceiving of representation. He borrows from Arac to do so, citing him thus: “‘Current advanced theory,’ Arac writes, ‘crosses these lines [between ‘an anti-representational antihumanism’ and ‘humanist defenders of representation’]’ [Colás’s clarification]: it is anti-humanist, but it acknowledges — critically — our enmeshment in

53 Paul de Man’s ‘Auto-biography as De-Facement’ is addressed in Chapter One.
representation’” (Colás 163). He borrows from Ernesto Laclau to further demonstrate this point:

‘[a]bsolute representation, the total transparency between the representative and the represented, means the extinction of the relationship of representation. [. . .] Representation can therefore only exist to the extent that the transparency entailed by the concept is never achieved; and that a permanent dislocation exists between the representative and the represented’. (qtd. in Colás 169)

This model of representation argues for maintaining a vitalising disjunction between the representative and the represented because such disjunction maintains the dynamism of dialectic by not collapsing it into either dialectical pole. The maintenance of the ambiguity of dialectic is the primary theoretical concern of this study. As I have set out to address in each chapter, opposite but ultimately complementary strategies fail to account for the complexities involved in the dialectical movement between traumatic memory and narrative memory, cognitive and affective systems, the testifier and the collective, realism and anti-realism, redemptive totalisations and impasse narratives, truth and non-truth, and relativism and absolutism. In this manner, I have sought to demonstrate that Colás’s and Laclau’s position on maintaining the disjunction between the representative and the represented corresponds with the rejection of the false opposition of realism and anti-realism discussed in Chapter One; with the maintenance of the disjunction between the representative of a collective and the collective itself discussed in Chapter Two; with LaCapra’s position on working-through trauma discussed in Chapter Three; and with maintaining difference in self/other and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal recognitive relations discussed in Chapter Four. By not collapsing the above dialectical poles into one another in an effort to understand the post-colonial situation in Australia, this study distinguishes itself from how the post-colonial situation would be
conceived of in what Yúdice terms ‘hegemonic postmodernism’, which is characterised by its use of blunt deconstructive method of the A equals not A kind.

In hegemonic postmodernist readings, the dispossessed Other of colonialism is not seen as possessing an active agency within the post-colonial matrix but is defined as having negative valence — its character solely determined by that which is suppressed in the privileged discourse — that is the specific effaced Real of a specific colonialist Australian Symbolic. In hegemonic postmodernism, the violence privileged discourse does to the dispossessed Other of colonialism is only identified to highlight the contradictions within privileged discourse itself, and is too often not explicitly equated with the violence committed against the dispossessed Other. Subaltern agency is viewed as a consequence of fissures within the dominant discourse and, thus, hegemonic postmodernism does not reveal that the dispossessed Other also has an other, namely, the collective traumatic material of colonial dispossession that resists integration into its cultural history. Such a position “do[es] not provide the marginalized elements with their own specificity outside of hegemonic discourse; they exist as the hidden fuel on which that discourse reproduces itself” (Yúdice 22). However, the interpolation of subaltern agency into hegemonic discourse in order to transform that discourse, as witnessed in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, means that such writing cannot be reduced to the hegemonic postmodernist position, which argues that the Other does not exist other than as the repressed material of the Symbolic.

Unlike hegemonic postmodernism and realist/anti-realist views of representation, this study argues that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is better understood as embodying a dialectical movement between the representative and the represented. It does not characterise the subaltern as the unrepresentable Other, but rather argues that the position of the subaltern is contested through maintaining a dynamic dialectical
interchange. Post-colonial traumatic memory defies signification but demands to be signified in order to ensure the survival of the subject. This dialectic generates others: the temporal gap (latency) between the experience of trauma and its successful narration; the gap between a sense of humanity and the inhuman material conditions resulting from colonialism; and the disjunction between the testifier and the collective consciousness she or he represents. Reading Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, it becomes clear that it is sometimes successful in creating new vocabularies, identities and affectivities that result from mobilising the dialectics of the post-colonial condition. In doing so, it shows itself to be a presentation of agency that is neither “‘an antirepresentational antihumanism’ [nor a] humanist [. . . defence] of representation’” (Arac qtd. in Colás 163).

It is more valuable to discuss not absolute otherness or absolute ineffability, but the specific dialectical movements that constitute particular identities. The post-colonial subject, singular and collective, is constantly changing and is made up of successful articulations of traumatic otherness as well as continuing and ever-new alterities. There is no teleological completeness like that which characterises traditional realist autobiography. The post-colonial condition is better described as, to use Deleuze’s and Guattari’s schizo-analytic terminology, a series of de-territorialisations and re-territorialisations. Agency is generated in the specificity of conditions and is not affirmed or denied in the sweeping generalisations of realism or hegemonic postmodernism. C. L. R. James cautions theorists that “one of the chief errors of thought is to continue to think in one set of forms, categories, ideas, etc., when the object, the content, has moved on, has created premises for an extension, a development of thought” (15). Testimonial life-writing is such an ‘object’ and the model of dialectical movement I have proposed is a welcome extension of the two dominant theories of representation and agency explored throughout this study. The dialectical movements that comprise the relationship between
the testifier and the reader and between affective and cognitive modalities are equally points of connection and separation and of identification and difference. They are mutable rather than stable points and Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is both the execution and record of their history (Gibbons 70).

Yúdice, writing on I, Rigoberta Menchú, argues that testimonio’s engagement with traumatic material that resists representation does not create “‘representation’ [. . .] born of the exclusion of the ‘limiting otherness’ — in [Menchú’s] case, the nahual — but, rather, by dialogue and interaction with it” (27). As previously stated, Yúdice further defines the difference between testimonio and that of hegemonic postmodernism, writing:

Again, in contrast with the hegemonic postmodern text, in which the ‘I’ is expelled as vomit, in which the body transforms into vomit, that which is expelled, separating it from nature (mother and father), thus making dialogue impossible — ‘I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself’ (Kristeva, 1982: 3) — Menchú’s text is, rather, a testimonial of incorporation, embodiment. (27)

Much Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is such a process of incorporation and embodiment, effected through a dialogue with the trauma of colonialism that, rather than expelling the I, creates it out of the material of the dialectical struggle. Likewise, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, through emphasising the racial difference of the addressee of the testimony (the non-Aboriginal reader), provides an opportunity for that reader to engage in a process of incorporation and embodiment with regard to his or her colonial history.

Aboriginal testimonial life-writing implicitly challenges hegemonic postmodernism's theorisation of agency. Johnston, in her ‘Foreword’ to My Bundjalung People, writes, “[a]lways is a solid word. It is stable and immutable, as this journey into Bundjalung country is, encompassing as it does the history, culture and an abiding spirituality. The people, the roads, the houses, the conversations and the thousands of
minute detail are solid and immutable as that word” (Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People* xi). Johnston and Langford Ginibi will not concede that the truth and reality of Aboriginal culture and history is defaced by the narratives that attest to them. In opposition to the hegemonic postmodernist position, Aboriginal testifiers insist that the unnarrativised traumatic history of Aboriginal people can be represented in written and spoken form. In doing so, they affirm the power of subaltern agency and of representation, and perform an integration and narrativisation of their and their people’s traumatic memory into social history.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, a correlation between Haraway and Deleuze and Guattari is their focus on the ‘event’. An event consists of the particular manifestations of politics, technologies and economies that generate specific subjects. To understand the subject as event, it is best not to employ over-generalised interpretative tools or dreams of a common language or common ontology. Rather, the subaltern subject as a living culturally specific affective and narrative event and the technologies and economies of particular events in history mutually constitute one another. Haraway’s *and schizo-analysis*’ theoretical tools can assist in developing unclichéd interpretations of the post-colonial condition because they are capable of articulating historically specific formations of contesting forces. To be able to theorise with greater and greater specificity is important for such theorists. For example, Haraway sees a need for “[a]n adequate socialist-feminist politics [. . . that addresses] women in the privileged occupational categories, and particularly in the production of science and technology that constructs scientific-technical discourses, processes, and objects” (169). In this way, she speaks neither of archetypal subjects nor simple political allegiances but of subjects and allegiances that change and cross traditional boundaries.
Aboriginal-Specific Trauma-Work

The specificity of the feminisms of privileged white women in privileged occupations that Haraway is interested in theorising is precisely what some Aboriginal feminist theorists see as a problem of difference. Aileen Moreton-Robinson in *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*, argues:

Indigenous women’s experiences are grounded in a different history from that which is celebrated and known by those who deploy the subject position middle-class white woman. We know and understand the practical, political and personal effects of being ‘Other’ through a consciousness forged from our experiences and oral traditions. The self-presentation in Indigenous women’s life writings, and the strategic deployment of different subject positions to resist white cultural domination, is evidence of this consciousness. (179)

Moreton-Robinson stresses the specificity of the history and material conditions of the dispossessed Aboriginal Other to highlight the failures of some feminist theory to take account of the differences between Aboriginal and middle-class white women. Moreton-Robinson’s call for the differences between white feminisms and Aboriginality to be better acknowledged requires developing vocabularies that can articulate the spectrum of post-colonial conditions with a high level of specificity. As such it is appropriate to complement the high theory of this study (theory that argues for the importance of culturally specific approaches to trauma work) with some examples of therapeutic programs that have sought to respond to the specificity of Aboriginal cultures and Aboriginal trauma. Throughout Australia Aboriginal people such as Judy Atkinson and local community initiatives such as Derby’s Family Violence Intervention Program and the New South Wales’s Northern Rivers Men’s Violence Program have developed specific Aboriginal therapeutic vocabularies and programs. Such endeavours are important because the affective and narrative refrains that characterise traumatic material
are culturally specific and, therefore, the therapeutic tools for working-through them must address this cultural specificity.

Atkinson, writing on her engagement with Aboriginal post-colonial trauma and her wish to extend feminist theory to address Aboriginal cultural need, recounts:

I found I had to extend my reading beyond feminist explanations of violence against women and children, to explore disaster/trauma theory. The violence I was seeing and hearing was much more than ‘domestic violence’. In the context of colonisation, there are, I began to understand, human trauma experiences, implicit in human acts of violence, which result in trauma behaviours. Violent outbursts, on others and on self, are one manifestation of traumatisation. Alcohol and drug misuse appeared to fit the same self-medicating needs of those who are traumatised. (*Working with Adolescents* Screen 1, par. 6)

Like this study, Atkinson focuses on narrativising trauma as a therapeutic approach, yet does so within an Aboriginal-specific, workshop-oriented therapeutic framework rather than a text-based literary one. Atkinson developed the We Al-li (Fire and Water) program as an Aboriginal-specific practice for working-through Aboriginal trauma, which she argues directly stems from colonialisation. Atkinson describes We Al-li as a program that evolved from the participatory action focus of my research project. A series of workshops was developed and delivered to promote the exploration of personal and collective stories in a safe environment. The program was built around a number of considerations. Firstly, it was informed by the work of Alice Miller (1983), who has listed what she believes are the five interactive ingredients into the construction of a truly violent person [...]. Secondly, it was considered that a culturally safe environment had to be established, so that the stories of violence could be told in self-other relationships, during which each person could experience and express the pain of past abuse, and have others in the group witness the truth of those experiences. At the same time the purpose and structure
of the workshops was to allow the group to work together to ‘intellectualise’, or ‘make sense’ of the abuse.

Finally, all the work we did would be based on the integrity of Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices. The name We Al-li was part of that cultural integrity. (Trauma Trails 93-94)

A core part of developing this therapeutic program was the employment of an Aboriginal-specific therapeutic tool \[ \text{\textit{dadirri}} \] defined by Atkinson as

\[ \text{[a] word from the language of the Ngangikurungkurr people of the Daly River area of the Northern Territory.} \quad \text{\textit{Nangi}} \text{ means word or sound.} \quad \text{\textit{Kuri}} \text{ means water and} \quad \text{\textit{kurr}} \text{ means deep.} \quad \text{Deep water sound or sounds of the deep, also explains the word} \quad \text{\textit{dadirri}} \text{ —} \quad \text{inner deep listening and quiet still awareness.} \quad \text{\textit{Dadirri} can only be experienced over a period of time in the practice or activity:} \quad \text{‘When I experience} \quad \text{\textit{dadirri} I am made whole again’.} \quad (\text{Trauma Trails ix}) \]

Atkinson is a descendent of the Jiman and Bundjalung people as well as having Celtic-German heritage and is not related to the Daly River community. Therefore, Atkinson is quick to address the potential criticism of intra-Aboriginal cultural appropriation:

\[ \text{It could be inferred that my use of} \quad \text{\textit{dadirri}} \text{ is a form of cultural appropriation. On the contrary, I approached both the author of the paper ‘\textit{Dadirri: Listening to One Another}’ (Ungunmerr 1993a), and the Aboriginal people of Central Queensland, who helped inform the early design of the research approach, before the choice was made.} \quad \text{\textit{Dadirri}, as both an Indigenous philosophy informing investigative processes, and ethical cultural behaviour (in research), ensured cultural safety in the research design.} \quad (15) \]

Atkinson is establishing for the reader that her use of Central Queensland Aboriginal therapeutic methodologies has been approved by the traditional owners of the practice and is thereby ethical. As colonialism impacted on all Aboriginal people at different times in different ways throughout Australia, it seems reasonable that resistive responses to that offensive will be informed by the culturally specific tools of different Aboriginal
As an Aboriginal-specific therapeutic methodology, dadirri establishes a recognize process based on listening to someone attesting to traumatic material in an open and empathetic way. Some risks of not listening appropriately were examined within the context of literary and psychoanalytic models of recognition in Chapter Four of this study and, like Atkinson, the importance of listening in a way that does not capture and co-opt another’s experience was stressed.

Interestingly, Atkinson’s development of Aboriginal-specific therapeutic tools for dealing with cultural incommensurabilities emphasises similar structures and processes for dealing with trauma to those found in contemporary trauma theory, indicating the potential for comparative cultural studies to draw ever closer historical links while simultaneously underlining difference. Indeed, Atkinson not only employs therapeutic tools from Aboriginal nations other than her own, but also borrows from Western therapeutic frameworks such as psychoanalysis. Being a hybrid therapeutic practice, We Al-li is suited to a schizo-analytic reading that would seek to identify the specific territorialisations and refrains it performs. We Al-li, as an Aboriginal-specific therapeutic practice, is constructed from diverse sources and partly mirrors the complexity of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century Aboriginality. The use of both traditional Aboriginal therapeutic and contemporary psychotherapeutic techniques demonstrates the way in which diverse cultural sources are employed in the present-centred performance of Aboriginal identity. Yet, there are some elements of Atkinson’s analysis that are at odds with the positions on contemporary trauma theory argued for in this study. Atkinson writes:

Participants demonstrated through their testimonies that healing is a process of transformation and transcendence. It is the ever-unfolding expression of knowledge of the Self. In the processes of transformation the Self is viewed with acceptance and compassion and a curiosity towards
the change process. With the knowledge that change is possible must come the knowledge of choices and an access to services relevant to the transformation process. The desire for change can then be met. (206)

Of concern here is the suggestion that the healing process is about revealing the true common proper noun ‘Self’, that is, something already always there — an abstracted formulation of Self like that examined in the discussion of traditional autobiography in Chapter One. Yet, as Atkinson’s use of diverse theoretical sources for working-through Aboriginal trauma implicitly acknowledges, Aboriginality itself is multiple and is to a significant extent characterised by the present-centred presentation of itself. Nevertheless, as with Aboriginal testimonial life-writing, Atkinson’s emphasis on the ‘real’ Self is tied to the therapeutic and political goal of establishing non-metaphorical facts that form the basis of the project of re-externalising Aboriginal trauma. Atkinson writes:

A healing relationship between people who are working to listen to each other in *dadirri* is important because it holds the potential for reacquainting people with their own self-healing abilities. For people who have been colonised this is doubly important, so that they begin to feel and reclaim the power within themselves to change who they have been made by the colonising processes and who they have tried to be to counter this colonisation. The ‘real self’ only emerges once people have been able to name and know the ‘constructed self’ (how we have been constructed by others) and the ‘ideal self’ (behaving in the way we think people want us to behave. (213-14)

This passage touches on the central theme of this study, that is, testimonial life-writing, as a therapeutic and political process concerned with establishing Aboriginal agency, is a paradoxical process of reclaiming Aboriginal identity through the present-centred performance of Aboriginal identity. Atkinson’s and Aboriginal testimonial life-writers’ emphasis on the ‘real self’ is intended to counter denial of Aboriginal people’s
experience. Such denial may be sourced to colonialist imaginaries or to the over-emphasis on Aboriginal identity as ‘constructed’, that is, as ‘not real’ or as nothing other than the repressed other of the ‘idealisations’ of dominant discourses. This reinforcement of Aboriginal reality is an important strategy for countering the negation of Aboriginal agency in both political and therapeutic contexts; negations of agency that have historical precedence. Furthermore, Atkinson’s use of the term transcendence need not necessarily mean an escape into ahistoricism but could rather mean situational transcendence in the sense that LaCapra uses it.

Yet, in countering these dangers, such essentialism may overlook that the construction and performance of Aboriginal identity is living Aboriginal culture itself. Aboriginality is not an ahistorical essential object to be reclaimed in political and therapeutic actions. Rather, what is profoundly important is who has the power to construct Aboriginality for whom; who has the power to determine the nature of the performativity of Aboriginality. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and programs like We Al-li publicly take the power and privileges of identity construction into Aboriginal hands, in contrast to the history of coercive colonial prescriptions of Aboriginality and the surveillance and enforcement of those prescriptions. As argued in this chapter, subjectivity is a highly dynamic process so, rather than positing restrictive universalisations of Aboriginality, it is it important that the dynamism of Aboriginal subjectivity is mobilised and Aboriginal access to privileged discourses is strengthened. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and Aboriginal cultural theory work towards this, and schizo-analytic theory provides conceptual tools that can help articulate and support this post-colonial endeavour.
Conclusion

One of the crucial projects of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is to establish and reinforce Aboriginal realities. This project has been underway for some time and it has produced a foundational body of work that new forms of Aboriginal life-writing will borrow from and to some extent be compared with. I speculate that in contrast to the testimonial texts examined in this study, there will be a growth in life-stories produced by new Aboriginal writers that participate in the sophisticated self-reflexivity of postmodernist autobiography. For example, Fabienne Bayet-Charlton, in her “Introductory Author’s” note to Finding Ullagundahi Island, writes:

Can I point out that, although this book is strongly autobiographical, it is not an autobiography. To be an autobiography everything in this book would have to historically precise and that’s not the case. I can say that just about every conversation recounted in the text happened. It’s more the timing of events that have been adjusted.

And to be fair to my family, past work colleagues, friends and assorted characters I’ve met along the way I also need to say this book is from my own perspective and I have written only what I have been able to see and say. I’m sure just about everybody in my family remembers my Nana differently as our own experiences, personalities and relationships with this wonderful woman differed. This book is not a claim to favouritism, special information or highly evolved wisdom. I’m biased and human. It’s a story of dispossession if anything.

Such an acknowledgement of historical relativism and perspectivism is not generally a feature of the Aboriginal testimonial life-writing examined in his study. While I believe that future Aboriginal life-writing will employ devices more characteristic of the narrative games of postmodernist autobiography, this study suggests that there will also be a strong tendency in Aboriginal writers for a long time to come to emphasise the power of
material conditions to limit those games. The Aboriginal testimonial life-writing examined in this study provides a base for such future texts because it is concerned with establishing, as do testimonies to the Holocaust, non-metaphorical facts — thus the emphasis on truth in such texts — upon and through which more complex narratives can produce and contest Aboriginal realities. This study argues that this emphasis on non-metaphorical facts is generationally specific and that new writing by younger generations of Aboriginal authors will reveal different areas of focus — a topic for future study. It also suggests that Aboriginal writers will progressively become more focused on how they produce their Others, how they organise Aboriginality within their communities, and what they wish to accept and reject of non-Aboriginal values and practices.

This study has demonstrated that positions that critique testimonial life-writing’s claims to establish non-metaphorical facts and to extra-textual reach are important because they focus attention on the discursive construction of testimonial texts. However, by arguing that there is nothing other than metaphorical facts and intra-textuality, these positions fail to emphasise strongly enough that Aboriginal people have been historically denied the right to access the material and symbolic privileges of certain discourses and imaginaries that generate metaphorical facts by virtue of their Aboriginality. This impeding of Aboriginal access to privileges that allow the production and expression of identity, in addition to the material bases of racist marginalisation, are the facts addressed in the testimonial life-writing examined here. This is why, when introducing this study, it was argued that Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a distinct literary genre generated out of the material conditions of a certain stage in post-colonial Australian history. Aboriginal testimony’s object is post-colonial history and as an intervention in that history it signals a change in the material and symbolic conditions of that history — at the very least a change in the pattern of engaging with Australian
English literary modes. Yet, they are engaged with more than just the literary: these texts are involved in the establishment and strengthening of Aboriginal agency in political and therapeutic contexts. They perform a reinforcement of Aboriginality while also working towards Aboriginality’s “complexification, its processual enrichment, towards the consistency of its virtual lines of bifurcation and differentiation, in short towards its ontological heterogeneity” (Guattari, Chaosmosis 61).

Yet, it must be remembered that the legacy of traumatic events works against subjectivity’s processual enrichment; more specifically, post-colonial Aboriginal trauma works against the processual enrichment of Aboriginality. This is the core therapeutic and political tension being worked-through in the testimonials and it manifests itself as a crisis of representation for the literary theorist who is torn between reinforcing and deconstructing the establishment and presentation of agency therein. ‘Presentation’ is used here in Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense, cited in Chapter Five, that is, “[t]he subject becomes what it is (its own essence) by representing itself to itself (as you know, the original and proper meaning of ‘representation’ is not a ‘second presentation,’ but a ‘presentation to the self’) [. . .]” (148). Reinforcing or deconstructing subjects’ power over this first presentation of the self to the self is prior to other reinforcements or deconstructions. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing’s therapeutic and political agenda is primarily aimed at strengthening Aboriginal people’s material and symbolic power to control this first presentation of Aboriginality to itself. As such, the representation (in this sense of a first presentation) of Aboriginality in testimonial life-writing is profoundly performative and the tension between the establishment and process of Aboriginality characteristic of all performances of subjectivity propels the creation of Aboriginality/subjectivity. Because this tension drives Aboriginality/subjectivity, it is important to maintain it and not collapse it into absolute impasse or redemption.
narratives, full or deferred presence, affective paralysis or transcendence, and representational opacity or transparency.

To reinforce or deconstruct Aboriginal agency through one’s critical response to Aboriginal testimony is to confront one’s ethical foundation or anti-foundationalism. Yet, the practice of working-through as writing-through trauma is a processual one that simultaneously performs both reinforcement and deconstruction, and theoretical responses ought to reflect this. It seems theoretically and ethically short-sighted to collapse unique subjectivity events into instances of dialectical opposition. Post-colonial material conditions determine subjectivity events (often traumatic in nature) and working-through them for processual subjective enrichment requires different levers for different contexts. Postmodern theories and language games may not be the best lever for reading historically specific Aboriginal testimonial texts; realist affirmation of Aboriginal subjectivity, history and culture is a useful lever; and theoretical responses that are neither realist nor anti-realist are better. One should recall C. L. R. James’s warning to theorists: “one of the chief errors of thought is to continue to think in one set of forms, categories, ideas, etc., when the object, the content, has moved on, has created premises for an extension, a development of thought” (15). Equally, supersession of others’ concerns is as incongruent as lagging behind them and this study has set out to identify the incongruities and affinities between contemporary theory and post-colonial Australian conditions. It has sought to articulate those incongruities and affinities by off-setting Aboriginal testimonial life-writing and contemporary theory with one another through their different language and concerns. It has sought to problematise their engagement with one another and to align mutual concerns where considered relevant.

This study has directed attention to the figurativeness of different imaginaries and the clusters of metaphors, symbols and concepts that characterise them. It has explored
theoretical resources that can assist in showing how different imaginaries are central in the establishment of different historical stages and social worlds. Acknowledging the figurativeness of imaginaries and discourses opens them to reconfiguration. This study has explored those figurative practices associated with different forms of self-representation found in life-writing practices and with the contemporary theory that aims to explicate those practices. It has examined life-writing and contemporary theory to establish the different ways in which they can assist in better figuring post-colonial realities; to identify where they too strictly prescribe and where they open up what can be addressed within post-colonial studies. It has explored various imaginaries and their associated metaphors to demonstrate their links to post-colonial theory, history and subjects and to identify their connections with different stages stages in the temporal and theatrical senses of post-colonial history.

It was argued that the Cartesian imaginary is characterised by metaphors of non-situated transcendence, abstraction and mastery, and by the way it posits a split within the subject between an abstracted (metaphysical) subjectivity and the historically located person. In a post-colonial context, this imaginary corresponds with the colonialist imaginary in that each restricts the recognitive structures available for relationships between the self and others — the coloniser and the colonised — by maintaining a transcendent subject position that does not acknowledge its own historical locatedness, relativity, or the difference of others. I argued (for a number reasons discussed in Chapter One) that a Cartesian-like imaginary is presented in classic realist autobiographical life-writing and that the split it creates is adopted by readers who identify with the narrator. This, in turn, forecloses more complex forms of recognitive engagement that maintain difference between the narrator and the author. Such writing was contrasted with
Aboriginal testimonial life-writing which was seen to maintain more dynamic recognitive structures between Aboriginal narrators and non-Aboriginal readers.

Traditional psychoanalytic theory provides useful conceptual tools for thinking about traumatic experience such as mourning/working-through and melancholy/acting-out which, in the case of trauma theory, are employed to better articulate and, thereby, establish narrative control over, traumatic material. However, such concepts are diminished when used to further a psychoanalytic agenda that too closely connects the living subject with the operations of language and restricts the use of such concepts to the analysis of notions like Oedipal and Electra complexes to interpret very different subjects. Unlike schizo-analysis, traditional psychoanalysis presents itself as a science that faithfully represents the reality of the subject, rather than as a figurative practice that constructs subjectivity as it claims to reflect it. In doing so, it establishes universal psychic categories that overdetermine subjects and fail to take account of the specificity of psychic imaginaries in different individuals, groups and societies. Nevertheless, traditional psychoanalysis provides resources for theorising the traumatic and therapeutic dimensions involved in working-through post-colonial trauma in addition to providing an understanding of the connections between subjects and language.

Schizo-analysis avoids these limitations of psychoanalysis by registering the role and complexity of affective dimensions in the living subject, and by not exclusively tying the subject to the operations of language. It was shown that schizo-analysis neither commits itself to a Manichean split between the conscious and unconscious nor to complexes such as the Oedipal complex. Rather, it presents a model of psychic processes that shows them as deeply mutable and co-extensive with specific social contexts. It acknowledges that subjectivity is never given, always produced, and actively maps (rather than traces over) the unconscious. As such, it is a highly useful resource for thinking
through the way Aboriginal testimonial life-writing presents Aboriginality in-becoming because it highlights the way performativity is being itself. However, any theory that emphasises the dynamic nature of the subject and possibilities for subjective becoming must be balanced by a position that explores the role of forces that shape and circumscribe subjectivity, such as post-colonial trauma.

Trauma theory provides just such a counterweight because it assists in understanding the various ways in which traumatic experience disrupts and impairs the subject. Trauma theory offers a rich vocabulary/imaginary for thinking about post-colonial traumatic material by providing a set of conceptual tools that can articulate and specify traumatic objects. In doing so, it provides a means by which the sufferer of trauma can establish narrative and affective control over traumatic material. Trauma theory has cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary significance and has been employed by Aboriginal theorists and activists themselves to explicate post-colonial Aboriginal trauma. However, like responses to traumatic experience itself, trauma theory can enshrine traumatic experience by either fetishistically maintaining impasses or redemptive totalisations. Just as there is a close relationship between writing autobiographical theory and autobiography itself, how we theorise trauma is closely connected with how subjects may negotiate lived traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, and to a greater degree than traditional psychoanalysis, contemporary trauma theory assists in more dynamically figuring the traumatic legacy of colonial dispossession and processes available for working-through it. As such, it is a valuable theoretical resource for dealing with the therapeutic stages of negotiating post-colonial trauma.

Theory of written resistance (in its realist mode rather than anti-realist mode) is important because it identifies various strategies that oppressed subjects can employ to wrest power for themselves, such as strengthening their own identity positions or
questioning those of their oppressors. However, like schizo-analysis, it needs to take to
greater account the difficulty involved in performing such resistance. For instance,
written resistance may not be successful when it is undermined by the disruptions to the
subject created by traumatic material. Nevertheless, it is the tensions and concordances
between the therapeutic and political goals of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing that so
well characterises the post-colonial Australian context. Furthermore, resistance theory, in
a post-colonial context, emphasises the complex differences and co-production of
colonising and colonised cultures as well as the complexity of intra-racial relations.
However, with regard to post-colonial theory generally, there is currently a tendency to
too strongly stress the incommensurability of different cultures at the expense of looking
for useful cross-cultural comparisons.

This study has demonstrated that deconstructive method is valuable because it
provides tools for identifying the violent Othering and exclusion involved in acts of
establishing identity. Nevertheless, deconstructive method risks rendering the Other as
merely the residue of the operations of privileged discourses and identities and its
criticism is thereby often introspective and insular. It fails to register strongly enough
that that which is Other to privileged discourses has character of its own beyond merely
being the repressed Other of privileged discourses; the Other also has its Others. In
addition, some deployments of deconstructive analysis risk becoming a simplistic method
that fails to register difference because they respond to very different phenomena with the
same operation, that is, A equals not A. Furthermore, as a method, it may at times
confuse the processes involved in constructing identity with the power and privilege to do
so.

The realist imaginary examined in this study is characterised by a monological
perspective rather than a multi-perspectival one, although it does not necessitate a split
between an abstracted metaphysical subjectivity and historical persons as the Cartesian imaginary does. The realist imaginary is evoked by metaphors associated with truth, the subject’s embeddedness in and determination by the material conditions of history, and transparency. It posits that gaps between the representative and the represented can be spanned to give a true mimetic representation of the world. In a post-colonial context, the realist position as practised in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is not concerned with resisting colonialism through anti-realist deconstructive practice, but rather accepts the material effects of colonialist imaginaries as a reality that can be contested in a realist framework through recourse to notions of right and wrong, justice, and humanism. The realist contestation of colonialism is a vital stage in post-colonial history and helps reconfigure Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations for a variety of reasons: it challenges the colonialist discourse through adopting concepts that characterise colonialist rhetoric itself, such as humaneness, justice, and morality; it helps establish non-metaphorical facts that form the basis for the historicisation of the Aboriginal experience of colonial history and, thereby, works to strengthen Aboriginal agency; and it helps to register an Aboriginal-specific reality as perceived by themselves for themselves and for others.

The realist affirmation of Aboriginal reality found in Aboriginal testimony is underpinned by a political and therapeutic agenda that is closely bound to negotiating specific stages in the historical movement of post-colonial material conditions. Contemporary theory can articulate these stages beyond the language and concerns of realism and anti-realism but it can also fail to do so. Identity in general and Aboriginality in particular are performative but performativity itself is circumscribed by post-colonial material conditions that have limited the possibilities for Aboriginal self-expression. Post-colonial trauma complicates performativity as the establishment of Aboriginality. Yet, post-colonial traumatic material contains the levers that can mobilise performativity
for the processual enrichment of Aboriginality. Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is the transformation and record of the history of post-colonial traumatic conditions. To improve vocabularies and imaginaries to better hear its claims is to further that history. These are joint projects in the ethical performance of Australian history. This study is an instance of how such writing and theory produce one another. As such, it has hopefully clarified the performance and inherent symbolic and material possibilities of post-colonial Australian conditions.

This study has demonstrated some ways in which Aboriginal life-writing and contemporary theory can inform each other. As such, it expresses my literary concerns and history in exploring different forms of self-representation. It might be a useful lever for different people for different reasons through which their understanding is aided. Because Aboriginal testimonial life-writing is a multi-dimensional, hybrid genre it holds the potential to generate a large body of multi-disciplinary work of which this study is a specialised literary contribution. Nevertheless, this study should also prove useful for those interested in the political and/or psychotherapeutic disciplines. If so, the multi-dimensionality of Aboriginal testimonial life-writing will have been reflected and the eclectic use of contemporary theory justified.

It is important to remember that testimonial life-writing as a literary mode has no political allegiances. It can be used as a medium for oppressive neo-colonialist practices just as it can be used to challenge such practices. However, Aboriginal testimonial life-writing does have an allegiance: to the articulation and advancement of Aboriginal cultural identity. That allegiance has engendered positive results in that the presentation of cultural identity in Aboriginal testimonial life-writing has provided an opportunity to advance awareness, appreciation and understanding of Aboriginal cultures. It has also provided the opportunity for non-Aboriginal Australians to recognise themselves
differently due to its presentation of the complex dialogical relations that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. From an initial interest in theories of autobiography, this study moved into the broader field of life-writing and Aboriginal life-writing in particular. The move provided numerous benefits: texts that highlighted the excesses, deficits, utility and creativity of contemporary cultural theory; a wider focus due to the greater emphasis on the co-extensivity of society and individuals than found in autobiography; suitability to multi-disciplinary approaches due to the multi-dimensionality of the texts; insight into the complex operations of traumatic material in the construction of texts and subjects; and an improved understanding of literatures of political resistance and of post-colonial Australian history.

Aboriginal Studies has great value as a multi-disciplinary field of study and I look forward to the work of others committed to its processual enrichment. As a uniquely Australian discipline, its development will strengthen Australia’s very particular identity in the global context and may pay desirable material and symbolic dividends. It will also refine the dialectic underpinning discussions on Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations and Australia’s national identity. To reinforce impasses or escape into redemptive totalisations in discussions about Australia’s identity are decisions with serious consequences for establishing an ethical citizenry. To take either path is an important ethical decision because both destructively impact upon the establishment and volition of Aboriginal agency and exacerbate post-colonial trauma. Thereby, there is an ethical obligation to conceptualise identity and Aboriginality in a way that acknowledges its processual movements. Consider the dual movement that David Parker points to, which I cited at the beginning of Chapter One:

even the most linguistically focused recovery of the marginalised Other of a logocentric philosophical or literary text at least implicitly links itself with the defence of those who have been Other to Western imperialism, to
patriarchy or to bourgeois interests. [. . .] It is hard to see how a concern with such evils as ‘subordination and domination’ is not at least implicitly oriented towards a conception of a good life centring around goods such as freedom, self-expression, and self-realisation. (3)

This study argues that the theoretical way forward is to simultaneously affirm dual dialectical directions: claim the privileges of essentialism and of non-essentialism; reinforce traditional Aboriginality and work towards its processual enrichment; locate and abstract; establish and deconstruct; claim truth and retain the right to conceal secrets; be transparent and opaque; and be an agent of and representative for a collective. However, this simultaneous dual affirmation must be balanced by a simultaneous dual resistance to absolutism and radical relativism, complete redemptive totalisation and complete impasse enforcement, complete locatedness and complete abstractedness, complete transparency and complete opacity, complete establishment and complete deconstruction, and complete truth or complete non-truth. This position could be described as a theory and practice of how to have it both ways but not too much. It affirms dynamic dialectic as the human, post-humanist condition. It acknowledges that with regard to subaltern/coloniser relations, agency is the power to adopt and adapt identity positions as one chooses; it is about who can perform what and access the dynamism central to identity construction. This position acknowledges that the split between the representative and the represented in its many forms is what sustains the relationships of representation and avoids the violence of making equal. It is also, as Friedlander puts it, “the simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naive historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closure” (Friedlander qtd. in La Capra 212). The challenge remains to better formulate protocols for how this ambiguity might function more clearly and for an ethics of how to negotiate it. It is a difficult but necessary paradigmatic challenge.
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