

*Ruby Langford Ginibi's Influence on a Spanish Student of Australian
Studies*

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Abstract: Dr Ruby Langford Ginibi influenced me, personally and academically speaking, with her text *Haunted by the Past*, her direct style of writing and her personal approach to life and hardship. This text pays tribute to her by explaining how reading *Haunted by the Past* turned out to be a central text in my life.

Key Words: Ruby Langford Ginibi, *Haunted by the Past*, Nobby Langford.

I first read *Haunted by the Past* in Barcelona in June 2003. This text was available to me because it was a set reading in a subject of my degree in English at the Universitat de Barcelona. It influenced me and would reverberate in much of my future reading as I felt Ruby Langford Ginibi was talking to me directly, urging me to listen carefully and do something. The information on the extremely high number of deaths of Indigenous Australians in prison shocked me tremendously. Learning about the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1987-1991) lifted my spirits, but reading about the shameful lack of governmental response to implement the 339 recommendations of the report (Langford xiv) took me aback. I expected more from a country who praised a 'fair go' as one of its national identity markers.

Haunted by the Past is not only a memoir of the experiences her son Nobby lived with the Australian penal system, but also a history lesson. I think this was one of Ruby Langford Ginibi's goals when writing this book: to educate other Australians and non-Australians on Indigenous Australians' determined struggle to survive, dispossession and ongoing discrimination in order to foster their visibility. She excelled in her objectives as many generations of students, not only in Australia, but also in countries all over the world, learned about racism and discrimination through a contemporary first-hand account. Her activism and her novels received widespread recognition and she was awarded a History Fellowship from the New South Wales (NSW) Ministry for the Arts in 1994, an Honorary Fellowship from the National Museum of Australia in 1995, an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from La Trobe University in 1998, the NSW Premier's Literary Awards special award in 2005, the Australia Council for the Arts Writer's Emeritus Award in 2006 and was named Aboriginal Elder of the Year 2007 (Brown). Moreover, her books, *Don't Take your Love to Town* (1988), *Real Deadly* (1992), *My Bundjalung People* (1994), *Haunted by the Past* (1999) and *All My Mob*

(2007), allowed her voice, and that of other Indigenous Australians, to be heard and acknowledged.

Ruby Langford Ginibi defied all conventions: her mother abandoned her as well as her sisters and her father when she was six; she and her sisters were not part of the Stolen Generations because her father took them to Bonalbo away from the mission; she went to various schools until she was a teenager; she started to work in Sydney as a machinist when she was 15; she had her first child when she was 17; she had violent partners; she did all kinds of physical jobs in order to keep her family together; she had nine children and mainly raised them on her own; she had health problems and overcame them. Ruby Langford Ginibi was a very strong woman, a fighter, a survivor. Her books are proof of this. In *Haunted by the Past*, she explains her life and that of her family, some of the difficulties they faced and the strength of their love, but she also denounces the many causes of their pain and how colonisation, lack of recognition and lack of representation were at their root. However, her texts included laughter and lots of love, instead of only negative feelings, such as bitterness, resentment and anger regarding such appalling situations. I think her ability to love and laugh gave her strength to continue fighting, giving lectures, writing books and ensuring her voice was heard. Ruby Langford Ginibi received recognition for her efforts to educate Australians (and non-Australians) about Indigenous life experiences and suffering, to have their voice heard and acknowledged, to change text books and to change the perspective of colonisers. She even wrote a preamble for the Australian Constitution, which was not included, but which she sent to the media:

We, the Indigenous first peoples of this land, being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, who have lived in this land since time immemorial and have never seceded our sovereignty to any foreign power, because there were no treaties made with us, hence the stealing of our lands by the British Crown claiming the great lie of terra nullius, a Latin term of inhabited, no-one here, and I don't think our people, big black people that they were, were bloody invisible. So, until all Australians, white and multicultural, acknowledge our sovereign rights to our own land, Australia will remain a divided nation of White Australia Policy believers, monarchists, rednecks, liars and thieves. (Heimans 27)

This is an example of her style: direct, politically incorrect, eye-opening so blatantly clear that it makes the reader smile if not laugh. This text also forces the reader to question and reconsider one's knowledge about and one's position in society. It urges the reader to take action and demand explanations from the government for their lack of awareness concerning the plight of Indigenous Australians and stirs a desire to learn more, and keep listening and being taught.

Ruby Langford Ginibi's words had that effect on me: they encouraged me to keep learning about Indigenous Australians. I began to read more books (academic and creative writing, written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian authors), to learn about them at international congresses and to look for films and documentaries. I started searching for texts written by Indigenous authors, such as Sally Morgan or Ruth Hegarty. I also read Zohl dé Ishtar's *Holding Yawulyu. White Culture and Black*

Women's Law (2005) and I re-read Mudrooroo Narogin's *Dr Wooredy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) and Katherine Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929). I listened to the studies presented by Peter Read and Marcia Langton, among others, and I learnt about Indigenous Australian art and paintings with Austrian academic Eleonore Wildburger at congresses. I watched documentaries, such as *First Australians* (2008), and contemporary films directed or co-directed by or dealing with Indigenous Australians, such as Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* (2002), Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker* (2002), Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr's *Ten Canoes* (2006) and Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* (2009), and his short films' *Nana* (2007) and *Green Bush* (2005), for example. I also tried to be aware of work done by Amnesty International and Survival International.

Ruby Langford Ginibi's words also made me reconsider the experiences I had had during my trips to the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and Alice Springs, for example. I knew about the relevance of Uluru for the Anangu people, the traditional owners of the lands within the National Park, but I did not know that the rock formation was related to Kata Tjuta, that it was a sacred place, which was the reason why climbing Uluru was discouraged. After learning this, I did not even consider climbing Uluru, as it would be disrespectful, but I was taken aback when I saw a line of people queuing to climb it! Why was it difficult to respect someone else's culture? Surely they would not enter a church with a bikini or no t-shirt. If people in 2001 were behaving that way and it hurt me, a stranger, how would Indigenous peoples, and especially Anangu, feel? How many sacred sites must have been violated since the beginning of the colonisation? How many Indigenous peoples had been killed when trying to defend the territories they belonged to? I sympathised with Indigenous Australians in their plight for respect and acknowledgement.

Reading *Haunted by the Past* made me more sensitive towards Aboriginal cultural laws and planted on me the desire to keep learning and to share the gained knowledge. Ruby Langford Ginibi's book brought the disappointment I had felt in 2001 to the surface again: how many lives were being damaged at the time due to a lack of respect, interest and knowledge? Ruby Langford Ginibi explained her attachment to her traditional land, how she visited it every year and she tried to pass her culture on to her children, how she took each one at a time to focus all her attention on his or her learning and to help her child to be aware of the teachings. I imagined Anangu people would be doing the same with their youth and that they were trying to teach us, tourists, with the leaflets and the Cultural Centre: there was so much information there! One could learn about Tjukurpa (the creation period), the unique flora and fauna of the area, the formation of Uluru and Kata-Tjuta, about Anangu Art and reasons to avoid climbing Uluru. If they respected white people's way of learning, could not the white people respect Indigenous ways of living?

In *Haunted by the Past*, Ruby Langford Ginibi explains how her son Nobby found his balance and identity, his true spirit and place in the community, through Indigenous art. Many artists paint the same story several times, but the untrained viewer cannot either realise it nor read the story. This is also explained in Zohl dé Ishtar's book *Holding Yawulyu. White Culture and Black Women's Law* and in Warwick Thornton's film *Samson and Delilah*, for example. Art and tradition are strongly related in Indigenous

cultures as it is a way of expressing their identity, of learning and teaching patterns of behaviour. Besides, art is not considered to be a commodity, it is not encouraged by a specific social class and does not belong to individuals, but to the community. Art is another expression of their identity and, thus, a way of overcoming suffering and hardship.

Another example of Ruby Langford Ginibi's words resonating in me took place in the hours I was in Alice Springs. I was walking around the town when I came across a group of Indigenous women who were drinking on the shade. That surprised me because I tended to think that men became drunk in public spaces more often than women and the few female drunkards I had seen in different cities were homeless. Reading about the effects that colonisation had on the daily lives of so many Indigenous Australians allowed me to stop judging them and to approach this problem with a different understanding. Before reading *Haunted by the Past*, I had the tendency to think that, in democratic countries, individuals had control over their own lives and that, with a supportive family, lives would be quite organised and safe (the shameful act of removing children from their caring parents was an example of a broken family because they were not allowed to take care of each other). Reading Ruby Langford Ginibi's text showed me how wrong I was: she never lacked love, but her life was difficult, she loved her children dearly and supported them, yet their lives were not easy. Langford herself explained how she had a problem with alcohol, but she overcame it thanks to her family and her strength. During my degree, I had read many books denouncing abusive and unjust situations, but most of these texts were not contemporary novels. From that moment onwards, I have focused my attention on—mainly Australian—literature written after the Second World War.

After reading *Haunted by the Past*, I met an author from the Stolen Generations, who had also had problems with alcohol, and who had suffered tremendously due to injustices meted out to Indigenous Australians by different Australian governments: Alf Taylor. I met him in Barcelona and he gave a class I was allowed to attend. He talked about his works and read a very touching poem addressed to his mother. After his reading, the whole class was moved to tears! Some of his experiences in life were similar to those of Ruby Langford Ginibi: they did not enjoy the care of their mothers; they lived unconventional lives; they had problems with alcohol, which they overcame; and, they were writers and used writing as a way of denouncing injustice. The following time I met him was at New Norcia Benedictine Mission (Western Australia) for a congress. Being in the mission with Alf Taylor, who had been sent there as a child, listening to his memories and feeling his pain, made me remember Ruby Langford Ginibi and all the Indigenous peoples who had suffered, and were suffering, so much due to decisions they had not made, but that had affected them directly. I think that congress, with its setting and the moving and enlightening papers delivered, made an indelible mark on most of its attendants. It certainly did with regard to myself.

Personally, I also felt curious about the mission because it had been founded in 1846 by the Galician Dom. Rosendo Salvado with the help of Dom. Joseph Serra. New Norcia Benedictine Mission is 132 km north of Perth. Its architectural style is typically Spanish with arcs, towers, churches with frescoes on their walls, and wood carvings, paintings and decoration brought from Spain. Twenty-seven of the mission buildings are

classified by the National Trust and the town as a whole is registered in the National Estate ("A winter"). Moreover, the museum holds copies of the Bible in the official and three co-official languages of Spain: Spanish and Basque, Catalan and Galician. According to the mission's website, Salvado wanted to create a self-sufficient Christian village with an economy based on agriculture. However, as the diseases introduced in the 1860s caused many deaths among Indigenous people, Salvado changed his aim to that of providing practical education for the children brought to New Norcia from all over Western Australia. As the website explains, Salvado shared the 19th century aim of other missionaries to "civilise and evangelise" according to the European ideals of the time, but he did so with a sympathy for indigenous culture that was rare in his day ("The Salvado Era"). After Salvado's death, New Norcia became a more traditional monastic town in a European style for fifty years, and in 1951 it adapted its lifestyle to local conditions. The presence of Spanish missionaries has been continuous for more than 160 years.

In spite of all the changes introduced by the mission, I could not help wondering what Nyoongar peoples' lives would have been like had the Stolen Generations not happened. While I was walking through the sites, I kept thinking about Alf Taylor's feelings and memories, about Ruby Langford Ginibi not living in a mission because her father took her and her sisters to Bonalbo with his brother and sister-in-law and about the lives of thousands who were definitely marked by this policy. Being Spanish, thus, from a former imperial country, also made me think about the killings and the processes of colonisation and *mestizaje* in Central and South America, the "loss of the colonies" in 1898 (Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines) and the colonies in Africa. Moreover, many Majorcans went to "do the Americas" in the second half of the 19th century and there still exist popular references to the life of Majorcans there, the so-called "*havaneres*". Why had I been taught so little about the point of view of the colonies? Was it studied at university level as part of the Spanish Literature and Language degree? Surely there had been a "chief protector of aborigines": Fray Bartolomé de las Casas was the first "*protector de indios*" in 1516. How many more similarities existed between Australia and the former Spanish colonies? Reading texts written by Ruby Langford Ginibi and other Indigenous Australians could also help me understand Spanish colonial history/ies better and improve my understanding of the world and of the bilateral relations with and among the countries of the former colonies.

A final memory I would like to share happened in 2005 and it has to do with the instant I read that Spaniards and Mediterranean people in general are not considered to be Caucasian in Australia. That came out as a shock to me because I had never considered myself to be anything but a Caucasian, and the label 'wog' does not exist in Europe to designate Southern Europeans (at least, as far as I know). (I am aware of the fact that Southern Europeans are sometimes referred to as "PIGS" or "PIIGS", that is, from Portugal, Italy and/or Ireland, Greece and Spain, the countries with a more troubled economy, but it has to do with the current economic crisis not skin colour and Ireland is not a Southern European country.)

Having read that Spaniards are not considered Caucasians, I thought, 'In Spain I am Caucasian, I take three flights, land in Australia and I am not Caucasian anymore. What happens during these flights to change my perceived identity?' Madan Sarup defined

identity as “the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story that others tell of us” (Sarup 3). During that semester in Australia I went through an identity crisis because the person I considered myself to be did not coincide with the person Australians perceived. Ruby Langford Ginibi will never know how much I remembered her son Nobby and his explanation of this duality in *Haunted by the Past*:

Because I'm fair I live ninety per cent of my life in a sort of divided culture.
Some Kooris say, 'You don't look like a blackfella!' But that's not my fault.
I've got a black mother; I can't help it if my father is white! It's something
I've had to live with all my life (Langford Ginibi 19).

I reflected on the number of people who go through similar identity crises: the children of mixed-marriages, migrants who are asked to define their loyalty (as if one could love only *one* country!), people who are judged by their religion, the colour of their hair or their physical appearance or condition. As I reached the conclusion that I could not control what others thought of me, I also decided I would continue studying and researching the different ways migrants deal with these identity issues. And this is what I am doing for my PhD.

Thank you, Dr Ruby Langford Ginibi, for your courage, for your wake-up calls, for your direct style, for sharing your life and that of your family with unknown readers. Thank you for your generosity.

Vale Ruby Langford Ginibi.

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