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Bel-Davias, Carine (2017) *Mémoire et identité dans les récits de vie des Insulaires Australiens du Pacifique Sud: une lutte pour la reconnaissance / Memory and identity in the life writing of Australian South Sea Islanders: struggling for recognition*. PhD Thesis, James Cook University and Université de Montpellier
3. (English summary only)

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Memory and Identity in the Life Writing of Australian South Sea Islanders: Struggling for Recognition

Abstract

This dissertation reconsiders from a postcolonial perspective the life narratives of unrecognised writers belonging to the Australian South Sea Islander community. It concentrates on their experience of dispersal and relocation as related by memory and recounted in narrative. This thesis argues that these narratives constitute a literature of resistance and contributes as a body of work, to a larger recognition of the Australian South Sea Islanders as a community whose common identification stems from being descendants of Islanders who mainly came from Melanesia (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands) and were indentured to work on the sugar cane plantations of Queensland from 1863 to 1904 in slave-like conditions. The personal memories of the authors under study, Faith Bandler, Noel Fatnowna, Mabel Edmund and Jacqui Wright in association with Francis Wimbis, as well as those of their abducted ancestors, victims of “blackbirding”, shed light on a common history of suffering and discrimination as well as survival and adaptation which enabled them to create a new common identity despite their varied geographical origins. Although their existence has been officially recognised, this identity, as written on paper, is not as fixed and unique as it seems: it is part of a network of what Edouard Glissant defines as *identités-relations* which, in the case of Australian South Sea Islanders’ narratives, are maintained in constant interaction through the work of memory that operates as a strategy of resistance against oblivion and as a process of identification. In being both rooted and deterritorialised, these dynamic identities are evolving like a rhizome that spreads its roots horizontally while anchoring various tubers on its way. This process of multiple connected lines and bifurcations inscribes Australian South Sea Islanders on a larger map of diasporic displaced people.

The theoretical approach of this thesis has been inspired by different disciplinary fields, notably cultural, postcolonial and diaspora studies, philosophy and anthropology, including thinkers from Oceania, such as Epili Hau’Ofa, from Europe such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and from the French Caribbean islands especially Edouard Glissant. They all focused on notions of diversity, connectedness and relational identities. The various practices and politics of relational identities informed the various representations of identity shared by Australian South Sea Islanders and the way they experiment with them within their life narratives. This thesis looks at how the authors create interactions of different components to help build understanding of a dynamic network of relations between people and places across time, beyond social, racial and spatial boundaries.

After a brief summary of who Australian South Sea Islanders are and the historical circumstances leading to their arrival in Australia, the corpus of writers under examination will be presented, followed by the issues of identity and the postcolonial, Oceanic and diasporic framework used for analysis. The last two parts will include the thesis outline and the conclusion.

Key words: Australian South Sea Islanders; *identité-relation*; memory; diaspora; indentured labour; “blackbirding”; “Kanakas”; rhizome; post-colonialism; Pacific literature

Summary

In Australia, the existence and contribution to the country's economy of a small Black community whose members identify themselves as Australian South Sea Islanders has largely been ignored. Mainly coming from the surrounding Melanesian islands (the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia), they are the descendants of the first Islanders who worked on the sugar cane plantations of Queensland from 1863 to 1904. Although these Islanders held a three-year contract as indentured labourers, the deplorable conditions of their recruitment, either by "force, trickery or persuasion" (Docker 1970, 47), and the harsh treatment they received once in Australia, likened them to slaves (Shineberg 1999, 4). Their recruitment soon became known as "blackbirding" in reference to the abduction of Black people pejoratively called "blackbirds" by British traders and sailors, which therefore implied some form of illegal human trafficking.

These historical circumstances clearly had an impact on the way these South Pacific Islanders tried to redefine themselves once in Australia, especially as they had been cut off from their traditional social and cultural environment, sometimes at an early age, and had therefore lost a part of their island culture and identity. In addition, Islanders from the same island were often separated and mixed with other Islanders from different locations on the plantations, which entailed a restricted access to their culture and language. After the adoption of the Pacific Island Labourers Act in its 1901 constitution, the Commonwealth of Australia organised the deportation of almost all the Islanders who had settled in the country since 1863, with a few exemptions for those who had arrived before 1879 and were married to a local person or owned land, among other reasons (Moore 2000, 22). It is considered that out of the 10,000 or so Pacific Islanders living in Queensland

and the north of New South Wales, about 1,600 were allowed to stay while 1,000 managed to settle illegally. They were dispersed along 2,000 km of eastern coast and they mixed with Aboriginal people especially to balance the scarcity of Islander women among themselves.

Known as Australian South Sea Islanders, their descendants have been struggling for more than forty years to reclaim their own history and identity in order to have their heritage and identity recognised at a national and international level. They consider themselves as the descendants of slaves although this question has been much debated and has given rise to some controversy among historians.

Since the 1970s, the work of memory has come to support Australian South Sea Islanders' claims for recognition, be it through writing with the publication of life narratives or recently through the organisation of national conferences, colloquia and commemorative cultural events. Since 2012, such events intend to give more visibility to this forgotten community still unknown to the general public. Despite the erection of memorials in the towns that thrived thanks to the sugar cane industry, the recognition of this unique cultural group by the Commonwealth of Australia (1994), the Queensland Government (2000), and the New South Wales Government (2013) is not sufficient. The Australian South Sea Islanders are still treated as a deprived community waiting for a recognition translated into action, providing better opportunities in terms of education, employment, health and employment.

A Corpus of Australian South Sea Islander Writers

With the publication of *Wacvie* in 1977, Faith Bandler became the first Australian South Sea Islander to produce a written account of her father's experience in Queensland. After his abduction on Ambrym Island in Vanuatu, she recounts how Peter Mussingkon was taken to Australia to work

on a sugar cane plantation before his successful escape in Tumbulgum, in the north of New South Wales where he managed to settle. When she started writing, Bandler was already a well-known figure because of her involvement alongside Aboriginal people for a recognition of their rights and her active role in the organisation of the 1967 referendum which enabled to amend the discriminatory sections of the Constitution towards Aboriginal people. She had stepped down from her position of General Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) to address the needs of her community, which found itself excluded from all the new schemes that had been set up to help Aboriginal people. She feared South Pacific Islanders might lose their identity in passing themselves off as Aborigines, which was possible because many of them had Aboriginal relatives due to intermarriages (Interview 1993, tape 4). After travelling to Vanuatu in 1974 to find her ancestral family, she decided to write her father's story, convinced that his fight for freedom should be told not to be forgotten. She received several awards for her involvement in Aboriginal and South Pacific Islander Affairs during her lifetime, including the Order of Australia (1984), a Human Rights Medal (1997) and a Meritorious Award on behalf of the Sydney Peace Foundation, presented by Nelson Mandela (2000). She was also awarded the Degree of Doctor of Letters from Macquarie University in 1994 but declined to become a Member of the British Empire (Stephens 2015).

Concerning Faith Bandler's five published books, among which two are dedicated to her political fight (1983, 1089) and one is a fiction for children (1980), only *Wacvie* (1977) and its sequel *Welou, My Brother* (1984) are examined in this study. In *Wacvie*, the author largely focuses on the description of the Islanders' life on the Queensland plantation. This very important stage enables her father to learn the ways and language of his white masters and contributes to the development of a collective consciousness that fuels his desire for freedom. Her father Wacvie is clearly presented as a slave right from the start, with a book cover showing the head of an Islander

whose neck is fettered to three cane sticks. In addition, the narrative displays a micropolitics based on race and power relations between the white masters and their Islander servants or workers in giving a voice to each of them, which means that the biased and stereotyped perceptions of the first are counterbalanced by a positive reassessment of the values shared by the latter.

In *Welou, My Brother*, Bandler reconsiders Wacvie's life from a more familial perspective in relation to one of his eight children, Welou (officially named Walter), whose life is here partly recounted from his birth to the age of twelve when his father passes away. This episode corresponds to a critical moment of his life when he is experiencing a personal struggle as a boy caught between two cultures: his father's Melanesian traditions and lifestyle on one hand and the need for a European education stressed by his mother on the other hand as she considers it to be "the only escape from a life of toil" (48).

The second author under study, Noel Fatnowna (1929-1991) was also involved in local politics and worked for the recognition of his community in Mackay. As recounted in his unique written testimony, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage* (1989), his grandfather Kwailiu and his cousin Karai had been abducted from the isle of Malaita, in the Solomon Islands while they were still young boys in the late 1870s. During his childhood, Fatnowna and his family lived close to old Solomon Islanders who taught him the customs, traditions and language of his grandfather's island, a heritage which made him feel very proud. In 1973, he and his wife, Minnie, travelled back to Malaita with their four children in order to reconnect with their past and find Kwailiu's family. By the time he met Professor Roger Keesing and got involved with the Department of Anthropology of the Australian National University in 1976, Fatnowna had already gathered much information related to South Sea Islander history, including recollections, photos and documents from those living in the Mackay district. As reported in the introduction of *Fragments*, he shared some of his information with students working on the Black Oral History Project at James Cook University,

including Clive Moore and Patricia Mercer. However, Fatnowna intended to tell his story in his own way and he asked for Keesing's assistance because the anthropologist had done some fieldwork in Malaita on the Kwaio people in 1963-64. Thanks to him and the Aboriginal Arts Board, Fatnowna received tapes and materials to record his story. Keesing compiled and edited transcriptions of the contents of the 27 tapes recorded between 1978 and 1979, a work resulting in the publication of *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*. From 1976 to 1983 (Gistitin 1995, 87) he worked as a Special Commissioner for Pacific Islanders with the Queensland Government but eventually resigned due to what he perceived as the ineffectiveness of the implemented policy and the lack of improvement in the conditions of his people. Acting for 41 years as an officer in the Queensland Ambulance Service, he was also appointed as Justice of the Peace in 1968 and received the Medal of the British Empire in 1982.

Published with the help of Roger Keesing, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage* (1989) encapsulates the personal, familial and collective story of three generations of South Sea Islanders, underlined in the subtitle on the front cover as: "A Powerful and Moving Account of a Kanaka Family". The book is divided into four parts, starting with Fatnowna's own experience as a "Kanaka" descendant discriminated against in the white world of his childhood and young adulthood, followed by his journey back to Malaita in the Solomon Islands to find his family. The third part is dedicated to the story of his kidnapped grandfather Kwailiu while the fourth evokes the deportation era in the 1900s as well as the story of his father, Harry Fatnowna, and the hardships undergone by their fellow Islanders up to 1988.

The third writer of this corpus is Mabel Edmund (1930-2009) from Rockhampton. Her father, John William Mann, had been abducted in Vanuatu or in Lifou from the Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia, according to the two versions she gives of her family history in *No Regrets* (1992) and *Hello Johnny! Stories of my Aboriginal and South Sea Islander Family* (1996). This lack of clarity

regarding exact origins may have been due to the multiple ports of call made by the ships taking the Islanders to Australia. As her mother was half-Aboriginal and half-German, she became aware of her difference from the other Islanders with whom she spent her childhood. After her wedding with Harold “Digger”, she went to live in Joskeleigh where she joined another South Sea Islander community. Digger was the one who encouraged her to join the local branch of the Labour Party in 1968. Two years later, Mabel Edmund became the first Black woman to be elected to local government as a councillor in the Livingstone Shire. At that time, she also began to get involved in Black politics, as reported in *No Regrets* (63). She joined the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (ATSILS) and was later elected as its State Secretary. In 1973, she was appointed Commissioner of the National Aboriginal Loans Commission in Canberra by the Governor General of Australia and travelled in different parts of the country for work up to the end of her mandate in 1980. These two positions enabled her to contribute significantly to the improvement of Aboriginal people’s conditions. Feeling very depressed after the death of her husband in 1981, she undertook an Art course at the Aboriginal and Islander Vocational School of Art in Cairns from which she graduated in 1986. Her batiks and paintings have been exhibited in Rockhampton, Brisbane and Canberra. Some of them are also displayed on the book covers of her two works of life writing. Edmund received several awards including the Order of Australia in 1986, the Centenary of Federation Medal for Service to Australian Society and Literature in 2003.

Her first autobiographical narrative, *No Regrets* (1992), is composed of different parts dedicated to family, community and her political career in which she conjures up her social advancement and success as an artist. Four years later, Edmund completed her story with *Hello Johnny!*, a series of personal anecdotes related to the four men of her life: her father, brother, father-in-law (all named “Johnny”) and her husband Digger. These memories cast a new light on the way different ethnic groups can interact and form networks of positive relations in a liminal

multicultural environment despite racial conflicts of constructed boundaries.

The last two authors under examination are Jacqueline Wright and Francis Wimbis, who jointly self-published four books in two years' time including *The Secret: A Story of Slavery in Australia* (1996), *Light in the Darkness* (1996), a work of poetry as well as two fables entitled *The Lizard and the Dog* (1996) and *Two Little Boys and the Snake: A South Sea Islander Story Yarn* (1997). Less known than the other South Sea Islander writers, Francis Wimbis trusted the history of his grandfather and father to Jacqui Wright who worked for many years as a linguist and teacher in Aboriginal communities from Pilbara and Kimberley before becoming Western Australia's regional Literature Officer in 2000¹. She also worked as an editor at Magabala Books, an Aboriginal publishing house and is now an open producer for ABC Kimberley. In 2013, her first novel, *Red Dirt Talking*, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin. I could not find any information on Francis Wimbis or on how he met Jacqui Wright, apart from the fact that she agreed to help him turn his oral family history into a written one, using her own words and drawings to "see through the eyes of the South Sea people" (1996, ii) and convey their feelings while adding some of Wimbis's words and selected excerpts from the Bible.

Although *The Secret* spans three generations of Wimbis from the grandfather to the grandson Francis, it mainly focuses on the story of Wimbis's grandfather and confirms his slave-like conditions through a polyvocality of real and fictitious testimonies which resonate and serve as a background to the history of the older Wimbis. Forced to escape after his father was killed in a tribe feud on Lakon Island (today known as Gaua Island or Santa Maria in the Banks Islands north of Vanuatu), Wimbis the grandfather took refuge at the mission before being lured into a boat and sent to work on a plantation at the age of fourteen. During the crossing and at the plantation, the

¹ See her biography on the Freemantle Press website, accessed on 6th Feb. 2017.

Islanders' difficult conditions and the harsh treatment they received come to support Wright's argument concerning the existence of an Australian slavery system, already mentioned in the title (*The Secret: A Story of Slavery in Australia*) and her appeal for an open recognition of it in the Foreword. In spite of all this, Wimbis feels proud to be Australian and encourages his son to share their history and cultural heritage with his children (71).

Other narratives, often intended for a more restricted use within the family or the community, came to be published, among them *History and the South Sea Islanders on the Tweed* (1994) by Johnny Itong, followed by his *Memoirs of my 80 Years of Work in the Areas of Tweed-Brisbane* (1995) and Teresa Fatnowna's *Faith of Our Fathers: A Journey of Three Fatnownas (1866-1999)* (2002). Some oral testimonies were also compiled like those collected by historians Clive Moore and Patricia Mercer (2001), Cristine Andrew and Penny Cook (2000) or those gathered by Justin Doyle, Grahame Fatnowna and Teleal Ketchell among Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders and South Sea Islanders. Publications sponsored by Australian South Sea Islander associations under the form of brochures can also be taken into account, including those of Lloyd Willie (1998) and Pat Hamilton (1998) that combine local history and family histories. Their more factual, genealogical and historical approach aims at helping descendants in search of their ancestors. Comparatively, the life narratives under study provide a larger perception of Australian South Sea Islander communities which serves as a backdrop to the shaping of a common identity and the recognition of their history by the work of memory.

Exploring Identity through Writing

Published before Queensland's official recognition of the Australian South Sea Islander community in 2000, the selected life narratives all deal with the abduction of ancestors and their

struggle to survive at the plantation, two experiences that have been underestimated although they constitute the very first stages of the building process of a common identity. Mabel Edmund is the only one referring to this episode briefly as she prefers to focus on the tightly-knit community life she enjoys among South Sea Islanders and the links she maintains with various groups living in the same area.

This thesis intends to show that the South Sea Islanders' common experiences of dispersal, bondage and in the present case, abduction, have entailed a common suffering and a desire to survive which encouraged them and their descendants to gather in small groups around the family circle, then in the community circle related to the island of origin before taking part in a more global movement at a national and international level. Accordingly, Australian South Sea Islanders came to identify collectively as the descendants of displaced Islanders held in bondage in a foreign country the customs and language of which were unknown to them.

Other factors further helped the process of a common identification, as exemplified in the books under scrutiny: the adoption of a common *lingua franca*, the Kanaka Pidgin English, later replaced by English, Christianisation,² the access to education for Islander children and the experience of discrimination which carried on during adulthood under the White Australia policy. The emphasis on this process in the narratives also supports Australian South Sea Islanders' will to be recognised by creating in 1975 the Australian South Sea Islanders United Council (ASSIUC). In addition, these books construct together a sense of continuity to the Australian South Sea Islander community in turning personal stories into collective history, prone to be passed on to the next generations of Islanders and non-Islanders.

² Some of these factors had already been pointed out by Patricia Mercer in *White Australia Defied* (28-32).

A Postcolonial, Oceanic and Diasporic Theoretical Framework

Given Australian South Sea Islander history of displacement and relocation in a country colonised by the English and the importance of the identity issue in order to resist oblivion and sustain demands for more recognition since the 1970s, this thesis adopts a postcolonial literary perspective. As with many postcolonial approaches, its literary scholarship has been enriched and enlarged by other disciplinary fields, notably cultural studies, diaspora studies, philosophy, anthropology, history and geography. These perspectives highlight the different components of Australian South Sea Islanders life writings which simply cannot be read within a predetermined grid corresponding to hypothetical canonical expectations. In the same way as shells lose of their shine when they dry, the stories of Australian South Sea Islanders would have seemed flat or deprived of interest if a multidisciplinary reading had not revealed the moving frame of a poetics of insularity connecting land and sea through the flow of memory across time and space. A singular perspective would have made it difficult to show how their heterogeneous contents commingle to interact with the different parts of their lives and identities.

Furthermore, thinkers and researchers from different geographical areas, from the Pacific to the Caribbean, have helped to give a non-Eurocentric, transdisciplinary and transoceanic insight to this research, the product of a cooperation between two universities, two countries, France and Australia, situated in two different hemispheres. This research also draws on my immersion in two Melanesian countries with a very different colonial environments: first New Caledonia (2010-2013), still a French possession, and then independent Fiji (2013-2017).

As John McLeod explains (2010, 28-29), postcolonial literatures are concerned with questioning the colonial discourse and producing new forms of representations in order to decolonise the mind while focusing on major issues like identity, place and displacement, a point

already made by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002, 8). They consider the appropriation of language as a determining factor in this decolonising process, which consists in expressing one's own views and reclaiming one's history according to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012, 31). For Australian South Sea Islanders, using English is also a means to express their resistance and creativity through auto/biographical narratives including fictional elements. Edward Said points out that narrative fiction is not just as a counter discourse but an alternative to imperialism, a "method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (1994, xii). He also argues that cultural boundaries have been blurred by imperialism, which calls into question any static notion of reified identities inherited from the colonial era, such as those British settlers tried to impose in their division of Australia society, as reflected in Bandler, Fatnowna and Edmund's narratives.

Nevertheless, Said used the term "postcolonial" sparingly and Tuhiwai Smith stressed the fact that it aroused some resistance from Indigenous writers and thinkers in Australia for instance because it seemed to imply that colonialism was over despite its ongoing effects and it came to reassert the authority of non-Indigenous academics in that field (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 25). In order to counterbalance these aspects, perspectives from the Pacific and the Caribbean were introduced because their current inhabitants have experienced colonisation and dispersal. Contrary to Aboriginal writer and critic Jackie Huggins in the Australian context³ they do not perceive fluidity as a dilution of one's cultural heritage or identity.

Within a larger context of decolonisation starting in the Pacific with the independence of Samoa in 1962 (Argounes 2011, 30), writers and thinkers from the newly independent states tried

³ In a chapter entitled "Always was always will be", Huggins opposes Bain Attwood's conception of identity as "a process of becoming" and presents Aboriginality as "fixed rather than a diluted mystical vision to aspire to" (Grossman 2003, 63) but this argument is part of a larger debate between indigeneity and diaspora, which are not as divided as they seem according to Daniel Coleman (2015).

to counter the colonial discourse with a view to “developing an Indigenous literary aesthetic and debunking Western ‘myths’ about Pacific peoples” according to Michelle Keown (2009, 109).

While Samoan writer Albert Wendt insisted on the need to create a new Oceania promoting “new cultures which are free of the taint of colonialism and based firmly on our own pasts” (1973, 53), Tongan anthropologist and critic Epili Hau’Ofa shared a new positive vision of Oceania as “a sea of islands” opposing the belittling perceptions of the West who viewed the Pacific as “islands in a far sea” (“Our Sea of Islands” 1994, 152). In this new vision, he enhanced the natural connections between the islands and their people thanks to the sea, a defining pattern for a common Oceanic identity: “the sea is our pathway to each other and to everyone else, the sea is our endless saga, the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is within us” (“The Ocean in Us” 1998, 409).

Either materialised by the metaphor of the sea as in Hau’Ofa’s vision or in the creative interaction between oral and written forms within South Pacific literature as underlined by Fijian writer and academic Subramani (1992, 2-6), fluidity can be conceived as a path between people, places and identities. This vision dwells on the cultural exchanges that have always existed between South Pacific Islands before European colonisers imposed their boundaries and it seeks to promote Pacific Islanders’ own creativity and voice so that they can speak “from the inside out” as Rob Wilson put it (Hereniko and Wilson 1999).

Rotuman playwright and scholar Vilsoni Hereniko claims that fluidity is therefore a hallmark of Pacific Islanders’ cultural representations and identities (1999, 138). It is also a component of the poetics running through the Australian South Sea Islander narratives, a poetics close to the one developed by Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Similar to the ebb and flow of the tide, his so-called “tidalectics” (1999) creates a movement of return in the text through the dynamic interaction between time and space which produces creolisation. For Brathwaite, this term refers to an ongoing

sociocultural process from which people can identify and position themselves in a variety of ways that are not “fixed or monolithic” because of their interactions (Ashcroft et al. 1995, 202-205).

As a concept and a process, the philosophy of Relation developed by Edouard Glissant, a French writer, poet and thinker from the Martinique Caribbean Island, also advocates creolisation instead of essence, because it recognises and values diversity through the interaction of its different cultural components. In that perspective, identity is not restricted to a unique and fixed root but deployed as relational and rhizomatic (1990, 31), that is, constantly reconstructed by a network of open connections between different cultures.

These Islanders’ approaches to identity have played a determining part in helping to clarify that Australian South Sea Islander identity is not pure or indivisible since it partakes of a network of connexions extending beyond geographical borders. Their concepts also connect with the philosophical, diasporic and anthropological fields aforementioned: indeed, Glissant explains that his reference to the roots and the rhizome (1996, 59) was clearly inspired by French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari’s “Rhizome” (1980), a seminal essay in which they develop a dynamic, transversal⁴ and connected way of thinking that they assimilate to the workings of a rhizome and that constitutes a rhizome in itself, with its multiple, unlimited and heterogeneous ramifications. Glissant applied this concept to the notion of identity as a useful means to draw a distinction between rooted identities based on uniqueness and creolised, composite ones, produced by the encountering of different cultures (1996, 60).

For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is also characterised by its strong potential for deterritorialisation⁵ when it follows an unexpected path and changes territory (19) to make a

⁴ Eric Alliez and Andrew Goffey (2011, 7-8) highlight that particular aspect of Guattari’s philosophy which is based on the fact that a rhizome always grows in-between things, as explained in “Rhizome” (1980, 36).

⁵ One of the three characteristics of what they call “minor literature” (2010, 29).

connection with something different across space and time. The two philosophers consider that a virtual link can be created through a rhythmic repetition of sounds or motifs they call “ritornello”, a musical term referring the transcoded passage of meaning from one *milieu* to another for birds as for humans (1980, 384-385). In the life narratives of Australian South Sea Islanders, I propose to use this concept of “ritornello” to encompass the tension between the longing for a return and the aspiration to project oneself in a new *milieu*. As part of the emergence of memory, it operates through various forms of repetitiveness of sounds, motifs and facts as well as their overemphasis that reflects the experience of displacement lived by Islanders, torn between a desire to come back and the will to blend in their new environment.

In the field of cultural studies too, British sociologists Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy⁶, inspired by postmodern thinkers such as François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault, define identity not as essence but as a “positioning” (Hall 1989, 226), a process of “becoming” (Hall 225) articulated around similarity, alterity and hybridity. With this dynamic framework, they propounded a new, mobile and decentred perception of diaspora known as “Black diaspora” in reference to the experience of dispersed Black people living in the margins. This model called into question the traditional conception of diaspora exemplified by the Jewish model and centred on the “point of departure and the maintenance of a fixed identity in spite of dispersal” as French sociologist Stéphane Dufoix points out (2008, 24).

In his essay on “Diasporas”, American anthropologist James Clifford revisits the definition of the term in order to stress, like Paul Gilroy (1993, 120), its potential to signify connectedness both to the local and the transnational. Inspired by the way Hall used Gramsci’s concept of “articulation” to define identity, Clifford further developed this approach and applied it to Oceanic

⁶ Hall was born in Jamaica and Gilroy was born to Guyanese and English parents in London.

people (2001) after his encounter with the late Kanak Independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Thanks to him, Clifford understood how indigeneity could be at the same time “rooted and routed in particular places” (2001, 469), which draws its experience and identity-forming processes closer to diaspora than expected, as Daniel Coleman recently argued (2015).

French anthropologist Barbara Glowczewski, refers to Clifford’s conjunction of “root and routed”, to propose a resonance with her exploration of Aboriginal people’s relation to places through mythical songs and narratives (2007, 87). Through storytelling, singing and dancing, men and women form mental maps of fluid and open networks composed of real places which are connected through storylines and song lines and create reticular patterns across the land (2007, 87). These patterns of totemic identifications can be drawn as lines connecting circles (Glowczewski 2011, 105): they materialise anchorage in places and semi-nomadic movement (95), a repetition of nostalgic departure from places as a defining paradigm of Aboriginal identities and knowledge (Glowczewski 2007). This research reveals that the articulation of anchorage and movement is also a characteristic of Australian South Sea Islander ontology.

In addition, this notion of diaspora is related to those of map and borders in the construction of places where cultural and dynamic exchanges take place and where identities commingle and interact according to Avtar Brah (2005) and Susan Stanford Friedman (1998). While Brah defines diasporic space as a point of confluence where different narratives constantly intersect, animated by different processes, be they economic, political, cultural or psychic (2005, 208), Friedman makes a useful distinction between “boundary” as a fixed dividing line and “borderland” as a space of cultural intermingling and mutual influence (1998, 135) where hybridity becomes a major component of her geography of identity. Considering the margin as borderland in the life writing of Australian South Sea Islanders highlights the porousness of geographical, social and racial boundaries erected by the colonial discourse as well as its potential for physical and mental

detritorialisation.

Homi Bhabha too focuses on hybridity and the splitting of the subject in a flexible third space, a “space of intervention” (1994, 12) where differential identities like those of the colonised and the displaced are not totally one and express themselves beyond difference, inducing an in-between position that makes interactions and border crossings possible through discourse and imagination (1994, 313). In Bandler’s *Wacvie* (1977), Fatnowna’s *Fragments* (1989) and Edmund’s *No Regrets* (1996), this positioning leads to a revision of white stereotypes through a metonymic displacement of the value of things and people in favour of an empowerment of Australian South Sea Islander characters within the micropolitics of race and power relations at work in the microcosm of the plantation.

Within a diasporic context, the importance of collective identity has already been stressed by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950), geographer Michel Bruneau, anthropologist Martine Hovanessian and sociologist Robin Cohen (2008, 7). Studying its formation inside Australian South Sea Islander narratives emphasises how they define themselves in their opposition and relation to others on the ground of their personal and collective memories. As a forerunner on this issue, Halbwachs early established that individual memories acquire a collective dimension because they are reinterpreted in different social frameworks, at different stages of a person’s life, and because of their transgenerational value. He posits that only the group to which a person belongs can keep collective memory alive for the future generations (1950, 49). In representing collective memory as a continuous stream of thought (46), Halbwachs argues that it cannot be assimilated to history’s clearcut dividing lines, thus acknowledging the tension between memory and history, the purpose of which differs from the first. As shown by Pierre Nora (1987, xix) and Inga Clendinnen (2006), history differs from and should thus be distinguished from memory, both personal and collective.

Within this research, such a distinction is relevant considering that the history of Australian South Sea Islanders orally passed on from generation to generation has been called into question by Australian historians, especially Peter Corris, Clive Moore and Patricia Mercer. From the 1970s, they tried to minimise the practice of “blackbirding” and the reference to “slavery” in a revisionist attempt to reinterpret their history. As a consequence, several Australian South Sea Islanders like Bandler, Fatnowna and Wimbis felt the need to reclaim their history and identity through writing.

For Michel Bruneau, collective memory is an essential component of identity in diaspora and it needs to be sustained by signs and places where displaced people have put their roots (2006, 328-329). In line with Bruneau, Martine Hovanessian revisits the notion of diaspora as a dynamic construction based on collective memory and a strategy of identification to recreate a community space (2007, 10) and reconquer some form of territoriality in real and imaginary places.

Within the Australian South Sea Islanders’ narratives, these places are revisited or recreated and connected with their history to support their personal and collective identity. Because of their biographical, autobiographical, historical and fictional components, these narratives can be categorised as life narratives, a genre Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define as salient to describe “acts of self-representation of all kinds and in diverse media” (2010, 4). Smith and Watson’s definition gestures to Philippe Lejeune’s much earlier acknowledgement that biography and fiction are not incompatible and can even be read in interaction with each other (1996, 42).

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur goes further when he claims that thanks to the act of narration, memory becomes a constitutive feature of identity (2000, 103). It can even turn into a project when people feel that their stories have to be told out of a sense of duty urged by an imperative of justice (107). At the end of a long debate on the way human experience is dynamically articulated and poetically transfigured through narrative in his *Temps et Recit* series, Ricoeur develops the concept of narrative identity as the sort of identity integrating both history and fiction

at an individual and collective level (1991, 73). Because of these two components, narrative identity is not fixed or stable but changes within narrative (446-447) and reflects multiple subject positions adopted by the writer and/or the narrator.

In the life writing of Australian South Sea Islanders, these positions tend to be individual, collective and flexible, articulating at the same time racial and political discourses in a diasporic and marginalised community space that is relational. Further these discursive articulations emerge as a response to what David Hollinsworth calls “institutionalised racism” (2006, 97) in Australia where races have been hierarchised since the arrival of Europeans, a point echoed by English Studies Professor Martine Piquet (2004). Besides, they represent a transgenerational testimony that needs to be witnessed and relayed at a national and transnational level with a view to supporting the need for recognition at a given moment and in the long term. According to Gillian Whitlock, such a testimonial discourse partakes of “testimonial transactions” (2015) the limited scope of which can, depending on the situation, be compensated by fiction in creating imaginative maps where people can relocate themselves and reassert their connectedness across space and time (197).

In this thesis, three theoretical concepts were adopted to unravel the complexity of these life narratives: performativity, related to the expression of identities and in this study, to the subject’s agency so important to anthropologists; positionality, referring to the subject’s multiple positionings; and relationality as a marker of difference (Smith and Watson 2010, 214-216). The latter has been here taken out of its exclusive binarism to be articulated with the dynamic relational approach inspired by the work of Glissant. These three concepts have been used as reading guides and meeting points between the conceptual fields of different disciplines that converge through a postcolonial perspective.

Unfortunately, despite some recognition at a local and national level and their personal and collective victories, the writings of the Australian South Sea Islander authors presented here are

still unknown to the great public. They are out of print and only *No Regrets* had a second edition (1988) with a new cover (corresponding to one of Edmund's paintings) thanks to the University of Queensland Press. Some are still accessible in Australian libraries and in the Pacific, especially in universities.

Although these life narratives are well-known among the historians who commented on them, they have not outreached the status of "sociological document" as Keesing puts it in the introduction to *Fragments* (1989, xiii) or that of "complement" according to Munro (1998, 942). Some historians like Peter Corris, Clive Moore, Patricia Mercer and Doug Munro criticised their style and contents, especially when Australian South Sea Islander writers did not take into account their own research conclusions. In that category, Bandler and her *Wacvie* attract most of the critics: Like Mercer (1978, 181-182), Corris reproaches "her lack of experience as a researcher and a writer" (Lake 2002, 187) and her simplistic way of describing emotions and personalities. He also resents the episode of the slave auction which he qualifies as "fiction", and Moore (1992, 65-66) highlights the lack of Melanesian folklore in her narrative. Mercer also regrets the lack of emphasis on the Islanders' "active and intelligent role" (1978, 181). In his review of Australian South Sea Islander narratives, Munro hardly mentions Bandler and her novels because of their "questionable historical accuracy" (1998, 941) whereas Fatnowna's and Edmund's accounts are considered as indigenous complements to the monographs produced by his peers. As for Moore, he promotes *Fragments* to the rank of history (1994-1995, 139) and praises its precise information and reliability owing to "Keesing's ethnographic expertise and [his] factual corrections and additional Fataleka and Mackay historical material" (147).

That type of reconsideration shows that Australian South Sea Islander narratives have never been perceived as literature by historians, except Niel Gunson (1981) who presented *Wacvie* as the first Australian Black family history following an American tradition launched by Pauli Murray's

Proud Shoes (1956) and Alex Haley's bestseller *Roots* (1976), published after the Civil Rights Movement at a time when America was celebrating its bicentennial. His article draws an interesting distinction between history and family history, one being an academic discipline based on impersonal research, the other relying on personal archives from ordinary people (1981, 149).

From a literary perspective, only a few commentaries came to underline the interest of these narratives, who often fall into the more general category of "Black Writing" (Whitlock 1992, 236; Shoemaker 1989). Although she classifies *No Regrets* as Aboriginal narrative, Carole Ferrier is certainly one of the first critics to consider it as literature (1992, 214). While arguing that being classified as life history or life writing had actually drawn these narratives closer to history than literature, thus reinforcing their "perceived lack of literariness" (201), Ferrier proposes to read them in a postcolonial perspective as sites where cultural identity and resistance are in the making.

In his study on physical violence and exploitation in Aboriginal literature (1989), Adam Shoemaker includes Bandler's *Wacvie*. He defines "the theme of a special Black Australian identity" as a "connective thread" between the books he examines (160), thus acknowledging a place for the recognition of *Wacvie* whilst unwittingly eliding cultural and historical specificities. He qualifies *Wacvie* as "the most simple and the most reserved of the Black Australian novels" because compared to other Aboriginal narratives, Bandler downplayed physical and cultural violence while overstressing "culinary and housekeeping minutiae" (162). However, this thesis shows that those two components, both physical and cultural violence, and domestic minutiae, illustrate the fluctuation of power and agency in the micropolitics of master-servant relationships at work in the life narrative. While dealing with sex, violence and power in "'Never Forget that the Kanakas are Men': Fictional Representations of the Enslaved Black Body" (Borch et al. 2008) Ferrier also showcases the interaction of Black and White bodies in a new light, stressing the relations between white women and black workers.

More recently, Clive Moore has shown how different South Sea Islander narratives of identity have developed in the historical and political fields as well as in the media, while briefly evoking “the Islander voice” (2015, 160) through extracts from *Fragments*, *Wacvie* and some oral testimonies. Although he aims at tackling the issue of South Sea Islanders’ different identifications as Australians, Islanders from the South Pacific and even “as part of a larger diaspora of Indigenous peoples dislodged from their homes as part of labour migration related to nineteenth century capitalism and forced labour migration” (155), it is not so. Moore returns to his initial hobbyhorse, pointing at the differences between historians and the South Sea Islanders’ own perceptions of slavery and the practice of “blackbirding”. In her thesis (2016), Kathleen Fallon adopts an ethnographic and historical stand to explore the strategies designed by Australian South Sea Islanders to survive the trauma of displacement and discrimination in studying commemorative places related to their history. She refers to the “traumatic realism” of some of the writers mentioned in this research while conjuring up the paratextual function of other testimonies as an appeal to the reader. Fallon’s and Moore’s studies testify to a renewed interest in the history, memory and identity of Australian South Sea Islanders to which this thesis is making a contribution. These issues are particularly important for the community because people are still waiting for some form of concrete recognition including a better access to education, employment, accommodation and health services as revealed in the feedback on a survey organised by the Queensland Government (2014, 9).

One conclusion we can draw from the historical, anthropological or literary critiques mentioned here is that Australian South Sea Islanders’ writings have never fully been recognised as literary works⁷. Often reduced to their historical, ethnographic or sociological contents, they

⁷ Except *Wacvie* which received the Braille and Talking Book Library Award in 1979, none of the Islanders’ accounts received any literary prize for their work, compared to Aboriginal writers and activists like Roberta Sykes,

have consequently not received the attention they deserved and have rarely been submitted to a literary analysis. Two main reasons for that: first, the idea of a form of slavery in Australia has always been subject to controversy and second, the South Sea Islander narratives have often been absorbed in Black or Aboriginal literature, or viewed as mere “complements” to the historical and anthropological accounts. These elements emphasise a denial of the cultural status and specificity of their life writing and confirm the need for a proper recognition.

This thesis therefore proposes to reconsider Australian South Sea Islanders’ narratives as a literature of resistance and recognition from a postcolonial perspective, drawing on the experience of displacement and relocation of their ancestors as related by memory and recounted in narrative. In sharing and co-mingling their ancestors’ reminiscences with their own, the authors reveal their common and enduring experience of suffering, discrimination but also their shared testimonies of survival and adaptation. These, I argue, form a poetics of insularity that establishes a common (but not unique) identification even if they derive from different islands. This identification as Australian South Sea Islander has a relational value because it makes a connection between the geographical and historical components of their identity.

More specifically, the purpose of this research is to show how memory comes to support identity, rooting in some places while linking it to other spatiotemporal situations where the writers and their protagonists have dispersed. They had to find their place within a diasporic context, caught in a network of complex race and power relations involving several “others”, including but not limited to the white masters, Aboriginal people or migrants coming from different countries. In the same way as connectedness represents a paradigm of Australian South Sea Islander identity

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Sally Morgan or Alexis Wright to name a few. *No Regrets* was highly commended in the David Unaipon Award for first-time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors but failed to be rewarded and Bandler only got a minor prize.

in this thesis, it has been the main strand of its outline articulating memory, resistance and identity in their ongoing and complementary relation to one another as a building strategy of the Australian South Sea Islander subject itself. Memory is the fundamental link, politically and poetically: its ebb and flow across the narrative connects past and present resistance and positioning, going beyond any form of binary oppositions. With its two parts composed of three chapters each, the outline's structure tries to follow this path in setting up a logic of the "and", as Deleuze and Guattari put it in "Rhizome" (36), based on transversal and tidalectic connections which place relationality as a defining pattern.

Thesis Outline

The first part of this thesis shows how memory sustains a strategy of resistance against oblivion and in doing so, supports the recognition of Australian South Sea Islander history and identity. The second part reflects how memory has been used by Australian South Sea Islanders as a strategy of positioning in national and transnational space, beyond the social, spatial and racial boundaries imposed on them.

Chapter One shows how sharing individual and collective memories through writing enables these otherwise invisible fragments of a complex cultural past to gain visibility in the Australian literary, historical and political space: writing first helps Australian South Sea Islander authors to revisit (and reclaim) their forgotten and contested history in their own way, at a time when other Pacific Indigenous literatures are emerging in response to European colonisation and erasure. Their choice to write composite narratives or life narratives gives them the opportunity to stage testimony and witnessing creatively in order to exist and resist these monolithic forces.

Chapter Two deals with Australian South Sea Islanders' agency and the way they have been

resisted from inside a dominant Anglo-Celtic culture, through their way of life and their voice. Although their traditional islander cultural heritage has been threatened and partly lost by forced displacement and relocation to a foreign country, they have been able to retain some of its elements and these fragments are proudly shared through a ritualised act of transfer within the narratives. The writers also emphasise their kin's cultural resilience and adaptation in presenting the attachment to land and the link to the sea as paradigms of a poetics of insularity which prefigures their perception of connected identities relying on rootedness and movement. For them, religion constitutes another factor of that process in recreating a community spirit and strengthening links between people from different islands. Eventually, the authors' combination of oral and written literature drawing on humour, irony and the unsaid proves to be another form of resistance to silence and historical erasure.

Chapter Three explores the connection between memory and places in Australian South Sea Islanders' life narratives as another component of this poetics of insularity. First the island is presented as a place related to uprootedness and the loss of identity. But within the narrative, the island also becomes a place of eternal anchorage, the memory of which is preserved through topographic similarities, the inclusion of elements from the Islanders' cultural traditions, like tubers or mango trees. Recurring, idealised recollections punctuating the narrative from time to time also contribute to keeping it alive. As for places of settlement in Australia, they include places of forced settlement like the plantation and those locations where the Islanders chose to stay despite the difficult conditions they had to face. While the first places are associated with suffering and exploitation, they also encourage the emergence of a collective identity based on a shared struggle, which stimulates the will to remove themselves from oppression and to acquire European goods, but also the fear of being unable to readapt to a traditional lifestyle. Places of settlement therefore become places of recollection, memorisation and commemoration as Ricoeur puts it (2000, 154)

and their depiction paves the way for a memorialisation process which turns Australian South Sea Islander narratives into places of memory.

In the second part of this thesis, where memory sustains a strategy of positioning, Chapter Four stresses how the authors move away from colonial representations of alterity and praise their own difference. Bandler, for instance, plays on the ambivalence of stereotypes, especially those associated with skin colour so as to invert their value and create new ones. These stereotypes tend to support a vision of the world made of light and shadow, a world after the Fall ruled by an economy of desire built on an overemphasis on metonymic signs such as skin colour, the colour of objects and their corresponding value. This tactic reveals the porousness of the boundaries erected by each race and leads to the emergence and empowerment of the Islander subject, either through a transfer of power to Islander protagonists in Bandler's *Wacvie* or through enunciation in the first person and taking on multiple subject positions in Fatnowna and Edmund's cases.

Chapter Five focuses on the space where relations to the "other" are at play, a space marked by liminality, hybridity and relation which constitute key features of the experience of Australian South Sea Islander descendants in a diasporic context. The writers reveal that they live in a territorialised and marginalised space in which the margin stands for both a space of protection and a space of segregation. They highlight the tensions caused by the social, racial and geographical partitioning organised by the British since their arrival in Australia. More specifically, the racial and social strata at the margin result from the "divide and rule" principle. This is applied as a strategy to strengthen their power, not only among the Blacks, be they Aboriginals, Torres Strait or South Sea Islanders, but also among the Whites coming from different European countries. Nonetheless, this strategy has led to a new positioning of Australian South Sea Islanders from a partitioned and enclosed liminal space to an open diasporic space where some form of equality is possible, based on exchange and the recognition of common values.

Chapter Six shows how this positioning, supported by memory, enables to conceive of Australian South Sea Islander identity in terms of rootedness, motion and deterritorialisation across a spatial-temporal ebb and flow created by the comings and goings of memories and different forms of “ritornellos” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) within the narratives. These recurring components have a double function: they anchor Australian South Sea Islander memory in different places and times that they also connect through transfer and displacement. The life narratives under scrutiny can therefore be read as dynamic cartographies of fluid identity connections based on geographical links which support an interconnected, Oceanic perception of places and identities discussed by Epili Hau’Ofa (“The Ocean in Us” 1993) and opposed to its belittling, European counterpart. Consequently, notions of “home”, “belonging” and “insularity” have to be reconsidered from a relational perspective. This perspective, combined with the notion of transfer, impacts the role of witness since this role is jointly fulfilled by the writer/narrator and the reader with a view to relaying Australian South Sea Islander memory and history on a wider scale, making connections between past and present and opening them to new developments on a global map of displaced people.

In conclusion, Australia South Sea Islanders’ life narratives show in a unique way how their people have been able to rebuild a diasporic community around individual and collective memories of dispersal and relocation which came to support resistance to oblivion and national recognition. As writings reflecting on the past to address present concerns and future reconciliation, these testimonies constitute a part of Australian South Sea Islanders’ cultural heritage and legacy to the future generations, dwelling on an interrelated Oceanian conception of place and identity transcending racial, social and national boundaries. Being rooted in several places interconnected through deterritorialisation and reterritorialization, Australian South Sea Islanders identity exemplifies the connection between Glissant’s philosophy of “Relation” and the “rhizome” concept defended by Deleuze and Guattari. This identity is not unique and fixed but spreads to create a

network of singular identifications between people and places across time. Another important aspect of this concept is that identity does not exclusively define itself in terms of similarity or difference since it reflects the latter's interdependent relations, as corresponding to Bhabha's logic of the "and" (1994, 139). Accordingly, the conceptualisation as relations means going beyond binary oppositions in considering that there is a space where interaction and mutual understanding are possible on a local and a global scale, as Australian South Sea Islanders' experience of integration shows. More generally, this interdependence suggests and anticipates a worldwide interdependence already perceived by Glissant (1990, 157). Keeping this global conception in mind seems all the more important and can serve as a new paradigm for a worldwide citizenship promoted by UNESCO at a time when a growing number of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are striving to relocate themselves in a place they can call their own.

From a disciplinary perspective in view of literature, Australian South Sea Islander writers have often been criticised for the simplistic ordinariness of their narratives and for their so-called lack of literariness or stylistic refinement. This research has shown that they use "metonymy" and "metaphor" in reference to identifying signs and images like the root or the rhizome in order to deal with their settlement on the Australian territory. These are important literary properties and strategies. However, the anthropological perspective I have focused on these narratives highlights the fact that those tropes go beyond a mere symbolic representation: they concretely actualise Australian South Sea Islanders' perception of things based on their culture and life experience. As a result, the use of those two literary devices in the thesis reflects a cultural dimension, which moves beyond the literary frame and indicates another way of understanding the world based on a particular set of values. With their practical, ethical-political and aesthetic components, Australian South Sea Islander perception as articulated in their writing is close to the "ecosophic" project imagined by Felix Guattari (1989, 70). This project promotes the development of new individual

and collective subjectivities able to meet future challenges. In this respect, Australian South Sea Islander narratives have an axiological and ontological scope that aligns telling with being – an observation already mentioned by Sylvie André (2012, 166) and Jacques Rancière (2007). To these dimensions these narratives add living and persisting. They show that life writing can propose a different way of perceiving the world, and make a valuable contribution to the field of humanities. The study of narrative can therefore serve as an exploratory field to understand the past and build the future.

Corpus of the 6 books by the 5 South Sea Islander authors discussed in the thesis

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