

**Flinders University**

**Michele McCrea**

**Collisions of authority: nonunitary narration and textual authority in Gail Jones' *Sorry***

**Abstract:**

Gail Jones' fourth novel, *Sorry* (2007), set in Australia at the time of World War II, traces the journey of a young girl from the outback to Perth, from trauma to recovery and from forgetting to remembering and responsibility. The text is characterised by a dual narrative voice linked by powerful recurring motifs. Narrative voice, like any representation of authority, may be problematic in contemporary fiction dealing with the dislocations of postcolonial experience, since traditional narrative modes tend to reinforce the master narratives of patriarchal imperialism. Authorial 'third-person' narrators may seem all knowing, while personal 'first-person' narrators may offer a limited perspective. Alternative narrative strategies interrogate assumptions about authority and seek to authorise marginalised voices and fragmented stories arising from dislocations of place, time and identity.

Gail Jones proposes a critical paradigm based on the affirmation of difference, the honouring of fragments, and the possibility of dreaming as a way to re-imagine communities, suggesting that in Australia, this space of cultural contradictions and disparate realities, there is a need to embrace not only the diversities of the present but also the ghosts of the past and the demands of the future. The task, she argues, is neither to reconstitute the past nor to reconcile differences but to use our partial understandings of history and of others with awareness and imagination to create a new kind of community. This suggests the notion of writing not so much as record or reflection but as performative act of contrition and creation. Such a text must convincingly represent collisions between different modes of being, the dislocations inherent in the differing perspectives of immigrants, children, colonisers and Indigenous people. This paper argues that *Sorry* (2007) undermines the hegemonic tendency of a dominant singular narrative voice by using narrative strategies that involve fracturing and reconfiguring the narrative voice to build a textual authority that is inclusive, open-ended and congruent with its reflexive postcolonial project.

Biographical note:

Michele McCrea is an Adjunct Research Associate and tutor at Flinders University, graduating in 2012 with a PhD in Creative Writing. Her thesis comprises a novel and an exegesis that investigates the relationship between narrative voice and textual authority in three postcolonial novels. Michele's research interests are in narrative structure, textual authority and voice in women's writing, postcolonial literature and hybrid literary forms. She has coedited a collection of scholarly papers on travel writing and published short fiction including a prizewinning novella.

Keywords:

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## Introduction

Gail Jones' 2007 novel *Sorry* interrogates assumptions about memory and the nature of narrative, establishing a non-traditional textual authority that allows for new ways of thinking about the past. The alternating personal and authorial narratives interweave individual and cultural histories in ways that challenge the singularity, seamlessness and reliability of remembered and recorded versions of the past.<sup>1</sup>

Gail Jones proposes a critical paradigm based on the affirmation of difference and the honouring of fragments, suggesting that in Australia, this space of disparate realities and cultural contradictions, we must embrace not only the diversities of the present but also the ghosts of the past and the demands of the future (2006, 14–21). The task before us, she argues, is neither to reconstitute the past nor to reconcile differences but to embrace otherness with an 'unconditional generosity', risking the loss of our centrality to create a new kind of community (21). For writers, this challenges traditional notions of textual authority and positions writing as a performative act of contrition that goes beyond telling or showing to acknowledge the gaps in our understanding and create space for new ways of being.

## Textual authority and narration

According to feminist narratologist Susan Lanser, choices about narration have a direct influence on textual authority, or the ways in which a fictional text draws readers into its world (1992, 1981). Narrative voice, like any representation of authority, may be problematic in contemporary fiction dealing with the dislocations of postcolonial experience, since traditional narrative modes tend to reinforce the master narratives of patriarchal imperialism (Brewster, 1995, DuPlessis 1985, Karamcheti 1994, Lanser 1992).<sup>2</sup> Authorial 'third-person' narrators may seem all-knowing, while personal 'first-person' narrators may offer a limited perspective. Alternative narrative strategies interrogate assumptions about authority and seek to authorise marginalised voices and fragmented stories arising from dislocations of place, time and identity (Karamcheti 1994, McCrea 2012).

The nonunitary narration in *Sorry* undermines the hegemonic tendency of a dominant singular narrative voice, using the disjunctions between several voices to build a textual authority that is inclusive, not definitive.<sup>3</sup> Shifting between personal and authorial modes, the nonunitary narrative voice renders the text fluid yet discontinuous in a process of weaving and unravelling that eludes finality. Thus, *Sorry* establishes a textual authority congruent with its postcolonial context by fracturing and reconfiguring the narrative voice in ways that represent 'what it means to forget ... to have history with a gap in it' (Gail Jones quoted in Block, 2008).

Set in Western Australia at the time of World War II, *Sorry* traces the protagonist's transition from the forgetting induced by trauma to a more fully realised remembering, from stammering child to eloquent woman. According to the author, the novel 'allegorizes the "forgetting" of the so-called Stolen Generations in Australia, those Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families [...]' (Jones quoted in Block, 2008). Any experience of trauma, according to Judith Lewis

Herman, can cause the fragmentation of consciousness due to a loss of ability to 'integrate the memory of overwhelming life events' (1992, 34). The opening pages of the novel depict its pivotal scene, the fatal stabbing of a man, yet conceal vital information. The victim's daughter, Perdita, is haunted by the murder, which returns to her in repeated, jagged fragments. Though the broad sweep of the narrative is chronological, the events surrounding the murder, like Perdita's stammer, recur, reflecting the engagement of the text with, as Jones puts it, 'the idea of the traumatic time, which is a time that is broken, and that is recursive' (Block, 2008).

### **Nonunitary narration**

The story is told from two distinct perspectives, linked by the primary focalising character, Perdita. Her personal recollections of her childhood alternate with the observations of a detached yet knowing authorial narrator, the former sharing intimate personal memories like cinematic close-ups, while the latter reveals the panoramic social context of wartime. The shifts in narrative voice, in addition to shaping content, determine how the text engages the reader, providing a double perspective that disrupts the assumption of a cohesive viewpoint.

In early chapters, Perdita is the sole narrator, her personal narrative focalised through the reflective adult she has become.

I was a mistake, a slightly embarrassing intervention, and knew this melancholy status from earliest childhood. Predictably, both [my parents] treated me as a smallish adult, arranging a regimen of behaviour, insisting on rules and repression, talking in stern, pedagogical tones. Neither thought it necessary to express affection, nor to offer any physical affirmations of our bond. I was, in consequence, a beseeching child, grumpy, insecure, anxious for their approval, but also wilfully emphatic in ways that I knew would test and annoy them. (Jones 2007, 4)

This is the voice of a personal narrator, telling her own story from a first-person perspective (Lanser 1992, 18). But midway through the chapter, there is a shift in point of view as the story is taken up by a heterodiegetic, authorial narrator (Lanser 1992, 15–18). A pattern of alternation is established between the authorial and personal narrators as they periodically interrupt each other. There is a structural logic, a rhythm that regulates the disruptive effect of these dramatic shifts in voice, producing a kind of narrative duet. The effect of this dual narration is dissociative, demanding intellectual work and thus distancing the reader from the emotional immediacy of Perdita's experience. This text requires the engagement of head as well as heart.

### **Exposing gaps and stitch-ups**

The two narratives contain parallels that link them and shift the personal story to an allegorical level, as Maya Jaggi notes.

Just as Perdita's story is punctuated by turning points in the war, so her memory loss is counterpointed by gaps in official history, such as the Japanese bombardment of

Dutch refugee ships in Broome in 1942 – another atrocity that people elected to forget. (2007)

En route to Perth, Perdita and her mother Stella stay at a convent in Broome. The pearling industry grinds to a halt as Japanese divers are interned. The authorial narrative shows the flow of transient and displaced people through the town, particularly the Dutch refugees who arrive in flying boats from Java, mooring in Roebuck Bay and living on board as they wait to refuel (126–27).

One day Perdita sneaks down to the harbour alone and witnesses the bombing of Dutch refugee planes by Japanese warplanes. The authorial narrative is focalised at first through the child Perdita as she watches from her hiding place, then returns to external focalisation.

History records what Perdita could not see from the shore: that the refugees trapped in the planes were bombarded as they leapt into the water, or burned to death as their planes exploded. That there was undignified scrambling, anguished mayhem, and appalling suffering. Almost one hundred people died. Later a mass grave would be dug for those whose names and faces had been so swiftly obliterated, who were now simply charred or mutilated bodies, simply the Dutch. (132).

Perdita's adult recollection provides a third perspective on the tragedy.

Of my complicated childhood, this event haunts me still: the slaughter, that day, of Dutch refugees. I was far enough away to see it all as a spectacle, and indeed I may not have heard any screams, but simply imagined I did, after the fact, as it were, after hearing the gory details. It was, I suppose, a direct encounter with war, but it was also at a distance, and alienated, and involved the swoop of shiny planes through a cobalt-blue sky, the glittering sea stretching before me, puffs of telltale smoke far away arising, rather than any real meeting with physical suffering. [...] I was witness and not witness [...] (135)

Throughout the narrative, there is an insistence on telling what is not seen, not heard, not witnessed – not to fill the gaps, but to acknowledge them. Under scrutiny, memory is seen to be full of holes, wayward, makeshift, cobbling together fragments to cover its incompleteness.

Stella survives by avoiding the truth. She represents the extreme of memory's skewed malleability, twisting Shakespearean speeches to fit her deranged outlook, and teaching her daughter idiosyncratic variations on schoolbook knowledge.

From her mother Perdita inherited an addled vision of the world; so much was unremembered or misremembered, so that the planet reshaped into new tectonic variations, changed the size and outline of countries on shaky hand-drawn maps, filled up with fabricated peoples and customs [...] (35–36)

The text recasts both personal and collective memories as cultural artefacts subject to alterations and erasures. When Perdita tries to tell her psychiatrist about her father's death, she realises with a shock that she does not remember. 'There was a dissolving of memory as she approached its substance; there was a gap and shapelessness to her

own lost history' (166). For Perdita, this is a crisis: to have a future, she must remember the past.

### **The unreliability of images**

Although set in World War II, *Sorry* is not an 'historical novel' that attempts to reconstitute a story from a bygone era. Instead it is an assemblage of fragments and images in which the correspondences between personal and authorial perspectives knit the narrative text together, while the gaps within and between them draw attention to the constructed and partial nature of both memories and texts. The separate narratives are linked by powerful recurring motifs whose meanings change according to the context in which they are perceived.

Descriptions of clothing and furnishings – the arrangement of surfaces – offer opportunities for concealment, interpretation and revelation. Perdita remembers that, after Nicholas' death, 'Stella took to wearing her Spanish shawl – this is a reliable image because others, I recall, remarked upon it, taking the extravagance as a sign of genuine mourning' (99). But images are not always reliable, since their meanings depend on context. To Stella, the shawl is emblematic of her 'lost dreams' (10).

Certain images in the text are juxtaposed and reiterated, building and reflecting upon layers of meaning, arranging and rearranging them, highlighting the inadequacies of all efforts to configure the past. In an effort to reduce the overwhelming disruption of war to manipulable fragments of text, Nicholas sticks newspaper clippings on his walls. Later, the rag rug covering the stain of his blood on the floor is 'a cheery, a glorious lie, a text of other men's shirts and cast-offs, floral and scrappy fragments' (997–98). Finally, Stella's 'snow dream', appropriated by Perdita, frames the entire narrative in a seductive image of forgetting.

I saw a distant place, all forgetful white, reversing its presences. I saw Mary, and Billy, covered by snowflakes. I saw my mother's bare feet beneath the hem of her nightgown. Everything was losing definition and outline. Everything was disappearing under the gradual snow. Calmed, I looked at the sky and saw only a blank. Soft curtains coming down, a whiteness, a peace. (214)

Concerned with the representation of gaps and complex perspectives, the text refers, in addition, to the contingent nature of representation itself. The blue dress worn by Mary on the fateful day has different meanings according to who sees it, what their assumptions are and what else is witnessed. Perdita's first recollection of the scene of her father's murder is 'just this single image: her dress, the particular blue of hydrangeas, spattered with the purple of my father's blood.' When Mary rises from the floor, her dress covered in blood, Perdita clings to her. Mary says, 'Don't tell them' (3). The apparent conclusion to be drawn from this sparse scenario is that Mary is the killer. Yet, since she later confesses to the crime, what is the meaning of her admonition 'Don't tell them'? In this text, ambiguities are rife and absences more telling than presences.

A third of the way through the novel, the murder scene is reprised. New information is revealed, but this narrator, although authorial, is not omniscient: 'The day unveils

itself in partial scenes and stages, as if a memory-camera is fixed, and cannot swing around to envision the entire room or every one of the players' (91). Two policemen from Broome come to investigate, and drive off with Nicholas' body in the back of their ute and Mary sitting between them. She has been raped. She has confessed to the crime. She does not look back (91–93).

Perdita, on the other hand, continually looks back to the day on which her life so abruptly changed. On her second visit, Perdita tries to tell her psychiatrist about her father's death, but realises she does not remember who wielded the murder weapon. She suspects her mother. But after more than a year, Perdita recalls that it was she herself who took up the carving knife and plunged it into her father's back (192–94).

The image of the blue dress spattered 'with patches of purple' recurs in each telling of the murder. At first it is simply an image, stark and horrifying. In the second telling, the bloodstained dress appears to be a signifier of Mary's guilt. And in the third telling, the stained dress represents the injustice done to Mary. Like Mary's injunction to Perdita ('Don't tell them'), the image of the blue dress depends for its meaning on the context in which it appears.

## Conclusion

The effect of the double narration in *Sorry* is a paradoxical kind of seeing which at times seems blurred, a literary equivalent of the double vision induced by headaches, and at other times sharpens events like flat images turned three-dimensional and hyper-real.

Sigrid Weigel (1985, 68–72) suggests that the strategy of splitting the narrative persona was, historically, an expression of women writers' awareness of and ambivalence about writing in a patriarchal context.<sup>4</sup> The splitting of the narrative persona in *Sorry* is a means of representing a divided self and culture, the stammering voice of the protagonist speaking for a white nation that represses a part of its history and identity.

*Sorry* is a compassionate and sober investigation of the nuances of denial and the complicated connections between cultures in a postcolonial world. But its shifting, complex nature also points to the rich possibilities that arise when cultures meet.

There was an entire universe [...] of the visible and the invisible, the unconcealed and the concealed, some fundamental hinge to all this hotch-potch, disorderly life, this swooning confusion. For Mary there was authority in signs Perdita had never before seen; there were pronouncements in tiny sounds and revelations in glimpses. (60)

The fractured and reconfigured narration in *Sorry* evokes a considered, multifarious and lacelike textual authority congruent with its performative postcolonial project.

## Endnotes

1. This paper draws on Mieke Bal's (1997) definitions of narrators and focalisers and Susan Lanser's (1992) distinctions between personal and authorial narrators and their relationships to textual authority.
2. Susan Lanser defines authorial voice as 'heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential' (1992, 15). The authorial narrator, like the narratee, is located outside the story, i.e. it speaks in 'third person'. In contrast, the ('first person') personal voice refers 'to narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories' (18). It is not a feature of all homodiegetic narratives, but 'only those Genette calls "autodiegetic," in which the "I" who tells the story is also the story's protagonist (or an older version of the protagonist)' (19).
3. The term nonunitary narration is derived from Leslie Bloom's work on nonunitary subjectivity in women's personal narratives (Bloom 1998, 1996).
4. 'The split gaze [...] can be further linked to the traditional association of women with the doubling of mirrors and masks. The dramatic increase in the number of women who pick up a pen at the end of the eighteenth century [is attributed] to a shift in theoretical norms that made such self-reflexivity acceptable and that dissolved the 'closed' text into fragments. Thus the revolt against neoclassicism made it possible for violations of formal unity, long attributed to women writers of letters and fiction on the grounds that they were less erudite or skilled than men, to be reconceived as deliberate deviations' (Higonnet 1994, 206).

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