Ancestral Narratives and Historical Consciousness

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To introduce myself, I’d like to say that my research is on ancestry in literature. This is a broad topic, which could be applied to many possible contexts, so I have narrowed my focus to one specific area. I am interested in the recent novels by Thomas Keneally and Christopher Koch, and more broadly the situation of the Irish in Australia. So I am looking at Australians with Irish ancestry. This paper will look at the relationship between ancestral narratives and historical consciousness; or rather, how ancestry coincides with historiography.

First I’ll ask a rather obvious question: what is ancestry? I have a working definition which runs along these lines: “the perceived relationship between two individuals who share biological origins; this relationship usually spans across historical time, and thus is vertical (in the family tree metaphor).” A quote illustrating this kind of definition comes from a significant work on kinship metaphors.

Genealogy connects past, present and future into one. It connects ancestors in the past to real descendants in the future, binds them into one living unity. This yields a model of humanity that unifies human diversity: living individuals are a lateral plurality, vastly divergent, even competing, but nonetheless united vertically into a descending tree.¹

Therefore, let us identify some qualities of ancestry. Ancestors are usually three or more generations away, and thus historically remote. However, grandparents and even parents may be considered ancestors, rather than living relatives, if there is sufficient distance from the given descendant. A good example of this is Keneally, Bettany’s Book², where the Bettany sisters have a magnified significance accorded to their origins because they are orphans from the beginning of the narrative; thus their parents are significant as an absence rather than a presence. Ancestry requires a necessary quality of distance; some verification is usually required to identify an ancestor, and the nature of this verification helps us understand ancestry.

It is useful to distinguish what we have defined as ancestry from a separate but related activity, genealogy - this is sometimes quite difficult, but it’s useful to make some preliminary distinctions. Genealogy is research using historical methods and documents which seeks to conclusively establish a given ancestry; or it may refer to the results of such research (i.e. “my family tree”). An interesting aspect is the recent popularity of genealogy; inspired by Haley’s Roots (which I will discuss in more detail later), ancestry has been notably democratised and liberated. Genealogy is no more the province of bluebloods seeking verification of their place on the throne, and so it can take as a proper object of study phenomena such as maternal lines, and the ancestry of slaves and convicts. This new attention given to neglected historical actors fits appropriately with the aims and intentions of social history, the form which many ancestral narratives actually take.

² Thomas Keneally, Bettany’s BookSydney: Random House, 2000
Genealogy is a rather inexact science, to say the least. Its reliance on historical documentation means that gaps in records are a significant obstacle. The supreme irony in Australia is that poor emigrants, although “free”, are difficult to trace because they often did not come to the notice of the state, unlike convicts. A great tragedy in Ireland is the many historical and genealogical records destroyed in War of Independence early in the twentieth century. This brief look at genealogy indicates some of the different ways of conceiving ancestry – here I have in mind a kind of a continuum between a rigid, scientific genealogy which requires strict rational verification and a figurative conception of ancestry which is more open to poetic and imaginative expression. The Mormons, who believe in retrospective baptism, express one rather unique conception of ancestry. With this device members of the Church can stand in for their ancestors in important ceremonies and so redeem their souls after the fact.

One thing my research has definitely shown is that ancestry is usually most forcefully & powerfully expressed as narrative. The Internet yields a massive abundance of ancestral narratives of many types. Within Australian literature two prominent examples figure in my background reading: Alex Miller, *The Ancestor Game*, and Richard Flanagan, *Death Of A River Guide*, both narrate the significance of their protagonists’ ancestors.

When discussing narrative, it is useful to note some of its distinctive features. First we have *employment*, whereby structure is imposed on events; the narrative is given a linear development which leads to closure. The second important aspect is *context*: the politics and position of audience and speaker. Finally, what I have identified as important in the narratives I have studies is what I call *fabrication*. I do not mean fiction or lies, but rather refer to an expression of the *texture* of a text, with a tendency to create myths and heroes. One narrative device here is where threads of truth are woven into a coherent narrative – this is evident in Keneally’s carefully-constructed Schindler myth. These various narrative techniques are prominent in many ancestral narratives.

Having discussed ancestry, I would like to move to issues regarding history. What does it mean to speak of historical consciousness? For me, it means a focus on mind, perception, awareness, and the role of humans in history. So history is not a monolithic entity entirely abstracted from human agency. In historical consciousness, *memory* is an important element, so history is remembered more subjectively. This terminology invariably evokes Freud, or at least Jung: the conscious must always be defined against the unconscious. Therefore using the term historical consciousness carries the in-built assumption that history can be an unconscious phenomenon, that unconscious threads run throughout history. This explains the historical significance of *absence* and *amnesia*. For instance, ancestors must be absent in order to carry any weight as ancestors. Through suffering trauma people may have forgotten their origins, and so suffer from a potent form of historical amnesia.

What is the relationship between ancestry and history – given the necessary historical remoteness, what *types* of history are we talking about?

- Family history – clearly related to genealogy, ancestry
- Oral history – also predominant in families, a fundamental form of ancestral narrative (Haley)
- Local history – ancestral homelands, significance of slave plantations over Africa
- Social History – migration history, subaltern – Irish

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Personal history/life story – Keneally, authorship (*Great Shame* is an ancestral narrative within historical discourse)

Ancestry highlights the dialectical relationship between the past and the present, and moreover the two directions of this relationship. On the one hand, it explains causal relations in history – the past causes present in the linear model we are used to. However, it also relates to the interpretation of history, where the present informs past in a very concrete way: we can only understand the past from our standpoint in the present. Koch specifically wrote two novels (*Highways To A War* and *Out Of Ireland*) to operate in this two-way fashion: “Which order the books are read isn’t important. Their sequence can be a matter of taste – depending on whether the reader prefers to see the present carrying messages from the past, or the past delivering messages to the present.”

Ultimately in my research I have two main questions: First, how does ancestry function in literature? As I have alluded, it works as a narrative device, and fits very snugly with historical fiction, which establishes a similar relationship between the past and the present. Second, how can ancestry relate to people like us? Ancestry enables access to history (creates historical consciousness), puts it in a form we can relate to and, most importantly, allows and even encourages reinterpretation of history. Ancestry thus conceived will hopefully enable a critical, active, empowered response to historical legacies.

I must note here that there is, however, a potential for ancestry to “turn bad”, or be used for divisive or negative purposes. A prime example is the Orange Lodges in Ireland and throughout the British colonies – we want no “glorious memory” of our ancestors. The best ancestral narratives seek to heal the wounds of the past, not create new conflicts. They can directly undermine the excesses of romantic nationalism which has caused such trauma in so many parts of the world, not least the North of Ireland.

To illustrate these points, I want to briefly discuss one example: Alex Haley’s *Roots*. It is a proto-typical ancestral narrative, extremely influential, and moreover inspirational – it has encouraged many to research their own ancestry. In narrating the family history of slaves it made an enormous contribution to what I have called the democratisation of ancestry. The miniseries based on the book was also highly popular – it boasted 130 million viewers in its first screening. Thus it is a text carrying quite some currency in popular culture; most people have at least heard of it and know of it as an important milestone in the development of African-American consciousness in the 1970s.

With *Roots*, there are several problems concerning authenticity and validity; unfortunately I have no time to deal with these objections. I prefer to focus on the significance of ancestry, and am content to admit the novel incorporates partly fictional elements. Let it be known that its status as non-fiction is at least somewhat problematic.

*Roots* set a literary precedent, which is certainly subject to critique and revision. Ultimately, this supports my claim that the text is influential, paves the way, allows for a reinterpretation of history. How does it do this? Through *ancestry*, a dominant theme and in fact the underlying motif of the entire narrative.

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5 Christopher Koch, *Out Of Ireland*, Milsons Point, NSW: Doubleday, 1999
6 Christopher Koch, *Highways To A War*, Victoria: Minerva, 1995, Author’s Note, p. vii
Haley spends a hundred and forty pages minutely reconstructing his ancestor’s way of life in Africa (much like Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart). This narrative structures the following family history and introduces early metaphors and themes, which carry throughout the narrative. One significant image is the three people in a village: the living, the dead, and the yet to be born – this is a vision of the organic unity of a community, a sense of continuity which comforts the young Kunta after his grandmother’s death. A second central image is the ancestors embodied in owls – this illustrates the concrete interaction between the physical and spiritual worlds. (In Flanagan’s novel there is a close parallel: ancestors are embodied in sea eagles.)

Haley evokes many specific ancestral relationships throughout the narrative. These fall into two main groups: ancestors who represent Haley’s ultimate origins, and those who represent links to the founding ancestors.

The Founder, Kunta Kinte – named after his own ancestor Kairaba Kunta Kinte, a holy man who saved the village of Juffure from drought and then settled there. Here we have strong intonations of holiness and salvation, which in some ways carry through to Haley himself.

Kunta’s own grandmother, Nyo Boto, a slave whose story serves to foreground the difference between indigenous African forms of slavery and the severity of European slavery; her narrative foreshadows Kunta’s own slave tale.

Kunta’s hero ancestor Sundiata, of whom many stories are told to young children; Sundiata was a crippled slave general who conquered an Empire; again this identity is transmitted through Kunta (crippled while trying to escape) to Haley via the following two main characters:

Having covered the ancestral origins, I shall now discuss the links to Haley himself.

“Chicken” George, (Kunta’s grandson), is rather an outcast and eccentric (somewhat partial to the drink) who nevertheless makes his way in the world through caring for his master’s gamecocks. The sense of establishing an identity is strong here; George is a flawed but likeable individual.

Tom, who takes the opportunity to become a blacksmith; this trade makes for upward social mobility, family dignity and pride, and after Emancipation, the family moves to Henning, Tennessee. Tom is not allowed to open a shop because of his blackness, but makes a thriving business as a mobile blacksmith; this determination and ingenuity is the key to the family’s survival and success. Tom’s hard work allows for the family’s acceptance (and perhaps assimilation?) in American society. After this chosen emigration, the narrative quickly traces its way to Haley himself, providing a somewhat incomplete picture of the family – focus on main characters.

Overall, what does Haley do for history?
He enables a historical consciousness of slavery as fundamental to US history; other events such as the War of Independence and the Civil War are seen through this lens, in the pieces of gossip the slaves can gather on their isolated plantations.

He makes a strong claim for the validity of oral history. He remembers as a child hearing stories of his ancestors on his grandmother’s porch; this had a profound effect on his imagination and in many ways enabled him to research his ancestry.

He encourages others to research their own ancestry and family history for purposes of personal satisfaction and spiritual fulfilment.

He presents the history of colonialism such as to leave it open for interrogation; this is an important achievement which allows for criticism of post-Emancipation assimilationist social policies. Ultimately, Haley’s sustained ancestral narrative engages historical discourse on many levels. Thus his slave-founded ancestry produces a historical consciousness which enables a personal relationship with the past, and encourages reinterpretation of that past. Haley’s achievement is to empower individuals with a sense of the significance of their own heritage; he encouraged others to discover and celebrate that heritage in positive, constructive ways. It is these positive ancestral identifications I focus on in my research.
References


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