

*Don't Take Your Love to Town*

*A Historical Document as Seen from a Catalan Perspective*

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**Abstract:** Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* has been a source of inspiration for me as it awoke my interest and passion for Aboriginal history, culture and society. Her work can be read as a historical document as it makes readers aware of Australian history from an Aboriginal woman's perspective. Her writing made me aware of the repression that her community had during the Twentieth Century and how her Aboriginal community is recovering and explaining their past through their writing. When reading her autobiography I could draw a parallel between the repression suffered by Aboriginal Australians and the oppression suffered by the Catalan nation and Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975). White Australia and Franco's Dictatorship used assimilation as the means to dominate Aboriginal peoples in the case of Australia and Republicans and the Catalan nation in the case of Franco's dictatorship.

**Key Words:** Ruby Langford Ginibi; *Don't Take Your Love to Town*; Catalan Reception

In this country - [Australia] - you only have an Anglo concept of history- white history -taught, you have nothing from an Aboriginal perspective, and we are the first people of this land, we are the indigenous people and our history have always been suppressed or it has been written by somebody else. But most of the funded writing in this country about Aboriginal people is funded to white people to write about us, and it's wrong, you know. Our place was invaded, we must look at Aboriginal people through the eyes of dispossession, because we are dispossessed people. (Fullana 2)

When studying Australian literature and history at Barcelona University I came across Aboriginal writers such as Ruby Langford Ginibi, Mudrooroo Narogin and Sally Morgan. Susan Ballyn, my mentor in Australian studies at Barcelona University, taught me literature by looking at the historical and social context before adopting a theoretical approach in order to have a better understanding of Aboriginal history and literature. As Ballyn states:

We need to *listen* if we are to understand, we need to realise that enabling ourselves to leap the cultural abyss that lies between us and Aboriginal culture, indeed that of any indigenous group around the world, has to be based on listening, absorbing taking the texts away with us and thinking profoundly about what they are saying about themselves and us as outsiders. We must tread carefully across the bridge of cultural difference to establish a degree of intercultural understanding. (Ballyn 3)

From all of the Aboriginal writers I read, Ruby Langford Ginibi is the one I admired the most. I admired her strength, courage and determination to survive. I found the way she wrote about her life to be unique. Ruby was able to reflect the struggle and the difficulties an Aboriginal woman was faced with in a society divided into black and white cultures. Her writings did not evince any feeling of resentment. When I read her life story, *Don't Take your Love to Town*, I was enlightened and I became aware of the situation in which Aboriginal people had been living. I also realised that the bulk of Aboriginal-related books was written by white Australian writers who were trying to give Aboriginal people a voice (e.g., Broome). Ginibi's writing and criticism of white writers speaking for Aboriginal people made me realise that to learn about the socio-political situation of Aboriginal Australians' past and present, I had to listen to Aboriginal voices, that is, to Aboriginal life histories. As a result, I ended up taking all the subjects available at Barcelona University on Australian studies.

Ruby Langford Ginibi's writings have made me aware that the only way to really understand Aboriginal culture and history was to go to Australia. As a result, I applied for the student exchange programme and went to Australia to study Aboriginal and Australian studies at La Trobe University in 1997. It was the year of my life, the year I met Ruby Langford Ginibi at a conference at La Trobe University; I got in touch with the Aboriginal Advancement League of Victoria and attended the *Bringing them Home* conference that took place in Melbourne that same year. I even went on a trip from Adelaide to Alice Springs to experience the Australian desert and visited the Apatula community at Finke. There I observed the impact of invasion, dispossession and genocide on contemporary Aboriginal communities.

I come from Catalonia, a region of Spain, which was a sovereign nation until the 18<sup>th</sup> century and became part of Spain as a result of the invasion of the Bourbons in 1714. Catalonia also had a history of invasion due to its geographical and strategic situation in the Iberian Peninsula. It is a region with its own history, cultural heritage and language, Catalan. Not so long ago, during the Spanish Civil War that took place from 1936 to 1939, Catalans who were not in favour of the dictator, Franco, had to go into exile in order to survive and went to France and other countries around the world such as Mexico or the United Kingdom. Many artists and Catalan intellectuals had to leave Spain in order to survive, including the musician Pau Casals, who was forced into exile and went to France (Fàbregas 318). Many Catalans who did not go into exile and did not agree with Franco's ideology were killed. During Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975), the Catalan language and culture were suppressed. Catalans could no longer speak their language in public, but only in the private sphere and if they were seen speaking Catalan in the street, they could be arrested by the military police. Catalans were seen as "the other" until the death of Franco when democracy was restored. Catalonians started to have a voice in their own country. The Spanish constitution now recognises Catalan history, cultural differences and the Catalan language. Catalonia is a region with a history of invasion, dispossession and genocide. Since my childhood, I have heard stories from my grandmother about the invasion, the sense of dispossession and genocide as some of my relatives were killed by Franco's forces.

When I learned about Aboriginal history and culture, I became aware that Aboriginal people and their nations had also undergone a process of invasion, dispossession and genocide, but to a greater scale, as the extension of their land was vast compared to the extension of Catalonia. Ruby Langford Ginibi is one of the Aboriginal writers who explained through her narratives her own personal history. Her texts studied in postcolonial literature courses in Spain such as those organised by the University of Barcelona, and has made readers aware of the situation Aboriginal people, but most especially, what Aboriginal women have undergone throughout the twentieth century. In my eyes, Ruby Langford Ginibi's writing is also about history and politics. Her writing was about the history of the Aboriginal population during the Twentieth Century. In her autobiographies, I became aware of the relations between white Australia and Aboriginal Australians. The mechanisms that white Australia used to assimilate Aboriginal children into their society reminded me of the mechanisms used by Franco's dictatorship to assimilate Republican children into Fascism. Republican children were taken away from their mothers who were imprisoned in penitentiaries such as the one in the city of Malaga. The army psychiatrist Antonio Vallejo Nágera tried to assimilate Republican children into the Fascist ideology as they were seen as inferior creatures. These children were adopted by families in favour of Fascism and educated within its ideology.

It was not until 2002, and thanks to the research project done by Ricard Vinyes, Montse Armengou and Ricard Belis, that these Republican children have become aware of their past. The impact that the assimilation process had in the Aboriginal community was

huge in comparison to the impact that the assimilation process had on the Republican children. However, both communities have not been able to voice what happened to their communities until very recently.

I would like to dedicate this article to Ruby Langford Ginibi and her life history, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, the book that awoke in me a passion for Aboriginal history, culture and society. This book can be considered a historical document as, through Ruby's life story I learned not only about Aboriginal life in post-war south-eastern Australia, but also 'about the conflicts and pressures faced by her community, with urbanization, stress and death, and frequent invasion of lives by the welfare and the police' (Saunders and Evans 420). Her book reveals the effects of the state policies of assimilation on her life and that of her community. I am also going to show in this article, how Ruby Langford—a Koorie woman—tried to confront both cultures and asks for reconciliation in her book.

The state governments started to apply the assimilation policy by splitting up the different Aboriginal communities and placing Aboriginal people into missions in order to assimilate them to white Anglo-Saxon culture. The official aim was to eliminate any kind of link between Aboriginal people and their communities. One of the communities affected by this policy was the Bundjalung, Ruby Langford's community, where she was born in 1934 at Box Ridge Mission (Langford 3). She was dispossessed from her country from the first stages of her life. The only contact she had with her culture was through her parents, relatives and Bundjalung people. Her father was always working far away from the mission or village where they were staying so she had more contact with her mother. When her mother left with another man, her father took Ruby and all his children to Auntie Nell and Uncle Sam who took care of them and became substitute parents. This caring showed me that even if the Bundjalung community was split up, there were still many Aboriginal people who had offered help. Furthermore, throughout her life story, Ruby explains that whenever celebrations took place, her father and people from her community, and later on in her life, her sons and daughters, met. This is the sense of community that she developed like other Koories.

The state tried to destroy Koorie heritages through assimilation policies. This fact led to feelings of loneliness, dispossession and displacement in Ruby Langford:

I felt like I was living tribal but with no tribe around me, no close-knit family. The food-gathering, the laws and the songs were broken up, and my generation at this time wandered around as if we were tribal but in fact living worst than the poorest of the poor whites, and in the case of women living hard because it seemed like the men loved you for a while and then more kids came along and the men drank and gambled and disappeared. (Langford 96)

This quote showed me that the assimilation efforts turned out to be eventually “unsuccessful”, although having certainly fostered a feeling of rootlessness and isolation.

Aboriginal people taken away from their lands must have had a sense of displacement throughout all their lives. This must have been aggravated by the fact that they have had to move from one mission, station and village to another, looking for ill-paid jobs such as fencing, process work in factories and servants or cleaners. This also applied to Ruby Langford who was forced to live in cars, tents, tin huts, and Aboriginal Protection houses, depending on the place where she and her partners could find a job. The period of time they settled down in each of these places was not very long, so Ruby Langford could not develop a sense of home. At a certain point in her life she applied for an Aboriginal Home Loan, but her application was rejected. Then, she wrote a poem about the sense of home:

A Home/ A home is where the heart is/ or so they say,/I wonder if I will own  
one/ some sunny day/ Or will all my efforts be in vain/ and the whole battle be  
too much a strain/ and put me in too much pain/hence I shall refrain from this  
endless strain/ and pitch a tent. (Langford 217-8)

Ruby Langford Ginibi lived at ‘Allawah’, the Aboriginal Hostel in Granville, she described it as a place ‘for people who’d raised their families and didn’t want to become live-in babysitters for their kids’ (Langford 267). The sense of Aboriginal displacement, I learned from Ginibi’s writing, was the result of racism and exclusion from the benefits of the dominant white society. However, the strength I took from reading Aboriginal literature is that Aboriginal people have not succumbed and remained silent, but defended themselves. In *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, I could find so many instances where either Ruby, her children or her relatives have defended themselves in front of white Australians. For example, when Ruby lived at Green Valley and was offended by the complaints of her neighbour, Mrs. Jenkins, about the noise her kids were producing, she responds:

Come outside and fight as good as you can talk and complain,’ I said, ‘while you bastards were having your kids in comfort I was battling to raise mine in a tent where my husband had left me with a gutful of his next child - you don’t own the land your houses is on, my people were here first, so get off, come on and fight me if you’re game you bitch [...] you had to fight to survive out there. The suburbs were nothing like the city [...] we had trouble coping with the discrimination. (Langford 176)

This courage to speak up inspired me as did Ruby Langford Ginibi's strength to survive: many Aboriginal people, like her, were born and grew up in missions or stations and were thus not used to living on their own in the bush. There were some Aboriginal people who, when faced with life in the bush, were afraid and saw the bush as hostile because they felt displaced. Ruby spent a period of her life living in a tent in the bush with her children when her partner had left her. She was frightened at nights: 'The second night was worse. I seemed to hear every noise magnified, every sound in the bush was going through my body' (Langford 92). However, despite being frightened, Ginibi literally survived the bush and also survived the efforts of assimilation.

I was also impressed by Ginibi's writing because it was part of Aboriginal women's writing. Gender roles in many Aboriginal societies underwent radical changes in the processes of colonisation, partly as a result of the weakening of the position of Aboriginal men (Fullana 8). The role of women as mothers became increasingly important, as they were the ones who from now on were going to pass on their community history, language and culture to future generations. It was a time when Aboriginal women felt threatened by assimilation efforts and the forcible removal of their children. Many Aboriginal women had to rely on themselves and could often not count on the support of men. Ruby Langford took the decision of not taking any more love to town—that is to say, any men—because she was fed up with men, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike; she thought they only brought problems into her life. The sense of motherhood was very strong in Aboriginal women as Ruby Langford states: 'I was a mother, I didn't know how to be no mother' (Langford 202). The resilience of Ruby Langford as both an Aboriginal person and an Aboriginal woman was thus a source of personal inspiration.

The Aboriginal languages were also affected by the process of assimilation. The effects of this process can be seen in Ruby Langford's life history. When Ruby was a child, she was fluent in her language because 'old man Ord' (Langford 3) explained to her stories in Bundjalung. Storytelling was (and is) a way to pass Bundjalung history from one generation to the next. Yet Ginibi was forced to give up her language, as she went to Government missions or schools where English was the only language taught. As she grew up, she scarcely heard the Bundjalung language to the point that when she listened to someone speaking or singing in Bundjalung a strange feeling arose in her: 'A man [...] was singing in the lingo and I listened closer. It was Bundjalung language, words and sounds I hadn't heard for a long time. It was an eerie feeling in amongst the skyscrapers' (Langford 117).

The Government expected that by depriving Aboriginal children of their languages, they were going to assimilate the Anglo-Australian culture quickly. In order to carry the assimilation out “successfully” there were not too many Aboriginal students in schools, as Ruby Langford explains: ‘there were ten or twelve of us among a few hundreds’ (Langford 28). Ruby Langford’s books are proof that even though the State Governments made great efforts to eliminate Aboriginal languages, it has not been completely “successful”. In fact, Ruby uses Bundjalung words all throughout her works. This sense of survival of having successfully reconnected to her ancient heritage, culture and language was what impressed me the most: Ginibi had proved anew that the official assimilation policies were in the end not successful. I was very impressed when reading about this resilience.

During the 1930s State Government policies stipulated that the education of Aboriginal Australians should not be at the same level of education as that of white Australians. Aboriginal people were thought to have merely rudimentary Western knowledge, as the District Educational Inspector, George Hendron stated in a letter to Queensland’s Director of Education in 1934: ‘Nothing should be attempted as a pure subject. It should be possible though to do something to introduce natives to our codes of ethics-observation of laws, regulations, etc. (in a very simple manner only), recognition of authority, discipline, etc.’ (Saunders and Evans 51).

Ruby Langford and her Aboriginal classmates subverted this idea of Aboriginal people being educated at basic level: as it turned out, she was the best of the class at Casino High: ‘... we were doing all right. We were class captain and sports captain, we ran faster [and] wrote the longest stories’ (Langford 35). Ruby was the best in her class and her father was told to send her to college to become a teacher with the aid of the Aboriginal Protection Board. Her father rejected this because he stated that ‘all the protection they’ve done so far is to take people from their land and split up families’ (Langford 38). Her father did not want to depend on the government system whose aim was to destroy his community and culture.

However, it was when Ruby listened about her becoming a teacher that she started to question the role and the impact a black teacher would have in a society where all the teachers were white: ‘Every teacher I’d ever seen was white. I tried to imagine black kids being taught by black teachers, then I tried to imagine white kids with black teachers’ (Langford 37)—an unthinkable situation in Australia at the time. Ruby did not finish school and started to work. This was a situation many Aboriginal people must have experienced when they were in their mid-teens. However, Ginibi succeeded and this is what I consider the strength of her stories—she not only topped her class but became a world famous author whose writing also reached me as a Catalan reader.

Finally, it may be said that even though Ginibi could not afford studying at college and becoming a teacher, she wrote a series of books, in which she is not only explaining her life history, but also explained what has happened to her, her community and her people. Eventually she became a teacher - perhaps not a formal teacher in the Western sense. But to me, she was a teacher who taught me the history of the Bundjalung people and the Koorie community in Australia. As Ginibi's writing testifies, Aboriginal history has long been hidden, but has emerged. Ruby Langford Ginibi was fighting to have a voice in order to 'provide cultural continuity and ensuring that what happened in the past does not reoccur' (Saunders and Evans 57) in Australia.

But Ginibi not only had something to say to me about Aboriginal Australian History. She also taught me to see Catalan and Spanish history in a new light. She made me understand that in order for victims of repression to become victors, they had to voice out the injustices they had suffered. In this way, the future generations become aware of their past and can fight for their own rights. When reading her works I saw a parallel between the way she wrote and what journalists and historians were doing in Spain at that time to recover the hidden past of Catalonia and Spain, which still continues today.

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**Eva Campamà Pizarro:** I graduated in English at Barcelona University in 1999 and I am currently working on my PhD thesis on Aileen Palmer and the Spanish Civil War. In 1997, I took part in the Barcelona-La Trobe university exchange and went to study to Bundoora (Melbourne) for a year where I studied Aboriginal, Australian and Gender studies. I became interested in Postcolonial studies and took a Postgraduate course on Postcolonial theory and literature at Barcelona University after I graduated. Postcolonial literature and Aboriginal studies is a field I have always been passionate about. I worked as a secondary teacher in the UK from 2004 until 2010 and I am now working currently as a secondary teacher at Kensington School, a British school in Barcelona.