

HISTORY AND FICTION IN RICHARD FLANAGAN'S WANTING (2008)

A HISTÓRIA E A FICÇÃO NO ROMANCE WANTING (2008), DE RICHARD FLANAGAN

Thomas Bonnici (UEM)¹

ABSTRACT: Modern novel writers are employing more and more historical events in fiction writing. This is especially true in the case of Black British and Australian literatures and this fact has provoked discussion and tensions on the feasibility of coping with these two highly problematic modes of narration. Flanagan's recent novel *Wanting* shows how the horrors of cultural annihilation and resistance represented in fiction by parody, irony, humor and puns give more highlighted effects on the tragedy of colonized peoples than the strict laws of historical narration.

KEYWORDS: Australian Literature; History; narrative; culture.

RESUMO: Os romancistas contemporâneos estão recorrendo cada vez mais aos eventos históricos em sua ficção. Este fato se materializa na literatura negra britânica e australiana e tem causado discussões e tensões sobre como tratar esses dois modos de narração altamente problemáticos. O romance *Wanting*, do autor australiano Richard Flanagan, mostra como os horrores da aniquilação cultural e a resistência, representados na ficção pela paródia, ironia, humor e jogo de palavras, transmitem mais a realidade ao leitor sobre a tragédia de povos colonizados do que através das leis científicas da narração histórica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura australiana; História; narrativa; cultura.

History versus fiction

Perhaps one of the most interesting features in contemporary Australian fiction literature is the retrieval and the understanding of historical events not through the strict laws of historical research and writing but through the rather slippery and deferment conditions of fiction. The use of history in many Australian novels is rather endemic since modern writers are highly aware of an erstwhile suppression policy of nasty happenings from the beginning of European invasion and settlement up to the 1950s. The *raison d'être* is the gap in the historical records that fiction writers desire to fill in the wake of suppressed events and deficits in history. When the Australian author Kate Grenville (2005) published *The Secret River*, an academic controversy ensued with Melbourne historian Inga Clendinnen who, reiterating previous arguments (Clendinnen 1996), insisted that novel writers misled readers because they inserted contemporary assumptions and current obsessions in their presumptive historical novels. Grenville's novel brings to the fore a micro-history of colonization and dispossession in which Australia's native populations and, in their wake, the whole colonized world, will *always* be remembered as objectified, marginalized and voiceless subjects. It also puts

¹ Professor do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Estadual de Maringá. Doutor. E-mail: bonnici@wnet.com.br.

fiction at odds with History since contemporary theories are averse to the concept that historical research alone uncovers the whole truth.

Hirst (2006) accuses contemporary Australian novel writers of abuse of history since readers are prone to consider novelists authorities in History even though the writers are aware that they are writing fiction. Although writing from other contexts, albeit within the same discussion, authors such as Caryl Phillips, Andrea Levy, Bernardine Evaristo, Monica Ali, Marina Warner and others have always stated that fiction has its beginnings in the real world and these beginnings are adapted and altered to various degrees for the sake of fiction. They have, however, also remarked that a new way to approach history has been found. In Phillips's *A Distant Shore*, Solomon's story is actually David Oluwale's narrated in the third part of *Foreigners* as a creative biography, and in *The City by the Water*, as a historical document (Phillips 2003; 2007; 2010). The fiction that ensues brings forth the emotions, the invisible nuances, the gaps and the undertones that would be present in such colonial encounters. It may even counter the official History narrative since fiction grasps what power and hierarchy have deemed to suppress and provides the marginalized with a voice not encountered in documents and inscriptions (Foucault 1980; Said 1978).

There are many reasons why post-colonial authors from the Caribbean, Australia, Canada, South Africa and other ex-British colonies are dealing more and more with historical themes and writing 'historical novels'. By looking backwards the modern writer and reader place themselves within their historical context and examine contemporary problems with more efficaciousness. Caryl Phillips's very short epilogue in *Crossing the River* is highly illustrating: the 'history' of Nash, Martha, Joyce and Captain James Hamilton is a fictional representation of the past but the narrator highlights the deep link between the implications of slavery and the disruption of economy and family life in the contemporary world of black people. Readers, therefore, become aware of the causes of the African diaspora, with its genocide, migration, civil wars, and racial attitudes vividly shown in flashes in the last section of the novel. In spite of all this discussion, it seems that historical fiction writers reject the idea that they are writing history or any patronizing attitude over historians. They do, however, insist on the hermeneutic power of the history-based novel (DeLillo 1997). According to Sebald (*apud* Denham; McCulloh 2005), it seems that fiction could be more powerful than the historical documents and records. Fiction seems to demonstrate what historical events mean to readers since they bring the traumas and memories of the past into the present age and circumstances.

The features of historical fiction or historiographical metafiction, as Hutcheon (1988) qualifies it, is characterized by textual play, falsification of historical details, rediscovery of the activities of marginalized people, direct speech, dramatic scenes and other features more proper to fiction than to strict historical narrative. According to Schama (1991) and Sullivan (2006), the latter may be also considered as a kind of fiction since the whole concept of historical certainty is actually at stake.

Since Flanagan's novel *Wanting* (2008) is a three-layer tightly-linked novel featuring historical people (Mathinna, the Franklin couple, Charles Dickens), current essay will analyze the story of the Aboriginal girl Mathinna (1835-1856), the protagonist of Richard Flanagan's novel *Wanting* (2008), as a micro-historical narrative of colonization and dispossession, and the manner the fictional story of the Aborigine is worked out by the writer.

Preliminary remarks: Australia-Tasmania, Flanagan, Mathinna

Australian history hails around 50,000 years ago when Polynesian islanders crossed the sea and settled on the mainland. At the time of British settlement it is estimated that 300,000 Aborigine peoples, speaking around 250 languages, inhabited Australia and Tasmania. As in all colonial encounters, British invasion and settlement was tragic to the Aborigines: they were driven out of their land and murdered, while new diseases wiped out whole populations. During the early part of the 20th century laws were passed to segregate and 'protect' the Aborigines with tragic consequences since they involved restrictions on where they could live and work and families were broken up. It was only during the 1960s that former legislation on segregation was reviewed and the Australian Government decreed that all Aborigines had citizen status. (Blainey 1975).

In 1787, the British government sent a fleet to colonize the strange and unknown continent with convicts. These *animae viles* arrived at Botany Bay (Sydney Harbor) in January 1788 with 1,030 criminals to establish a dystopia which lasted till 1868, totaling more than 160,000 transported prisoners. Convicts were mainly made up of English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish. Systematic brutality and constant humiliations by British colonial officers meted on the convicts during those 80 years was so widespread that the continent's convict history was for a long time suppressed and made invisible (Hughes 1988; Keneally 2007).

Richard Flanagan, born in Longford, Tasmania, in 1961, is descended from Irish convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land in the 1840s. He grew up in Rosebery on Tasmania's western coast, studied at the University of Tasmania and earned his Master's degree in History from Oxford UK, as a Rhodes Scholar. Published in 2008, *Wanting* is his fifth novel.

The main protagonist in *Wanting* is the Aboriginal girl Mathinna whose watercolor portrait by the convict Thomas Bock painted in 1842 when she was seven years old inspired Flanagan to write the novel. Mathinna was born on Flinders Island in 1835, the daughter of Towterer, chief of the Lowreenne people, and of Wongerneep. Towterer and his people were the victims of the Great Conciliator or Protector, George Augustus Robinson (1788-1866), who gave a final solution to the Aboriginal problem. From 1830 to 1834, this involved the capture and the removal of the remaining Tasmania's Aborigines to Wybalenna on Flinders Island and then to Oyster Cove on mainland Tasmania so that they would be Europeanized. By 1869 all were dead. When the Chief Executive of Van Diemen's Land John Franklin and his wife visited Wybalenna in 1838, they were impressed with Mathinna's manners and intelligence and, 'abducting' her from her community, she was sent to Hobart to live at Government House as an adopted daughter. When the Franklins were recalled to England in 1843 the couple abandoned the Aboriginal girl. These conditions launched Mathinna at the age of 21 on the fatal route of prostitution and alcoholism, both contributing to her death by drowning, probably in 1852. She never fitted in wherever she was: she was an orphaned Aboriginal with aristocratic upbringing; her culture was denied and was abandoned by the white culture she was forced into. These are meager historical facts. In the novel *Wanting* Flanagan 'improved' them and highlighted their significance.

Death

Estação Literária

The first glimpse of Mathinna in the novel lies within a death context. Herded to camps on Flinders Island by George Augustus Robinson, the Tasmanians are dying at a terrific speed, to the chagrin of the 'Protector'. She witnesses Robinson's pseudo-medical intervention, the gruesome autopsy and the removal of the dead chief's head. This is tantamount to the white man's triumph over the massacres perpetuated. Neither Hughes (1988) nor Keneally (2007) mention Mathinna or Towterer's post-mortem beheading for 'scientific purposes'. Hughes describes rival agents of the Royal College of Surgeons in London and the Royal Society in Tasmania fighting for the corpse of William Lanne, the last male Tasmanian Aboriginal, on his death in 1869. Within this death milieu, Flanagan presents Aboriginal culture as a factor of resilience in the midst of deep threats against their identity. 'Native' scenes, albeit highly disturbed and modified by colonizing techniques, are contrasted to the 'civilizing' milieu. The former is characterized by Mathinna's 'flying' on the soft soil, domestic sounds and scenes, the malign omens 'Rowra' and 'the black swan', the moaning of the black women, the natives' refusal to give the names of the dead for the newly prepared tombs and the women's concern on the imminent fatal calamities.

Such swapping of history and fiction makes Flanagan's narrative go beyond the historical facts and tell the reader a great deal on the tragedy of the Aborigines and the mind-workings of the European. While looking at her naked feet, Mathinna's silence connotes the contrast between the pre-invasion freedom, the bewilderment of displacement and the subsequent deaths. However, the displacement from her place does not eliminate her culture. "As they approached house number 17, Mathinna halted for a moment, stared at the sky above, and seemed transfixed by the nameless terror [...] a black swan swooping down towards the brick terraces" (Flanagan 2008: 11). She seems to have perceived the synonymy between the 'Protector' and the 'black swan', or rather, the link between the colonizer's presence and the omen of death. In fact, the (possible) initial belief in the white man's power turns into a "doubt [of] the sorcerer's potency" (Flanagan 2008: 15). This deficiency of belief is corroborated by the women's dirge, erroneously interpreted by the 'Protector' as "the normal state of native overexcitement, wailing like a belfry being rung by a madman" (Flanagan 2008: 17). The female 'speech' and the scarification represent the deep anguish that European civilization has brought to their shores with the subsequent erasure of their identity and culture.

The Protector's interior monologue with its highly ambiguous question "Had he become God?" (Flanagan 2008: 19) is answered positively by the continuation of his gruesome activities of autopsy and cemetery building. The colonialist's self-esteem may be perceived in the 1835 Benjamin Duterreau's picture entitled 'The Conciliation' at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart. The full-dressed Robinson stands in the middle of the picture surrounded by naked Aborigines who point to him as their savior. However, the irony emerging from Duterreau's triumphant scene and Flanagan's fictional narrative, or rather, between images of the "old world" filling Tasmanian landscape and the phrase that they kept dying, conveys an idea of tragedy that no historical narrative is able to transmit. Pathetically, the thanatophile Robinson literally probes into the corpses: "In the post mortems he searched their split oesophagi, their disemboweled bellies, their pus-raddled intestines and shriveled lungs for some evidence of his guilt or innocence, but he could find none" (Flanagan 2008: 12). The equation he is trying to work out lies in himself and in the Europeans' contact with the Aborigines. Flanagan's fictional portrait of the Protector's Eurocentric stance, impairing

him from finding the true cause of the deaths, albeit not strictly historical, brings to a deeper scale the ideology of European superiority and the othering unto death of everyone different. It seems to be the negative type of desire analyzed by Deleuze and Guattari (1977). In 'loving' his people, death ensued and culture erased. Misreading the silence of Towterer's daughter as "Christian sensibility" and the transformation of Mathinna as "amenable to a civilizing influence" (Flanagan 2008: 12), Robinson enhances the colonizers' "colossal vanity" of superior culture and the materialization of the death machine constructed by colonialism and capitalism in Australia.

Rape

The historical deficit in Mathinna's rise from a 'savage girl' to an educated young lady in early Tasmania is an important locus to enhance postcolonial ideology within the context of fiction. Main historians of Tasmania (Woodward 1951; Plomley 1966; Robson 1983; Hughes 1988; McGoogan 2001; Boyce 2010) do not mention Mathinna's story; others (Pybus 1991; Ryan 1996; Plomley 1987) mention her story but they largely depend on Bonwick (1870) who, in turn, was reprising a 1869 Hobart *Mercury's* report called "Something of the Past" written by one Old Bloomer. As explained above, Mathinna's vicissitudes are closely linked to Lady Franklin as from her visit on Flinders Island and subsequently in Government House in Hobart from 1841 to 1843. She was raised as a young lady alongside John Franklin's child Eleanor till the Franklins' departure to England.

Flanagan's fictional narrative about Mathinna, based on flimsy historical accounts, emphasizes Lady Franklin's endeavor "to raise just one individual with every advantage of class and rank" (Flanagan 2008: 69) as a 'civilizing' experiment. Transferred from the diasporic civilizing protection of Robinson to the household of Lady Jane Franklin, Mathinna transformed herself into the Leda myth which made her story much more symbolic than the bare fact of history about her. Taking seriously the Europeanization and Christianization of the Aborigines, the Zeus-like Robinson and the Franklin couple ravaged Mathinna's culture since "of the children of Ham that had not perished, [...] she was the most advanced [...] and perhaps the one with the greatest possibility of redemption" (Flanagan 2008: 110).

If historians are always zealous to find proof of erased or suppressed culture in vanquished people, Flanagan is very clear on Mathinna's cultural rape and that of her people. According to Lady Jane's project, she would be a princess seeped in "woman's natural virtues of faith, simplicity, goodness, self-sacrifice, tenderness and modesty"; she will learn "reading and spelling, grammar, arithmetic [...], geography, [...] rhetoric and ethics, as well as music, drawing and needlework [and] catechism [...]" (Flanagan 2008: 118). Robinson's final solution for all the Tasmanian Aborigines is tantamount to Lady Jane's scheme for the Victorian upbringing of Mathinna.

Even though historians have dealt with this cultural erasure in Australia and Tasmania, Flanagan enhances the topic by giving Mathinna's post-encounter name as Leda. The symbol of the mythological Leda and her encounter with Zeus underscores deceit and rape. Lady Franklin's experiment itself was the Aborigines' rape by the Europeans. *Wanting* is rife with the colonizers' conviction that white people had come to stay and Europeans had to establish a civilized place with the de-culturing of natives. By focalizing Mathinna's thoughts and writing, the narrative reproduces nature's hints of the tragedy that has been occurring for decades. The seagull tracks in the sand as a

message from her father and her letter to Towterer do not merely show “the things that were in danger of vanishing” (Flanagan 2008: 121), but the disappearance of hope and joy of the Aborigines and their immersion into the “melancholy of disillusionment” (Flanagan 2008: 121). Lady Franklin’s ridiculous project to inculcate Western ideology in Mathinna is the planned scheme of European monolithism to maintain superiority and marginalize the different other. Flanagan highlights the erasure of their culture by the trashing system, which, albeit mythical in Mathinna’s case (but not in boarding schools in the United States, Canada and Australia), is a metonym of her people’s fate in the white man’s hands.

If genocide, wars and rape are the masculine design in colonialism and are frequently analyzed historically, the feminine role in nurture, albeit not historicized, is perhaps more fatal. The endeavor to instill a European lifestyle in so far as the ‘us-them’ dichotomy is maintained becomes much more pernicious. The colonizers knew that what they called ‘the savage’ or ‘the native’ could simultaneously become and not become an Englishman. Many 19th century British authors with some experience in the colonies saw the possibility of destroying ‘native culture’ in colonized people and substituting it entirely with a British or European one (Young 2005). In the case of Mathinna, Lady Franklin ignores the girl’s culture, seeped in Aboriginal lore, and persists in fabricating her “a free-born Englishwoman” (Flanagan 2008: 118). However, the European fear of contamination by natives makes Jane Franklin keep a physical and psychological distance from the adopted girl. Although “she felt a sudden urge to pick the child up” and “long[ed] to hold the child” (Flanagan 2008: 116-117), Lady Franklin refrains from doing so. Mathinna is nevertheless raped by her adopted mother already foretold when Lady Franklin ordered the framing of Mathinna’s painting by the convict Bock: her feet, a symbol of Aboriginal sensitiveness and a metonym of their culture, are ‘cut’ by the frame (civilization).

Desire

In postcolonial literature, desire is a highly important term due to the ensuing debates on hybridism, miscegenation and racism. Human phenotypes in countries and places inscribed by colonialism invariably exhibit that, in spite of all alleged cultural superiority, desire for the non-white woman is more frequent than contemporary racist ideologies and tracts are prone to admit (Ferro 2004). Spivak (1995) has already discussed the ambiguous relationship between the imperialist subject and the subject of imperialism: on the one hand, there is the whiteness ideology which, along with economy, justifies the dominance of the ‘superior race’ over the ‘black races’; on the other, there is the evidence of the satisfaction of sexual desire within the modes of colonial entrepreneurship. Citing Long’s (in)famous 18th century book *History of Jamaica*, Hyam (1991: 92) says that “British people were indistinctly prone to take West Indian black women [...] because of the sexual appeal of the black body”. Behn’s *Oroonoko* to Levy’s *A Long Song* and Martin’s *Property* manifest the sexual prowess of English planters, managers and overseers. Though they do not mention colonialism, Deleuze and Guattari (1977) insist on the social aspect of desire with its attraction and repulsion. Desire, therefore, is not merely a wanting of the other’s body, but a metonym of invasion and domination in the context of capitalism.

Sir John Franklin’s desire for Mathinna is not extant in any historical record when he was chief executive in Van Diemen’s Land. Flanagan’s narrative, however,

produces a gradual and increasingly flirtation of Mathinna by Franklin that finally brings his recalling to England. His admiration at her red dress, speech, walk, large dark eyes and smile is followed by his seeking her out, enjoying her presence, yearning for her warmth and touch, accompanying her body growth:

Sometimes he snuck into her bedroom just to watch her sleep. [...] He thrilled at seeing the dark down on her exposed forearm, and as he leant in with his candle, the better to see her, he would wish to kiss her eyes, her lips. But, terrified of his engorged heart, he would abruptly straighten and leave (Flanagan 2008: 140).

In colonial terms and in postcolonial interpretation, this is very similar to Raleigh's phrase on "Guiana [...] that hath yet her maidenhood" (Raleigh 1972: 408). Although Mathinna's body is not defiled, it is gazed upon, objectified and desired. Transposing this metonym to the colonial enterprise, the desire lies not only in penetrating the virgin land of Tasmania but also the ravishing of its culture.

Further, the non-satisfaction of Franklin's wanting does not seem to be a question of ethics as his thoughts are liable to convey: "Still, on occasion Sir John felt ashamed of himself and, as a pious man, asked God in his prayers for his guiding wisdom" (Flanagan 2008: 138). The main reason is rather the fear of contagion by racially inferior 'black' people. "The ideology of race, a semiotic system in the guise of ethnology, 'the science of races', from the 1840s onwards necessarily worked according to a doubled logic, according to which it both enforced and policed the differences between the whites and the non-whites, but at the same time focused fetishistically upon the product of the contacts between them" (Young 2005: 220). The interracial contact and possible hybrid progeny are the true deterrent. Franklin's recalling and disgrace is due to the breaking up of the colonial economical liaison. The ethic and religious stance absconds the real motivation for avoiding contact with Mathinna. Since the sexual exchange between the colonizer and the colonized becomes the paradigm of economic and political trade, the lack of the former brings about his political downfall as the British government's representative on the island.

Resistance

Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion in all its modalities is the constant hallmark of all Australian tribes narrated in historical records. Flanagan's nuanced description of resistance to absorption shows an all-pervading attitude of violence and transformation (Ashcroft 2001). *Wanting*, however, depicts already weak, fragmented and dying communities which, due to displacement and cultural erasure, are almost incapable of re-inscribing their identity. Although recent historical records have revealed the atrocities of the settlers and the official policy for the Indigenous peoples, few narratives are comparable to the tragic connotation in Flanagan's depressing description of the slow extermination of Towterer's tribe. "[The Protector's] dreams were full of their dances and songs, the beauty of their villages, the sound of their rivers, the memory of their tenderness, yet still they kept dying. [...] They kept dying and dying, [...] but still they kept dying" (Flanagan 2008: 19-20). Perhaps no description in historical narrative is comparable to the dignified retreat of Towterer and his tribe:

Robinson told Towterer how, in this war the Aborigines could not longer win, he was offering the last and only realistic option left: sanctuary on the islands of the Bass Strait in return for their country. There they would be kept in food and provided with all the good things of the whites' world: clothing, shelter, tea, flour, God. He was so persuasive he almost believed himself. [...] But this time there was no sentry posted at his tent. The wild blacks had all vanished into the night, without even waking Robinson's own natives. Towterer's people would not allow themselves to be taken captive by any amount of lies (Flanagan 2008: 62-3).

Within a macrocosm stance, the Aborigines' resistance indicates freedom and not the colonizers' tantalizing carrot. It is their last effort not to be assimilated and erased and Flanagan depicts this attitude in a few striking words to manifest their dignity and determination. Even though some three years later Towterer and the remnant of his tribe 'accept' the white man's terms at a camp significantly called 'Hell's Gates' (Flanagan 2008: 64) and then displaced to Wybalenna on Flinders Island, their resistance is shown by "gloom and listlessness", by dying and by the telling of stories.

This non-violent resistance may be seen in Mathinna, doubly colonized within the general system of displacement and within the Franklin's household. Historians have always concentrated on Aboriginal violent reactions to the white settlers and government and little do they analyze the day-to-day workings of native resistance through the use of parody, irony, humor, puns and inconveniences posited against the white people to materialize the former's hostility to their othering. Corroborating Ashcroft's position (2001), Caryl Phillips, Andrea Levy and Karen King-Aribisala underscore in their novels non-violent means used by their characters to achieve emancipation. Flanagan's Mathinna is no exception: "She grew up into a lively child [...] listening to her father's stories of a cosmos where time and the world were infinite, and all things were revealed by sacred stories" (Flanagan 2008: 67). The transmission of culture is a resistance stance employed by her father in the wake of the 'death penalty' on all Aborigines imposed by the settlers. Even though instinctively wary of the white man's 'generosity', as her pleading to the cart man who takes her to the Franklins' house testifies ("Don't leave me [...] Don't go", Flanagan 2008: 113-4), Mathinna too resists assimilation. Her insistence on walking barefoot against Lady Franklin's orders epitomizes the Aboriginal versus the 'civilized' cultures. There is equivalence in the enforcement of shoe wearing and the 'classical education' (Eurocentric cultural superiority) she is required to don. "Wearing shoes, she felt as if her body had been blindfolded" (Flanagan 2008: 119), or rather, European civilization would annihilate the inheritance of Aboriginal culture and their identity. This may be seen in the episode of Mathinna's dance on board the ship *Erebus*. The symbolism of the mask worn by the Tasmanian elite (the cruelty, tyranny and hypocrisy beneath the *mission civilatrice*), the names of the ships *Terror* and *Erebus* (the encounter with European civilization brought terror and darkness to the Blacks), and the racialized comments by those invited ("Our princess of the wilds"; "the sweetest savage", Flanagan 2008: 147) seem to have triggered Mathinna to reveal, through her dance, a different civilization which they concocted towards its complete erasure and is even now in its dying throes. Nevertheless, it is a healthy and vigorous civilization as the combination of mental trance and physical dexterity in Mathinna's dance shows:

[She] was moving to something more fundamental and deep-rooted than a dance invented fifteen years before in Paris. Her cheeks were fired, her body liberated, her mind had never felt so free of what she now knew was a strange fog that had lain upon it for as long as she could remember. And yet she did not sense the strange rupture she was making in the evening. Her eyes were never felt so sharp, so able to see and know everything. [...] She kicked off her shoes and became a kangaroo absolutely still, except for its head, click-clicking around, then a stamp, two leaps, and she was flying (Flanagan 2008: 151).

Resistance is manifest when the Aboriginal dance is compared to the fashionable Parisian dance rehearsed by the Tasmanian elite; when the Aboriginal muse 'enters' Mathinna and inspires her into an involving body-soul trance; when she withdraws herself from Western civilization (the force of the verb 'kick' is significant) and starts imitating the kangaroo; when she collapses pronouncing "Rowra" (death) brought by European civilization. Even though European civilization would, in the long run, win the battle, she resists up to the end, "[f]or the black child would not become white" (Flanagan 2008: 174). Flanagan's fiction depicting Mathinna's trance is surely more forceful than the historical accounts of the last Tasmanians (Bonwick 1870; Flood 2006; Boyce 2010; Taylor 2004; Ryan 1996).

The aftermath of British civilizing procedures in Tasmania follows what happened elsewhere through asymmetric colonial encounters: nomadic life and socially connected groups are disrupted; their land seized and proclaimed *terra nullius* by the British; all languages become extinct; akin to the 'stain of convict ancestry', the stigma of Aboriginal blood others large number of people. The Aborigines find themselves ostracized on their own land and, to make matters worse, feel displaced in whatever circumstance they are.

It seems that Mathinna's displacement and its consequences are fictionally depicted with more impact on readers than the historical records of diaspora peoples may have achieved (Brah 2002; Van Hear 1998; Cohen 1997). After the Franklins' recall to England in 1844, Mathinna is returned to Wybalenna: with her feet in the soil, "she could feel nothing" and "she spoke in a manner that was neither white nor black, but in a strange way with strange words that made no sense to anyone" (Flanagan 2008: 213). In one way or another, all the remnant Aborigines are out of place, "call[ing] to their abandoned ancestors who kept trying to sing them home, so that their own souls would not be lost forever, but there was no answer" (Flanagan 2008: 214). If the recurring resistance phrase "they kept dying" is more pathetic and tragic than anything written in historical records, the Aborigines' conviction wrought by experience that "the world was not run by God but by the Devil" (Flanagan 2008: 217) brings to the fore the havoc characterizing disrupted culture and stability. A powerful kind of resistance is, however, still extant: the 'devil dance' and red ochre for the ceremony are reintroduced; the European religion is now thought to be a trick; revolt is manifested in prostitution and drunkenness. Even if the latter may seem to be 'slavery' and not liberation, Flanagan (2008: 228) is keen in emphasizing that "what she sold was not herself but a shell, from which at some point she would be free." The metonym of Mathinna may be extended to all colonized peoples, especially the women, who are made invisible and irrelevant to the history of their country but who are revived now through their resistance strategies.

Although the Aborigines become weak, useless, split subjects, and although the last days of the fictional Mathinna are steeped in rum, sex and violence, her strategies of nuanced resistance and resilience are numerous. Victims of the colonial tragedy that befalls the Tasmanian Aborigines, she and her fellow companions are now deeply aware of the synonym European religion and colonialism: “[Walter Bruney] shouted that if he had a chance, he would get a spear and spear God good, teach him a lesson” (Flanagan 2008: 243). In their tragedy, the drunken Aborigine asks again and again the existential question: ““Why?”” (Flanagan 2008: 246). In spite of everything, resilience exists in the scenes of construction, work, industriousness, a critical evaluation of colonization and its religion, births, generosity, mutual help, pleasure and satisfaction at one’s results – in other words, a vision of the birth of a country, based on the descendants of Aborigines and convicts, settlers, and freed white people, all emerging out of the tragedy of the first fifty years of colonial encounters.

Conclusion

Although History and fiction are both narratives, they are subject to different codes. The narration of historical events leaves many gaps which cannot be filled and the verbal reproduction and interpretation of past happenings will never satisfy the human search for the ‘truth’. Fiction, which is untruth, is one of the methods to convey the ‘truth’ and to understand within a deeper stance past events. In the case of colonial encounters and the tragedy therein, fiction establishes in the reader an environment of expectations, failures, despair, anger and other emotions that the subject matter is understood in a much deeper degree than the facts revealed by History are wont to do.

Books on the history of slavery are legion. However, the plight of the African father selling his children because of the drought that destroyed his crops in Phillips’s *Crossing the River*, and the cautious warning for those who seek the Jamaican abducted girl living in a white family in England in Levy’s *The Long Song* make a profounder impression than the historical African collaboration in the slave trade and the deep racial bias in the United Kingdom. Flanagan’s own *Gould’s Book of Fish* and Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* reveal much more on the convict colonies, the insensitive British overseers and the ‘raped’ Aborigine tribes than any specialized History book may convey.

Flanagan’s *Wanting* with its emergence of the scantily known Mathinna is not the revival of a Tasmanian legend but another way of provoking readers to deal and negotiate with their ‘outcast’ origin, the objectification by allegedly superior peoples, the crimes committed which no apology may cure, the long-standing social ills and disadvantages, and other racialized and classist stigmas caused by colonial encounters. Fiction’s role in these circumstances is the deconstruction of historical events or an alternative to a deeper vision of what happened even though the blood flowing in the reverse direction “cannot be settled cheaply” (Benjamin 1973: 256).

REFERENCES

ASHCROFT, B. *Post-colonial Transformation*. London: Routledge, 2001.

BENJAMIN, W. *Illuminations*. London: Fontana, 1973.

Estação Literária

Londrina, Vagão-volume 8 parte A, p. 153-164, dez. 2011

ISSN 1983-1048 - <http://www.uel.br/pos/letras/EL>

BLAINEY, G. *The Triumph of the Nomads: A History of Ancient Australia*. Melbourne, Overlook, 1975.

BONWICK, J. *The Last of the Tasmanians*. London: Sampson Low, Son & Marston, 1870.

BOYCE, J. *Van Diemen's Land*. Collingwood: Black Inc., 2010.

BRAH, A. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 2002.

CLENDINNEN, I. Fellow sufferers: History and imagination. *Australian Humanities Review*. September 1996. Available at: www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/, accessed on 15 May 2011.

COHEN, R. *Global Diasporas*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.

DELEUZE, G.; GUATTARI, F. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. New York: Viking, 1977.

_____. Balance Sheet – Program for Desiring Machines. *Semiotexte* v. 2, n. 3, 1977, p. 117-135.

DeLILLO, D. The Power of History. *New York Times Magazine*, 7th September 1997. Accessed at: <www.nytimes.com> on 17th May 2011.

DENHAM, S.; McCULLOH, M. (eds.). *W. G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005.

FERRO, M. *O livro negro do colonialismo*. São Paulo: Ediouro, 2004.

FLANAGAN, R. *Wanting*. New York: Grove, 2008.

FLOOD, J. *The Original Australians: Story of the Aboriginal People*. London: Allen & Unwin, 2006.

FOUCAULT, M. *Power and Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1971-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

HIRST, J. *Sense & Nonsense in Australian History*. Collingwood: Black Inc, 2006.

HUGHES, R. *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia's Founding*. New York: Vintage, 1988.

HUTCHEON, L. *Poetics of Post-Modernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

HYAM, R. *Empire and Sexuality*. Manchester: MUP, 1991.

KENEALLY, T. *A Commonwealth of Thieves: The improbable birth of Australia*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007.

McGOOGAN, K. *Fatal Passage* New York: Bantam Books, 2001.

PHILLIPS, C. *A Distant Shore*. New York: Random House, 2003.

_____. *Foreigners*. New York: Knopf, 2007.

_____. A City by the Water. *Moving Worlds*, v. 10, Supplement, 2010, p. 4-8.

PLOMLEY, N.J.B. *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834*. Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Association, 1966.

_____. *Weep in Silence*. Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 1987.

PYBUS, C. *Community of Thieves*. Minerva: Minerva Australia Press, 1991.

RALEIGH, W. The Discovery of the large, rich, and beautiful Empire of Guiana. In: HAKLUYT, R. *Voyages and Discoveries*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 386-410.

ROBSON, L. *Standard History of Tasmania*. Melbourne: OUP, 1983.

RYAN, L. *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1996.

SAID, E. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978.

SCHAMA, S. *Dead Certainties: unwarranted speculations*. London: Granta, 1991.

SPIVAK, G.C. Can the subaltern speak? In ASHCROFT, B.; GRIFFITHS, G.; TIFFIN, H. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 24-28.

SULLIVAN, J. Making a fiction of History. *The Age*. Oct. 21, 2006, p. 1-7.

TAYLOR, R. *Unearthed: the Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2004.

VAN HEAR, N. *New Diasporas*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998.

WOODWARD, F. J. *A Portrait of Jane: A Life of Jane Franklin*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951.

YOUNG, R. *Desejo colonial: hibridismo em teoria, cultura e raça*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005.

Artigo recebido em 27 de julho de 2011 e aprovado em 22 de setembro de 2011.

Estação Literária

Londrina, Vagão-volume 8 parte A, p. 153-164, dez. 2011

ISSN 1983-1048 - <http://www.uel.br/pos/letras/EL>