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Ali Cobby-Eckermann, *Too Afraid to Cry*  
Elsternwick, Ilura Press, 2012, 218pp pbk  
ISBN 9781921325243, RRP \$28.95

Bron Nicholls, *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*  
North Fitzroy, Black Pepper, 2013, 164pp pbk  
ISBN 9781876044770, RRP \$24.95

In *Too Afraid to Cry*, the award-winning poet Ali Cobby-Eckermann tells of her life as an Aboriginal woman stolen from her mother at birth and raised in a white family. Her childhood was spent initially aware that there was some slight difference between herself and other children. Later, Cobby-Eckermann depicts a period, as a teenager and into her twenties, of denial about her aboriginality, of painful curiosity and ongoing feeling of alienation from white culture, but an ashamed inability to identify herself as Aboriginal to other Aboriginal people. The sense of alienation and feeling of aloneness is palpable in Cobby-Eckermann's writing, as is the joy of finally finding a community and family in which she feels she belongs.

Bron Nicholls' title, *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*, indicates the ambiguous nature of her biological mother, Phyllis, a mother who did not seem entirely real, a mother whose presence was also absence, and who never seems to have been able to 'mother' her daughter. Indeed, Nicholls seems at times in this memoir to be the 'imaginary mother' to her own mother, a spirit-like presence herself, the shadow of her own mother's intense self-focus and narcissistic prioritization of herself over her children.

Both writers depict the negative effects of their self-fracturing relationships to their mothers, one mother is absent and the other is far too present. In terms of writerly decisions, Cobby-Eckermann chooses to show these destructive effects, while Nicholls chooses to tell them. The latter narrative method is often regarded as very risky, but here Nicholls uses it brilliantly, explaining very briefly and with subtle force, the negative legacy that her mother's passive-aggressive psychological tyranny has left on Nicholls' adult relationships. Both methods are perfectly suited to the respective styles of the writers, and testify to the writerly nature of these memoirs.

Genre is, as ever, a significant consideration when reading these works. The genre of Autobiography within the Western writing tradition is one that revolves around the tension between fact and fiction; the desire for the certainty of fact and the yearning for the liberating pleasures of narrative and fiction. For Aboriginal people, the genre of Aboriginal lifewriting is one with an urgent need for the expression of the truth of Aboriginal history, testimonies of what really happened to Aboriginal people, and how individuals really felt and continue to feel as victims of genocide and colonial oppression. Aboriginal lifewriting has become a source of regrowth for Aboriginal identities. Writers such as Sally Morgan, Jackie Huggins, Rosalie Fraser, Doris

Pilkington and Donna Meehan, have had the courage to tell their painful stories for reasons including public testimony, personal acceptance and healing. Cobby-Eckermann includes new poems in her lifewriting, as part of its memoir weave. Commenting directly on the relationship between lifewriting and personal identity, Cobby-Eckermann writes: “The impact of learning family stories is powerful. Each night I write in my journal, trying to capture my new family history. Poems appear at midnight, and I hasten to scribble them down. My mind seems to evolve from past confusions and doubts, and I feel a sense of healing by writing the words on the page” (173).

Each of these autobiographies differs profoundly from the conventional auto- and biography mode of Western Modernity, in which (usually famous/celebrated) male subjects delineate their autonomous, self-authoring identities. Cobby-Eckermann’s and Nicholls’ autobiographies demonstrate, from both the Western and Aboriginal perspectives, the intersubjective nature of individual identity: none of us is truly an autonomous ‘one’, though sometimes the perception of being a lone unit is related to deep unhappiness – Cobby-Eckermann is most ‘independent’ in that ‘free-living-years-of-one’s-twenties’ way, when she is drifting around, making casual friends and acquaintances, but simultaneously feeling deep sadness from the lack of a true sense of belonging. Conversely, Nicholls’ mother, Phyllis, resentfully conscious of her ties to her husband and family, performs duty by submitting to her husband’s religious zeal, but maliciously conveys her sense of subjugated suffering to her sensitive children, with a (perhaps unconscious) rebellious refusal to take a genuine interest in them. At all times Phyllis Nicholls’ deepest engagement comes across as being with herself, and this egocentrism makes, in her daughter’s account, for a profound unhappiness that she never shakes off.

Phyllis’ suffering becomes her daughter Bron’s burden. On a six-hour bus trip to the hospital carrying a baby with an infected, swollen head, a heavy suitcase falls onto Phyllis’ head. Bron, sitting with her mother, is upset:

“It’s alright, I’ll be alright,” whispered Mum....The baby wasn’t crying but Mum had tears of pain in her eyes. On we went, rocking and rocking in the old bus.

[...] I realized that somebody had forgotten to look after her mum. Somebody had been having a wild time, cavorting in the land of milk and honey, and not watching out for all the things that could go wrong. My guilt made my face burn hot. I hunched down beside my mother, pressed my head against the padded shoulder of her coat, wanting to let her know that I was there and would not desert her again. I kept looking up at the rack above our heads. There wasn’t much else I could do. I was a small and puny child, but I could stay awake, and I could watch. (59-60)

This anxiety about her mother’s wellbeing isn’t reciprocated. When Bron writes to her mother pleading for money so she can leave her abusive husband, she receives no reply from her, only a “barrage” of letters from her father, “ranting, condemning sermons, as from a nineteenth-century hellfire preacher.” Her mother (who had until then been corresponding regularly with Bron) sends her “not a word. And as there was no telephone at my end, her silence was complete, and devastating. It reinforced

the still-ashamed part of me that believed I was to blame for everything – including my husband’s cruelty (84).”

In the complexities of the parent-child relationship, however, the knowledge of the spider-entanglements doesn’t cancel out the pleasures of shared happy moments:

In one of your letters...you said: *Always, since childhood, I’ve had this feeling that nobody believes me. So I am nullified. I disappear.* You ‘nullified’ me, in the same way. If I said I was feeling happy, you said that I looked sad. If I said I felt well, you told me I look sick, and when I said I was sick, you insisted that I was pretending. [...] I never ceased trying to console you, never stopped trying to contradict your version of yourself as useless, unwanted, wicked, ‘a bad mother.’

Life as a rescue mission. ... We both knew, all the time, that my mission could not succeed, that its failure was built into the system from the outset. (143)

What is made clear in *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*, though, is that this is a mental disorder of some kind that hopefully would be recognized as such in contemporary times, but was considered to be one’s personality or character until recently (and still is, by those who insist that we are in complete control of our minds and bodies). The damage that such undiagnosed disorders cause on everyone in their vicinity is shown in Nicholls’ memoir. Nicholls’ generosity of soul means that she has persisted with her mother and come to understand this, allowing her to maintain an affection for her mother despite the pain:

I still miss you. Think about you whenever a new flower appears in the garden, and when I go out into the muddy yard in my slippers, and when the first autumn rains arrive. (144)

Where *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*, depicts the *symptoms* of psychological disorder, and its effects on those subjected to it in others, it touches only in passing on the possible causes of Phyllis Nicholls’ condition. In *Too Afraid to Cry*, on the other hand, through her own example Cobby-Eckermann shows how psychological disorder is created in the context of Australian colonialism and its social and cultural oppression of Aboriginal people as an entire group. Cobby-Eckermann portrays her own experience of being identified by others as not ‘really’ belonging to the white culture in which she was raised, and coming to understand that others identified her as belonging to a racially-inscribed group that has been violently oppressed and abused for two centuries. In this situation your sense of self is built on a profound feeling of inferiority, lack of self-confidence and self-belief, feelings of worthlessness, despair, and disempowerment, that make the temporary relief offered by drugs and alcohol too tempting to refuse, and the addictions that follow easy to understand. Again, it is writing that gives Cobby-Eckermann “a new clarity of mind. ... Writing allows me to define my dreams. Writing allows me to discover who I truly am” (154).

Intersubjectivity can be terrible or wonderful. For Ali Cobby-Eckermann, finally finding her birth mother and through that connection being brought into a large network of Aboriginal family with whom she feels an intimately connected sense of self is a profound relief and happiness: “My life is content again” (206). For Bron Nicholls, however, the intense intersubjective relationship with her mother defines her

life experiences in a negative way. In a painfully honest section of the book after her mother dies, Nicholls says that the overwhelming feeling is of having attained a joyous freedom from her mother at last. Her intersubjective entanglement with her mother's unhappy neediness was a burden that disfigured Nicholls' sense of self, rather than the enabling force that Cobby-Eckermann finds in Aboriginal kinship.

Each of these autobiographies is painful and sad, yet never so harrowing that it becomes too hard to read. These books are wise, and poetic in that wisdom. As difficult as they must have been for both women to write, each is a privilege for their readers. I was very grateful to both writers for sharing their stories, and I was personally energized by their faith that there is a reason for Aboriginal people and women and writers to share their stories.