

**Re-writing Indigeneity,
Questioning Postcoloniality**

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Synopsis

The portrayal of identity in contemporary Aboriginal writing is as varied and multifaceted as the notion of 'Aboriginality' itself. This thesis explores some of the issues and aspects of identity arising from Indigenous literature, particularly focusing on four recent texts that each, at times loosely, falls into the category of fiction. Postcolonial theory is considered in relation to the aims of Aboriginal writing, especially as to how such theory may, or may not, contribute to the project of decolonisation.

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Introduction

The act of writing often becomes more than something creative for some Aboriginal people who seek to use the process as a vehicle for analysing, processing, determining, understanding and asserting their identity.

Anita Heiss (*Dhuuluu Yala: To Talk Straight*, 2003, p 42)

I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth--not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell. In being an Aboriginal person, we can feel constrained by cultural values on some issues. We can also feel constrained by our own families or the communities in which we live. This is to do with safeguarding all kinds of interests of the individual, the family, community, or Aboriginal people as a whole...

Alexis Wright ('The Politics of Writing', *Southerly*, 62.2, 2002, p 11)

The exploration of identity as a theme recurs throughout much literature and this is no less the case in contemporary Aboriginal literature. As the quotes above indicate, Indigenous writers are not only concerned with identity as a literary theme but also explore it to enhance self-understanding and to communicate what it means to be

Aboriginal to a wider audience. It is contentious to say whether anyone can truly know the identity of another person, or for that matter whether we ever truly know ourselves, let alone a person who comes from a different cultural background. This contention is further complicated by the idea that, as self-perception is subject to alteration, notions of self can elude categorisation (Hall 1990, p 222; Hall 1996, p 4). Definitions of identity may also vary from person to person, from culture to culture and also between different fields of study (Hall 1990, p 223; Hall 1996, p 1). Despite the great variation within the concept of identity, and perhaps even because of it, it is important to strive towards an understanding of our 'selves' as well as one another, if only so that the travesties of our histories are not repeated, and the written form can be an effective and creative medium for this purpose.

Postcolonial literature in general, apart from the cultural and historical differences prevailing in works gathered under its broad banner, is described as having a 'pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002, p 9). This is unsurprising given the denial of Indigenous and other minority group self-representation under colonial regimes. The cultural denigration, disempowerment and dispossession that resulted from the process of colonisation means that Indigenous peoples have had to re-assert their identities so that they can begin to revive, reclaim and develop what has been taken from them. This process has been underway for some forty years¹ in Australia where the participation in mainstream literary discourse by Aboriginal Australians is allowing a broader readership to understand and appreciate their life experience and wealth of cultural production.

¹ Grossman (2003) notes there is a general consensus that the 'modern history of Indigenous Australian writing' began 'in 1964, with the publication of Kath Walker's first collection of poetry, *We Are Going*' while acknowledging that the writing of David Unaipon in the 1920s may revise this consensus (p1).

It can be argued, however, that white cultural hegemony still limits Aboriginal self-representation, a point that illustrates the ongoing impact of colonialism for Australia's Indigenous people. Sonja Kurtzer, in her article '*Wandering Girl: who defines "authenticity" in Aboriginal literature?*', describes such limitations on the reclamation of identity through the constraints of the Western canonical genre, and 'the competing desires of the hegemonic culture' in understanding Aboriginality (Kurtzer 2003, p183). Contemporary Aboriginal writing is, however, also seen to push the boundaries of traditional Western modes of writing. Penny van Toorn describes how Indigenous texts can 'resist classification within conventional European genre systems' by, for example, '[undoing] the Western commonsense categorical distinction between fact and fiction' (Van Toorn 2000, p 38). According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin postcolonial texts 'explore, in their figures, themes and forms, the conceptual dimensions of the acts of writing itself, and the tensions and issues traversing the institution of literature in marginalised societies' (2002, p 136). While Aboriginal literature is reclaiming history and expressing identities more than ever before, there is concern that this expression is still limited by the demands of the dominant culture and by its policing of what may and may not be said (Mudrooroo 1990; Lattas 1993; Gunew 1994).

Writing (and reading) from a non-Aboriginal perspective, I aim in this thesis to do two things: first, to explore issues of identity, particularly in relation to Aboriginality as it is represented in contemporary Indigenous fictional writing and with the aid of critical Indigenous texts; and second, to examine postcolonial theory and its relevancy to Indigenous Australian writing. The main literary texts of focus in this study will be Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997), Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* (1997),

Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999) and Fabienne Bayet-Charlton's *Finding Ullagundahi Island* (2002). Though they vary considerably in style and subject matter, each of these texts not only expresses meanings of Aboriginality as a contemporary experience, but also as an experience of previous generations.

Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* evokes missionary life in an unromantic portrayal of humanity that exposes the power relations operating between and within Aboriginal groups and the colonial overseers. Though the life trials of Ivy Koopundi, the central character, are harrowing and the reader is often confronted with challenging issues, Wright conjures up notions of the spiritual, with hints of magical realism, that lend an esoteric quality to the text. When later in the novel the narrative shifts setting from life at St Dominic's Mission to a modern, urban context and focuses on the quest of Ivy's daughter, Mary Doolan, to discover her Aboriginal heritage, Wright maintains her exposition of the power relations and sexual politics that govern the lives of these Aboriginal women (Grossman 1998). She is also concerned with the themes of ostracism and stigmatisation that occur within communities and how this impacts on the individual's sense of self. Throughout *Plains of Promise* Wright illustrates how Aboriginal identity and culture are inextricably connected to the land and how the process of colonisation has attempted to dismantle the very foundations of this culture. The text reinvents the past, and present, in original and imaginative ways while providing incisive reflections on the human condition and the dynamics of human relationships.

Where *Plains of Promise* presents challenging issues in an imaginative context, Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* confronts the reader through a realistic portrayal of

a young Murri woman's life trials in contemporary outer-suburban Brisbane. The title *Steam Pigs* is 'railwayman's talk for something that doesn't quite fit properly' (p 146) and signifies Sue Wilson's unease between her sense of self and the place and space she occupies within the Eagleby community. Though Sue finds love in her relationship with Roger, who is also Aboriginal, and learns from him about herself as an Aboriginal person, their relationship sours when issues of class and race become manifest through poverty, alcohol abuse and violence. Lucashenko also exposes the problems that occur in family relationships, such as when Sue's dependent mother pressurises her to be financially supportive or when her single-parent brother, jealous of her new-found happiness with Roger, evicts her from his home. Feminist-inspired life options are proposed to Sue by the (white) social worker, Kerry, and her partner, Rachel. They offer their home to Sue as a sanctuary from her otherwise male-dominated world and encourage her to pursue a life outside of Eagleby, promoting university and inner-suburban life as places of liberation (Henderson 1998, p 75). Ultimately Sue follows their advice, albeit on her own terms in that she maintains contact with the Eagleby community and does not aspire to become 'yuppified' by Brisbane's inner-West. In other words, she remains true to her sense of who she is, while reassured by the idea that all the land on which Brisbane is built was originally occupied by her forebears.

Like *Steam Pigs*, Kim Scott's *Benang* relates the story of a young Aboriginal person whose personal growth corresponds with a developing sense of their Aboriginality. While Scott's style is rarefied and subtle, he also challenges his readership with confronting issues such as sexual abuse, racism and cultural genocide. The colonialist attempt to 'breed out' the Aboriginal race is a central issue in the text, made apparent

through the efforts of Ernest Scat, the protagonist's grandfather, to produce the 'first white man born' and by Scott's constant references to historical documents that betray the racist agenda underlying the then government's policies. *Benang's* impact is powerful because it refuses to pass judgement - the material speaks for itself. Its potency also lies in the courage and compassion of the characters who, despite being subjected to the depravities of humankind, find the strength to forgive and even feel sympathy for those who have wronged them. Scott interweaves the past and present with an original artistry that conveys meanings of Aboriginality, such as in the importance of an affinity with the land and with Aboriginal customs. His writing also reflects elements of the mystical, exemplified when the main character, Harley, levitates and is able to sing in traditional languages that he did not realise he knew. The relatively unadorned prose of this text belies its complex and powerful nature which generates resounding cries from the past, echoes of which will not let a national conscience rest easily. Scott's message, though, is ultimately optimistic as it provides strong hope for future reconciliations between and within Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian communities, especially as exemplified through the bravery of his heroes.

Fabienne Bayet-Charlton takes the genres of fiction and memoir to new territory as she blends fact and fiction in the elegantly scripted *Finding Ullagundahi Island* (Grossman 2003). Like Scott's *Benang*, Bayet-Charlton also reaches into the past from a contemporary setting, using archival material, including previous government regulations, to illustrate the injustices that have beset and continue to plague Aboriginal people. She also uses this material for the more personal purpose of seeking her family history. Her journey across Australia is a journey into her past and

her search for places and meanings that can confirm her sense of self, particularly her Aboriginal self. By turns earthy and ethereal, the text explores aspects of Aboriginal mythology and notions of belonging to family and land that constitute important meanings of Aboriginality, both past and present. Despite its mellifluous qualities, however, *Finding Ullagundahi Island* does not shy away from a critical examination of current and past attitudes towards Aboriginal people, as well as the natural environment, that perpetuate colonialist mentalities. Though this journey to discover her past and, through this, her concept of self is a personal one, Bayet-Charlton's blurring of the actual and the imaginative eludes the demand to 'bare all' associated with memoir. Instead she shifts focus from the individual to family and community, tradition and inventive narrative and, in so doing, establishes an original method of displaying some of the hallmark signifiers of Indigenous writing.

Notions of Aboriginality, identity, and the postcolonial are all complex and contentious. Part I of this thesis will explore ideas and issues of identity, in particular Indigenous identity. Chapter One will focus on meanings of self, group identity and the importance of acceptance, and will use textual representations to illustrate these meanings. Conflicts between individual and group identity will be discussed, particularly in relation to notions of alienation and victimisation. It will also reflect on textual approaches to Aboriginality and on perceptions of an Aboriginal style of writing. Chapter Two will examine the possibilities and challenges of understanding meanings of Aboriginality for a non-Aboriginal readership. It will also examine notions of culture in relation to identity and how definitions of each evade categorisation. Extracts from the primary texts will also be used here to reflect on these observations.

Part II will investigate postcolonial theory, particularly in its relations to Indigenous writing. Postcolonial textual strategies will be identified in Chapter Three, while Chapter Four will highlight problems of the postcolonial in respect to Aboriginal authors. To locate the texts referred to above as postcolonial is controversial and depends considerably on the interpretation of this term. In any case, it is asserted that these texts may, at times, at least be aligned with theories of postcolonialism and that postcolonial theory can be a useful analytical tool for readers, and possibly even writers, of contemporary Indigenous literature.

PART I

Re-presenting Self in Contemporary Indigenous Writing

Chapter 1: Identity, Aboriginality and the Text

Identity is about the ‘self’ and also about groups, communities and cultures, and theoretical perspectives on identity have been offered by various scholarly disciplines, including psychological, sociological, philosophical and cultural frameworks of analysis. The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology describes a ‘classical sociological perspective’ of the self as ‘a relatively stable set of perceptions of who we are in relation to ourselves, to others and to social systems’ (Johnson 2000, p 277). There are many facets that constitute identity such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, tribal identity, biculturalism and multiculturalism (Weaver 2001, p 243). A postmodernist perspective of the self differs from a classical sociological one in that it sees the ‘distinction between the self and others [as] arbitrary and [resting] on the false notion that the self exists as an autonomous and separate entity. Instead, the self exists only through relationships’ (Johnson 2000, p 277). This relates to ‘the discursive approach’, as described by Stuart Hall who sees ‘identification as a construction, a process never completed – always in “process”’ (Hall 1996, p 2). Thus, our notions of who we are can change depending on where we are and how we

fit in to our surroundings, or as our perceptions of the world and of our selves develop and are modified.

Identity holds different meanings for different societies; in the Western world, for example, the individuality of a person is regarded as central to identity, whereas in Aboriginal culture family and group identity are regarded as critical to a sense of self. As the influential Black writer Mudrooroo has noted, '[it] is part of the tradition of Aboriginal culture to perceive the artist not as an isolated individual, alienated from his or her society and interested in only extending the bounds of his or her own private vision, but as a value creator and integrator' (Narogin 1990, p 24). Although much recent Indigenous writing is aligned with Western modes of writing, such as a fictional novel or an autobiography where the narrative focuses on a main character, family and community tend to form a large part of the surrounding context and the values or messages emanating from these texts usually relate to Aboriginal people as a whole.

Self-perception and Group Acceptance

Michael Dodson has outlined the importance of the freedom for Indigenous peoples to recognise and claim their own identity without the interference from other groups or cultures (Dodson 2003, p 30). It is, however, difficult to know how far an individual's experience and self-perception can differ from that of a group before they are alienated or disallowed from claiming that identity. The way we see ourselves can vary greatly from how other people may see us, but our self-concept is understood to

be most stable when affirmed by those who have influence and power over our lives. Group identity may come into conflict with individual identity when there are fixed measures of what it means to be part of a group, measures that may not allow room for variation. Stuart Hall maintains that identities are ‘constructed through, not outside, difference’ which means that identities are defined through what they lack, their ‘Other’ or ‘constitutive outside’ (Hall 1996, p 4). Identities are considered to be imaginary constructs: ‘They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity’ (ibid). Identities intersect with reality when the effects of our self-perception affect the way we live our lives and the way others expect or allow us to live. In this respect, they are closely related to stereotypes, group images and notions of race.

Alexis Wright addresses the problems of an individual’s ostracism from their community in her novel, *Plains of Promise*, through one of the central characters, Ivy Koopundi. Having been forcibly removed from their homelands, about eight hundred Aboriginal people from different tribal backgrounds are confined to dwelling at St Dominic’s Mission under the surveillance of the corrupt missionary, Errol Jipp. Ivy’s mother commits suicide at the mission and Ivy is left alone to face sexual and physical abuse at the hands of Jipp. She also suffers ill treatment from the Aboriginal men and even the children at the mission, who call her “‘the crow’s Time-keeper”” in reference to the crow whose presence signifies imminent death (p 22). Nobody at the mission is from the same tribal background as Ivy, and the only information she can gather about her former homeland is upon the death of Old Maudie, when she is

accused by the other Aboriginal women of coming from ‘Sickness country’:

She does not remember ever hearing anything about her country. Dazed and shocked she tries to put the puzzle of her life together. She cannot believe she is thought of as the embodiment of evil. Why should they think this? She has no power (p 56).

Ivy’s sense of self could not be more abject; there is nobody in her life who affirms in her a positive sense of self. Her alienation from the rest of the community at St Dominic’s not only highlights what it means to suffer prejudice due to cultural difference, but also how the most vulnerable people can suffer victimisation. Here Wright exposes a universal and negative aspect of human nature where identity difference is not tolerated. In an article on ‘The Politics of Writing’ Alexis Wright describes how she wrote *Plains of Promise* ‘to deal with my inner crisis and loneliness of the soul’ (Wright 2002, p 14) and how she was interested in social alienation and ostracism:

Over many years in my work, I had seen people who had been on the outside of life, not only from mainstream society but within Aboriginal society as well. Nobody knew their story.

These are the people who don't talk and are treated like they don't exist. I was concerned about how this could happen and what it meant to be a person who falls outside of life. In a way the story wrote itself and as much as it is a story about the main characters, it is a story about land and the powers that tie people to land (Wright 2002, p 14).

In *Plains of Promise* Wright reveals how she is interested in different aspects of identity: the experience of the social outcast, the experience of Aboriginality and the variety of difference within Aboriginality. Through writing this fictional novel Wright feels that she can tell the story of her own family and that of many other

Aboriginal families in a way that protects their interests and yet confronts the awful truths that were, and still are, the lived reality for many Aboriginal people since the onset and perpetuation of colonialism. *Plains of Promise* has been hailed for challenging conventional perceptions of the Aboriginal woman as family custodian and for its 'investigation of the shifting gender politics by which Aboriginal women's experiences have been governed and contextualised' (Grossman 1998, p 86).

Life at St Dominic's Mission is a life of suffering, yet it is here that valuable insights into Aboriginal spirituality and survival are revealed. Wright exposes the complexities of tribal identity and the impact of mission life that forces people from different tribal traditions to live together in 'this topsy-turvy world where, to establish harmony everyone had adopted local kinship status' (p 40). Due to the presence of the 'evil' Ivy Koopundi, 'people were prepared to reinstate their tribal governing laws over Christian institutional life to do something about it...It was a matter of survival' (p 37). Though based on the prejudices held against the main character, Ivy, Wright illustrates how Aboriginal groups united in order to resist white culture and their need to rely on traditional ways as a survival mechanism.

The novel goes on to tell of Ivy's incarceration in Sycamore Heights, a mental institution, and her release into a white community to live with the strangely disturbing Bessie. The latter part of the novel is set in a modern, urban context and relates the story of Mary Doolan, Ivy's daughter, and her determination to re-connect with her family and the Aboriginal heritage from which she was forcibly removed as a newborn baby. The story seems to come full circle when Mary and her daughter, Jessie, find themselves in a little hut where Ivy is living in squalor in her original homeland. There is an added dimension of sadness to the reunion as none of the

family members seem to be aware of their relation to one another. This is a family that has been torn asunder by the impact of colonialism and victimisation, yet fights to reunite with one another, their homeland and community.

Kim Scott also explores Indigenous family issues in *Benang* where pressure from the European settler society to conform to its dictates is shown to place strain on relations between family members. Will Coolman is accepted at the local Gebalup school because his skin is fair. When his cousins start attending the school he finds that attitudes towards him change as he is now perceived as Aboriginal. He begins to experience hostility from the other children and eventually the parents of white children decide to stop them from attending the school. When the school principal (begrudgingly) continues to take classes for the eight Aboriginal children, Will ends up deserting his cousins and leaving the classroom. Years later Will and his cousin Jack Chatalong find the strength to talk about these days. Will is ashamed of his behaviour, declaring one drunken evening: 'I hate myself...I turned my back. I was the only one who could get away with it' (p 296). But Jack is forgiving: 'Nah, Will, don't worry about it...We were all like that I reckon...You're a bit fair. It was different' (ibid). Because Will can pass as white, he chooses to disconnect with other Aboriginal people. This is not because he wants to but because it is a way of 'getting on' in the dominant culture, a way of surviving.

Susan Midalia describes how Scott 'wanted to show...the range of Aboriginal responses to the facts of their oppression, in their varying attempts to resist, accommodate to or collude with the dominant white culture' (Midalia 2003, <http://members.iinet.net.au/~facp/benangnotes.html>. Accessed 14/08/03). Harley witnesses how his two uncles try to make sense of their past and, as Philip Morrissey

notes, 'their different experiences of race in Australia provide him with a bridge to the past, and more importantly, the manner in which each accommodates the other's stories demonstrates an ethics of interpersonal respect' (Morrissey 2000, p 198). Where his closer paternal relations have been lacking, Harley looks to his uncles who serve as role models of strength and compassion and instil pride in his sense of Aboriginality.

Both *Plains of Promise* and *Benang* demonstrate how family, group and community relationships impact on self-perception. In the case of Wright's protagonist Ivy Koopundi, who is bereft of family connections from an early age and continues throughout her life to suffer isolation and rejection, the result is one of impoverishment, both emotionally and materially. Though Scott's Harley also suffers physical and emotional abuse, he has strong bonds with his extended family and is integrated into Nyoongar culture and community, conditions that contribute to his developing sense of pride and acceptance of himself. While these are only two examples from a multitude of contemporary portrayals of contextualised Aboriginal selves, they begin to reveal the variety and great difference in the area of what is termed 'Aboriginality'.

Textual Approaches to Aboriginality and Aboriginal Approaches to the Text

A key feature of Aboriginal writing, and one that constitutes a major part of identity for Indigenous peoples generally, is the expression of a sense of connection to the land and the associated dispossession with the onset of colonisation. Ashcroft *et al.*

have described 'the special post-colonial crisis of identity' as a 'concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place' (2002, p 8). In her article on Indigenous people and the wilderness, Bayet-Charlton states that 'Aboriginal people are an integral part of the Australian landscape. We are the land, the land is us' (1994, p 27). She goes on to describe the traditional 'spiritual and physical bond' that Aboriginal people have with the Australian landscape and how this is invoked through the Dreaming: 'the time of creation when the mystical and powerful ancestors of the Aboriginal people moved over the featureless earth and sea', creating all aspects of the environment (*op cit*). In Bayet-Charlton's *Finding Ullagundahi Island* she relates the story of Dirrangun's Dreaming, whose white hair forms the foam of the sea and whose curses made the river water salty and undrinkable (p 22). Though her style is gentle and lyrical, it is clear throughout the text that she has a deep concern for the natural environment and is angry at how the European settlers have mistreated it. In the section called 'Land' she says that '[the] best thing we can do to this land is nothing' but instead we abuse it for our own purposes (p 29). Here Bayet-Charlton uses the pronoun 'we', acknowledging the responsibility of all human beings in relation to the environment, though it is clear that, for her, the problems of environmental abuse began with the onset of colonisation.

When the land is such a key feature of identity, the affect of displacement from that land on people whose self-concept is constructed largely through this connection is difficult to fathom. Bayet-Charlton explains how '[the] environment relates directly to social organisation, kinship and social obligations, sacred law, offences against property and persons, marriage, and an individual's relationship with the land' (1994,

p 27). Ashcroft *et al* describe how ‘*dislocation*’ from place contributes to ‘*cultural denigration*’ in all ‘post-colonial societies’ through an ‘alienation of vision and crisis in self-image’ (2002, p 9). The experience of dislocation has some common elements globally for all those who experience it, although this may vary in cultural impact. Drawing on the experiences of other Indigenous people around the world, Alexis Wright believes there are ‘parallels between us and them, in relation to land, to family, and to beliefs about the “real” world and the “imaginary” one’ (Ravenscroft, 1998, p 77). Jackie Huggins describes her mother, Rita’s, emotional bond with the land in *Auntie Rita* (1994, p 13):

The way my mother moved around, kissed the earth and said her prayers will have a lasting effect on my soul and memory because she was paying homage and respect to her ancestors who had passed on long ago but whose presence we could both intensely feel.

It is only through reading such descriptions that non-Aboriginal people can begin to understand the importance of the connection to the land within Aboriginal culture and the suffering that must have been endured, and still is, through the dispossession that ensued through the process of colonisation.

Along with the importance of land, other textual representations of Aboriginality may include the significance of family and community, language and culture. All of the four main works of fiction referred to in this thesis relate stories of family and/or community, where the narrative often focuses away from the main characters and onto others. This is particularly so in *Benang* and *Plains of Promise* where the ‘minor’ characters gain almost as much representation as the protagonists. Stephen Muecke has identified the ‘Aboriginal textual convention’ of making a narrative into a

‘collective storytelling occasion for those who have the right to the story, the correct custodians’ (1992, p 134). As such, these stories create the setting for other stories to be told, especially where there is a ‘linear rather than a hierarchical structure of narrative framing’ (ibid). Muecke describes this way of reading the text as ‘Aboriginal or “Aboriginalising”’ and notes that Aboriginal textual production can be ‘relatively undetermined by the available reading strategies’ (1992, p 135). Though the great variety within contemporary Aboriginal fictional writing alone makes untenable any attempts to categorise it, aspects of family, community and culture, as well as approaches to the written form that signify collectivity, feature within these stories and so reflect their importance generally to Aboriginal people.

Among the multiple meanings these texts convey, expressions of sadness and anger at the dispossession and displacement of Aboriginal people, as well as celebrations of life and culture and the determination to recover and develop what has been previously lost or stolen, resonate from their pages. In *Finding Ullagundahi Island*, for example, Bayet-Charlton celebrates and reveres the life of her grandmother: ‘To say that Nana was beautiful would be a blatant exercise in bias, but I am swayed by love and memories...’ (p 46). She also pays homage to the strength and endurance of her Aboriginal ancestors who were forced to confront the initial colonial assault on their way of life, such as their relocation to Ullagundahi Island: ‘It is not a sanctuary...it is a prison, in the margins, on the fringes...Refugee camps for the dispossessed’ (p 210). The issues of displacement and dispossession have affected and still affect Aboriginal people and, as stories continue to be written, these issues manifest themselves in multiple ways that inform a readership as to their impact on meanings of Aboriginality.

Such textual approaches to Aboriginality create an awareness of the topics and issues that are significant to Indigenous people. What may be more contentious to outline is an 'Aboriginal approach to the text' as Aboriginal writers use vastly different methods and styles in their work. In her recently released *Dhuulu-Yala: To Talk Straight* (2003), a study of writing and publishing in Indigenous literature, Anita Heiss examines features of writing that she believes contribute to 'an Aboriginal style' (pp28-35). Such features, according to Heiss, include the incorporation of oral storytelling techniques into writing, the use of Aboriginal English (as opposed to Standard English), Kriol and Aboriginal speech patterns which Heiss claims give Aboriginal writing 'character, passion, authenticity and humour' (p 31). Aboriginal writers in Heiss's study appear to agree that theirs is a straightforward written style where grandiose language is avoided in favour of expression that, while it appears unembellished, may be 'in fact very serious and very deep and layered' (Muk Muk Burke, cited in Heiss 2003, pp 32-33). Heiss notes Alexis Wright's observation that 'Aboriginal languages have a great complexity, which derives from the genius of our people to describe their complex relationships with each other and within their world' (Wright, cited in Heiss 2003, p 29), suggesting that a narrative that may be translated into plain English can be deceptively intricate. The study takes into account that, in the very complicated area of defining 'Aboriginal literature', some Aboriginal people, such as author Melissa Lucashenko, believe it is necessary first to define 'Aboriginality' while acknowledging that this in itself can be difficult:

To me there may be people who are biologically white, but culturally Black and people who have lived in the communities for donkey's years and basically see the world through Black eyes (Lucashenko, cited in Heiss 2003, p 27).

Heiss's attempts to outline an Aboriginal style fail to acknowledge the sometimes very dense and demanding written styles of writers such as the Aboriginal poet Lionel Fogarty and the author Mudrooroo. While some writers and critics may agree that certain written qualities signify Indigeneity, others, wary of the limitations of essentialism, perceive Aboriginal writing as expressing more manifold and varied representations of the written form that belie an overall 'Aboriginal style'. In the same way, the multifarious meanings within the term 'Aboriginality' embody notions that may be representative of Aboriginal people in certain ways (such as the importance of land or community), but do not wholly establish what it is to be Aboriginal.

Chapter 2: Understanding Aboriginality

While it is contentious to outline a specific Indigenous approach to writing, it is even more dubious to say whether a non-Aboriginal readership can understand portrayals and perspectives of Aboriginality. After all, how far can anyone know what it is like to be part of a different culture or to understand the identity of another person? As Jackie Huggins argues: 'There are no books written by non-Aboriginals that can tell me what it is to be Black as it is a fiction and an ethnocentric presumption to do so. I would never presume to know what it is to be white' (Huggins 2003, p 60). However, Indigenous literature offers a window to understanding at least some of the experiences that contribute to what it means to be an Aboriginal person. In so doing it not only repossesses notions of Aboriginality from those that were, and still are, constructed for the benefit of the dominant culture, but also recreates Aboriginal identity in dynamic terms.

The question of what it means to be Aboriginal is still being debated amongst Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal people have different ways of defining Aboriginality. Some consider descent to be the most important determinant of whether or not someone can call themselves Aboriginal while others hold that experience, knowledge of and affiliation with culture matter just as much (Kurtzer 2003, pp 53-54). Others still, such as Michael Dodson, believe that Aboriginality is not a fixed category; instead it is 'at times ancient, at times subversive, at times oppositional, at times secret, at times essentialist, at times shifting' (Dodson 2003, p39). Dodson argues convincingly that Aboriginal people should not allow themselves to be essentialised and should resist being locked into fixed categories that

leave no room for growth or variation. With reference to the colonial discourses of Australia that he sees as reducing Aboriginality to a 'relational concept', Dodson states that Aboriginal identity exists independently and 'cannot be reduced to a relation' or a mirror image of the dominant culture that requires a reflection of its 'Other' in order to reinforce its position of power and control (Dodson 2003, pp 36-39). Marcia Langton warns that, where Aboriginal people take control of the writing process, the material of subjective experience must not to be taken as representative of an objective Aboriginality:

There is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make 'better' representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives greater understanding. This belief is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated *Other*. More specifically, the assumption is that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on. It is a demand for censorship: there is a 'right' way to be Aboriginal, and any Aboriginal [writer,] film or video producer will necessarily make a 'true' representation of 'Aboriginality' (1993, p 27)

Aboriginal identity is sometimes placed under strain by a dominant culture that requires proof of the 'authentic' native, a display of Indigenous culture that is 'pure' and untouched by the effects of colonialism (Kurtzer 2003, p51). In her article on 'authentic' Aboriginality, Sonja Kurtzer describes the category of 'Indigenous' as coming into being 'in relation to the imperial state and the socialised identities within it' (ibid); before this time there was no occasion for such a term in Australia. She

states that when Aboriginal identity becomes a performance in order to prove 'authenticity', those who are unable or refuse to do this may be seen as 'failures' and risk being punished by the settler society (ibid). Penny van Toorn has also noted the demands of the dominant culture on Indigenous identity: 'Unlike writers from dominant ethnic groups, Aboriginal and other non-Anglo-Celtic writers have been required to prove their authenticity and put their cultural identity on display' (Van Toorn 2000, p 41). Such a demand for an identity performance seeks to suppress what is real and maintain the myth of an ancient order unaffected by the outside world. In so doing it denies the existence of a contemporary, complex, self-defined and determined Aboriginality. Jackie Huggins addresses this issue when she claims that

To state that [Aboriginal] 'identity is constituted out of the past thus created' only provides half the answer, as it is the contemporary situation which also locks us (Aboriginals) into an ensuing identity like all human beings of any class, race, gender or ethnicity (Huggins 2003, pp 60-61).

In other words, while expressions of Aboriginality may reflect aspects of traditional culture, contemporary existence contributes to notions of self that conflate the past with the present in complex and ambiguous forms.

Culture and Identity in Indigenous Writing

Culture forms a major part of identity. Our self-concept is derived from various sources such as how we think other people see us and how we fit in to culturally

derived notions of social status (Johnson 2000, p 277). As with notions of the self, culture constantly evolves while maintaining core aspects. Hodge and Mishra describe the attempt to ‘reduce...traditional culture to a set of fixed invariant forms [as] an assault on its capacity to fulfil its primary social functions’(1991, p 91). They suggest that culture ‘minimally consist[s] of a set of forms and a set of transformations, constantly renewing the repertoire, continuing to provide meaning and stability’ (ibid). With regard to Aboriginal texts, it appears that ideas of what constitutes Aboriginal writing have transformed, even in the past decade, indicating a ‘renewal of the repertoire’ in Indigenous literary production. In his 1990 publication *Writing from the Fringe*, Mudrooroo states that ‘it is rare for Aboriginal discourse to use similes and metaphors’ (p 113) yet an examination of recent Indigenous writing provides much evidence of this use of language. Bayet-Chariton’s lyrical style abounds with similes and metaphors from the opening page of *Finding Ullagundahi Island*, where she uses eating oxtail soup as a metaphor for interpreting truth in a story, to the last where she describes how ‘we walk on this continent and we remember while rivers and dust flow in our blood’ (p 240). In her review of *Plains of Promise* Lisa Bellear describes how

[the] opening [of the novel] uses the symbolic metaphor of the journey and subsequent planting of a Poinciana tree at the grounds of...St Dominic's on the Gulf Country. The tree represents colonisation with a view of conquering and imposing foreign religious and European social and cultural practices (1998, p 194).

In *Benang*, Kim Scott describes the ‘air of unwashed laundry and indifferent cooking’ at his grandfather’s boarding house where ‘an array of tables...patiently awaited the arrival of those who would be served’ (p 17). Further along he describes Fanny and

Sandy One's relationship: 'All that time alone, following the team, him watching her, and she absorbed as if – I say – as if reading' (p 353). These passages would indicate that the culture of Indigenous writing and, therefore, perceptions of identity have undergone, and continue to undergo, transformation. It is not to say that they are any less Aboriginal, for these texts assert a strong sense of Aboriginality throughout, at least as perceived from a non-Indigenous perspective. Contemporary Indigenous writing incorporates aspects of both the traditional and the modern, as well as moving on to the postmodern. For instance Penny van Toorn notes that, while protest writing was and still is, a key feature of Aboriginal writing since its entry into mainstream production,

a new generation of younger, urban, university-educated [writers and] poets... write on the basis of their own personal contemporary experiences of alienation, institutionalised racism, and the complex intersections of sexual, racial, class and gender politics (Van Toorn 2002, p 34).

Contemporary notions of cultural hybridity and the fragmentation of the self are illustrated by current Indigenous writers. Fabienne Bayet-Charlton describes herself as 'Black on the outside and green on the inside, or the other way around? Perhaps there is no clear definition, I am both green and black, swirling colours which combine to make my identity' (1994, p 27). Here Bayet-Charlton refers to herself as a Black (Aboriginal) woman and an environmentalist. Though she sees these facets of her identity as sometimes in contention, they are both still integral to her idea of who she is. Bayet-Charlton's *Finding Ullagundahi Island* is her story of a search for an affirmation of identity and belonging. When she becomes pregnant she realises it is important to trace her (Aboriginal) family roots, to see and understand where she

comes from: 'Who does this face belong to? Time to go looking' (2002, p 149). She sees herself as black, though she is from mixed parentage and her partner is white. 'I am all one colour. I speak two languages but they are the same. I feel like the translator. I feel like the fence-sitter' (ibid). Educated in the Western academy and living in Adelaide, Bayet-Charlton straddles two cultures: 'Sometimes I feel like a door between two rooms, a fence dividing two pieces of land, two countries, two universes' (2002, p 148), yet despite this cultural hybridity she identifies as black. This is the same for many people who come from mixed white and Aboriginal parentage, as illustrated by the character Roger in Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs*:

"Where I come from we just say we're all Aboriginal, eh? None of that half-caste, quarter-caste bullshit. Like, I've got Scots and Irish too, I don't deny that, but my heart's with the blackfellas. Waka Waka I am" (1997, pp 20-21).

And Ian Anderson writes, 'As I am an Aborigine, I inhabit an Aboriginal body, and not a combination of features which may or may not cancel each other' (2003, p 51).

The enforced coding of categories such as 'half-caste' and 'quarter-caste' during colonialism, and the separatism and racism that enforced these classifications contributed to a negative identity for Aboriginal people who were not 'quite white'. People from a mixed white and Aboriginal background tend to feel more of a connection with their Aboriginal heritage. The negative impact of colonisation probably lies at the heart of this preferred cultural association; the white invasion was not welcomed and the brutality of its history is one that Aboriginal people (and many others) would rather had not have happened. The agenda of assimilation was also an agenda to wipe out Aboriginal culture, in other words to wipe out a people's identity.

Jackie Huggins writes that '[because] our beginnings as Black and white Australians were steeped in bloodshed and murder...it makes it almost impossible for us to pick up the pieces, forget about it and make up' (1994, p 15).

Kim Scott's *Benang* sheds light on the former Australian government's coding of Aborigines along bloodlines, which made them a focus of 'scientific investigation'. He draws on a wide range of sources for his work, including government files and letters from A O Neville, the Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915-1940. Susan Midalia describes how Scott

wanted to deal with his sense of being psychologically damaged and culturally dispossessed as 'the first white man born' in his immediate family, the product of a long-standing, systematic, state-sanctioned policy of assimilation or the 'biological absorption', as it was called, of the Aboriginal race (2003, [online] Available: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~facp/benangnotes.html> Accessed 14/08/03).

Scott's use of the historical record lends authority to his 'fictional' novel, leaving no doubt about the institutionalised racism towards Aboriginal people in Australia. The history of white Australia, with regard to Aboriginal people, would not invite identification with the settler culture, though this is not to say that contemporary Indigenous writers romanticise Aboriginality either. They aim to write history as they saw it in the past and continuing into the present.

Author Melissa Lucashenko exposes the harshness of urban Aboriginal life in her fictional work *Steam Pigs*, the title of which indicates the problems of identity that Sue, a young Aboriginal woman, faces in her search for a better future for herself and

for others like her. Sue lives on Brisbane's outskirts, in a suburb called Eagleby, and is involved in a relationship with Roger. At first this relationship is a positive and loving one and Sue is proud to be with a black man who confirms her sense of Aboriginal identity. When Roger becomes physically abusive, however, Sue's sense of herself as a woman and as an Aboriginal person turns negative. Although Sue wants a better life for herself, at first she feels this is incongruous with the most essential part of herself – her Aboriginality. Sue's self-perception as an Aboriginal woman is integrated within the urban community of Eagleby and she does not anticipate a life elsewhere. Her friend, Kerry, encourages Sue to leave Roger, explaining that by accepting violence in her life Sue is 'confusing colonisation with culture, and blackness with oppression' (p 147). *Steam Pigs* not only opens a stark window onto the urban lifestyles of Aboriginal people, it also creates a space of cultural difference and resistance in its style of language and assertion of values. Christine Watson, in her review of *Steam Pigs*, outlines this well:

Perhaps the best way to describe the motivation and written style of *Steam Pigs* is through a passage that Sue herself reads near the end of the book: 'Mirroring the colonial process, therefore, this tale will be tasteless and crude, a lament as much as a love story. No apologies will be forthcoming. You may not like my truths; I am equally unimpressed with yours.' Although I would not describe the book as 'tasteless', it definitely paints an unromanticised, uncompromising, and yes, even 'crude' picture of an Aboriginal woman's struggle to balance individual, family and community needs at the age of 17 (1998, p 53).

The character Harley in Scott's *Benang* strives to find out where he has come from in order to understand who he is, while resisting Ern, his abusive (white) grandfather's efforts to label him as the "first white man born", a being who would represent a genetic full stop for the Aboriginal people' (Morrissey 2000, p 198). Philip Morrissey

describes Kim Scott's 'project' as an attempt 'to erase that full stop and continue the story, generating new ways of thinking about Aboriginal and Settler community and identity' (*op cit*). In the section entitled 'Mirrors' Harley contemplates his reflection and '[familiarises himself] with the selves revealed there' (p 161):

I studied myself, looking for Ern or Will or Tommy or any family...I looked for ancestors in the mirror. I posed with Grandad's artefacts. And when Uncle Jack walked in on me I looked at him in the mirror, looked at myself, and tried to hold my expression as it was.

Although Harley feels the weightlessness of not being grounded in his Nyoongar culture, when he sings (from the heart) he is connected to his ancestors: 'Through me we hear the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of many hearts beating' (p 9). It is easier for him to sing than to write because 'this language troubles me', illustrating Harley's uneasiness with the English language (p 10).

Though raised by his grandfather in a white culture since he was seven years old and discouraged to identify with his Aboriginal heritage, Harley rejects Ern's efforts and uses his 'white' education to seek revenge. 'I gave birth to all these words...

Grandfather they spew you out. Me and you both, transformed too' (p 161). As Harley grows in strength and maturity, his self-perception alters and he begins to assert his Aboriginal identity while acknowledging that he values the tools of writing and reading that he associates with the white culture of his grandfather. He also becomes compassionate towards his grandfather, despite the horrendous abuse he has suffered at his hands. Based on her interview with Kim Scott, Susan Midalia suggests that

Kim wanted to use his narrator as a paradigmatic case: as someone whose investigation of his personal history shows the possibility and importance of moving from ignorance to knowledge, from anger and outrage at injustices to a more compassionate view of the oppressors of the past, from a sense of being psychologically damaged and spiritually disinherited to a healing identification with his people and the land (2003, [online] Available: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~facp/benangnotes.html>. Accessed 14/08/03).

As authors such as Kim Scott and Melissa Lucashenko illustrate, perceptions of self form and transform on the printed page, reflecting both stability and change in Aboriginal selves. While the dominant culture's demands, such as that of 'authenticity', and the possible constraints placed on authors from within their own communities, may influence their articulation of the 'real' (as the genre of fiction allows), Aboriginal authors are finding creative and original ways to voice the stories of both their own and previous generations. As such, they are inscribing new versions of contemporary and past histories that challenge and defy, heal and inspire.

PART II

Considering Postcolonialism and Aboriginal Writing

Chapter 3: The Postcolonial

Interweaving postcolonial theory into an analysis of contemporary Indigenous writing can be regarded as problematic as well as complementary to the purposes of such texts. It is important to maintain an awareness of the contradictions as well as the empowering effects of a postcolonial focus on Aboriginal identity in contemporary writing. Despite the tendency for many Indigenous writers to distance themselves from the term 'postcolonial' it could be argued that their work addresses many of the challenges of postcolonial criticism. Having had their lives shaped by the influence of colonialism both in the past as well as presently, many Indigenous Australian authors challenge the discourse of colonialism and present an alternative version of that history as well as a vision of how we should live now and in the future. The term postcolonial refers to 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day' (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p 2). What may bring these texts into line with other postcolonial literatures from around the world is their contestation of the power and authority of the imperial centre and their efforts to establish their own written histories and ways of seeing the world.

While the legacy of colonialism lives on throughout the structure of Australian society, many white Australians are in a position to write postcolonially, as they have (to a large extent) been freed from the confines of an imperialist culture. Aboriginal Australians are still suffering under a system of colonisation and, as such, postcolonial critique here may seem irrelevant. The fact that Aboriginal people's land is still invaded, that they must operate under laws established during the imperial regime, that they must use the tools of the dominant culture to speak and write, to be heard, all indicate that Indigenous Australians still exist under a colonial regime. Their history is still being determined by the colonisers and their predicament is one, as Mudrooroo notes, which has 'resulted in many persons becoming strangers in their own land, so alienated that sometimes they seem to have lost the will to survive' (Mudrooroo 1997, pp 2-3).

Despite this predicament, however, the wealth of Indigenous writing is rich and continually growing in Australia and Australian history is being retold from the viewpoint of the Aboriginal people. The idea that writing may be postcolonial simply by writing in opposition, or with a different voice, to the dominant culture means that postcolonial texts can emerge while under a colonial system. As Loomba has pointed out, 'it is more helpful to think of post-colonialism not just as literally coming after colonialism and signalling its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism' (1998, p 12; Reynolds 1981). Hodge and Mishra, in their counter-readings of colonial texts, maintain that during the genocidal period of colonialism in Australia there was 'resistance and subversion' amongst the Aboriginal people (1991, p 48). Although many contemporary Aboriginal authors do not write with a postcolonial theoretical framework in mind, their work and the work

of others about them can be interpreted through such critique. This would suggest that postcolonial theory is of more relevance and use to academics and students than to 'postcolonial' writers themselves. However, as Ian Anderson points out with respect to Aboriginal critical writers and academics,

it should not be presumed that [they] would necessarily want to adopt an identity defined by 'western' traditions of the 'west'. Rather, what has developed is a common interest in building a set of critical arguments about 'western' ways of knowing (2003, p 23).

Contemporary Aboriginal writers do not only contest the domination of colonialism but also write about their own culture and personal experience. As Mudrooroo notes, 'Guilt and blame are not enough for the continuation of a literature and so histories from an Indigenous viewpoint are being constructed; life stories...novels, short stories and poems are devoting their words to the Indigenous existential being' (1997, p 3). Mudrooroo is optimistic that the Indigenous culture of Australia is increasingly coming to be seen as a common heritage of all Australians and that there will be a time when the European canon that so inspired the imperial culture will be replaced by 'Indigenous motifs and myths [that will] provide the well-springs of a vibrant Australian culture resting on the land and the sense of national identity which can only come from our land' (1997, p 2). Here Mudrooroo attempts to centralise the formerly marginalized Indigenous culture so that it becomes a focal point for a sense of national identity. In alignment with postcolonial theory Mudrooroo's work addresses 'the problems of...the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature...attempts to construct a future' (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p35).

As with Edward Said's theory of 'Orientalism'² where the 'Other' is denied the capacity for self-representation and must therefore be represented instead by those who claim to know about them, a similar problem in Australian culture called 'Aboriginalism' has been identified (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p 27). Australian literary history has been constructed through a discourse of racism and dominance that often belittles Aboriginal people and their culture. The 'Dreaming', a complicated Aboriginal belief system including mythology, law and history was, and sometimes still is, considered incomprehensible to those from a European background who understand history as linear and empirical. The Dreaming was considered part of a 'primitive' Aboriginal mentality that had no place in the dominant culture. That stories from the Dreaming are now often written about and incorporated into life story and fictional Aboriginal writing, such as in the beginning of Bayet-Charlton's *Finding Ullagundahi Island*, indicates that Indigenous Australians have appropriated the dominant language to 'establish a discourse announcing its difference' (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p 77). From its position of 'otherness' Aboriginal writing reflects notions of the postcolonial text that foreground differences and struggles and so begin to establish control of the writing process.

Postcolonial Textual Strategies

Re-placing writing is a critical textual strategy in postcolonial writing. To use language as 'a medium of power' requires the postcolonial author to '[seize] the language of the centre and [re-place] it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonised

² Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is considered a cornerstone work in the field of postcolonial studies, having influenced much of the subsequent discourse produced in the area.

place' (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p 37). This process, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, involves two steps: the first is 'abrogation' or the 'denial of the privilege of "English"' and the metropolitan power of control over communication and, secondly, the 'appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre' (ibid). Hodge and Mishra see these steps as a 'double movement in relation to verbal language [that] is emblematic of the cultural strategies of postcolonialism' (1991, p 205). The foregrounding of marginalized experience through literary discourse displaces the centre so that all forms of social experience are valued equally. Indigenous Australian writers de-colonise the language by bringing their own meaning and different vocabulary into texts so that a readership becomes aware and then familiar with such a hybridised form of their culture (Smith 1999). The Ozlit website (2003 [online]http://www.ozco.gov.au/resources/publications/artform/aia/pdfs/aia_literature. Accessed 14/06/03), in an article on Indigenous literature, describes Indigenous writers as having 'maintained a distinctive voice' by

draw[ing] strongly on oral traditions, us[ing] 'Language' (from the remainder of what were once hundreds of Aboriginal languages), Aboriginal English (officially recognised as a dialect and displaying many regional characteristics) and kriol (creole). At the same time they experiment and challenge forms, like the novel, inherited from other cultures.

It also describes Indigenous writing as seeming 'peculiarly adventurous' as it is 'often emphatically conversational, apparently discursive, and sometimes entails the spiritual and the everyday in the same reality'. These descriptions would appear at once to place value on Indigenous writing while effectively re-colonising it by describing it as 'peculiar' or a strange and 'Other' art form. This illustrates how the dominant discourse maintains its centrality through an acceptance of marginalized discourse

into the mainstream and an application of values from the centre that reinforce that marginality.

Authors such as Melissa Lucashenko, Sam Watson and Jackie Huggins use Aboriginal English in their writing to illustrate their awareness of, and resistance to, the stereotypes projected on them by the dominant culture, stereotypes that can be reinforced by their own community. In *The Kadaitcha Song*, when the main character, Tommy, speaks to the police, 'He use[s] his Jacky-Jacky voice, knowing that it appease[s] most whites' (Watson 1990, p 59) and the warrior, Jarroo, complains, 'I get tired of talking this mongrel language!' (p 132). A white woman mimics the patois of a local urban Aboriginal community in Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* to try to make her Aboriginal friend, Sue, aware of the oppression that colonisation has brought to her culture. After Sue's boyfriend beats her, Kerry goads her: 'But aaay, she's got a black boyfriend, ridgy didge off the mish, sista, so she must be blaaack, hey? And he gives her a bit of blackfella loving every now and then, well that just goes to prove it, dunnit?' (p 147). In alignment with postcolonial ideas of mimicry, having her own language reflected back at her causes Sue to see her situation in another light.

Lucashenko believes that colonisation is ultimately responsible for the high levels of violence experienced by Aboriginal women today. In a co-authored article by Lucashenko and Odette Best, 'Women Bashing: An Urban Perspective', it is stated that:

Urban Aboriginal men have to a large extent internalised the values of British society – that success is a material measure; that masculinity is measured by physicality and aggression,

and crucially, that men have the right to inflict violence on their families (and indeed each other) (1995, p 19).

Postcolonial feminist criticism has identified a 'double colonisation' of women through the 'oppression of colonialism and patriarchy' (McLeod 2000, p 175). This is a situation that Lucashenko makes the reader fully aware of in her novel *Steam Pigs* such as when the character, Rachel, urges Sue to go to university and avoid the path of 'poverty, racism, patriarchal bullshit, getting fucked over all your life...' (pp 121-122). In *The Kadaitcha Sung* the threat of violence, particularly towards women, is ever present, and women are persistently treated as sexual objects, perhaps indicating Watson's own internalised values of colonialism.

Contemporary Aboriginal writers often use untranslated Aboriginal words, a technique that is considered postcolonial. For instance, both Watson and Lucashenko often use the word 'migloo' (white people), and 'bungoo' (money), the meanings of which are only deciphered through analysing the context of their continual use. This technique signifies a 'cultural distinctiveness' and 'illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts' (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p 63). Using the words of an 'Other' language forces the reader to adopt the use of these terms and to contemplate their significance beyond the text, such as the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal languages: would they have needed such words as those above if invasion had not taken place? And, what feelings are associated with such words? In the life story of *Auntie Rita*, co-author Jackie Huggins explains that

[we] made a decision not to differentiate these words in the text because they are part of our natural way of speech. This may cause some unsettling and confusing moments for a white reader. However, there is a glossary for those unfamiliar with our languages (1994, p 3).

Inserting explanations mid-text would interrupt the natural flow and rhythm of the language. As Mudrooroo has noted, '[The] uniqueness of Aboriginal communication and the aesthetic use of language is lost in the translation' and, where translation has occurred, '[the] languages have been replaced with an English of varying degrees of standardisation' (Narogin 1990, p 7). The technique of using untranslated words also gives authority to the (Aboriginal) languages as the conveyors of meaning.

Ultimately, the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing [parenthetic translations of individual words] gives the translated word, and thus the 'receptor' culture, the higher status (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p 65)

The concept of 'antilanguage' involves 'oppositional groups within a dominant society [constructing] special languages to sustain difference and identity' (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p 205). The values and beliefs of the group are encoded in these languages that exclude outsiders through their obscurity. 'Antigroups' also develop ways of reading the texts of the dominant language so that their meanings are (re)interpreted through the values of that group. According to Hodge and Mishra, 'the richest development of antilanguage in Australia is found amongst Aboriginal people' whose 'intense attachment...to their traditional languages is an antilanguage strategy, excluding outsiders (White Australians, and even other Aboriginal groups) and bonding the community' (1991, p 206). Although the maintenance of traditional languages can be read as a postcolonial strategy of resistance, Aboriginal people, as

well as other minority groups, may simply be practicing their culture without the double-edged intention of resistance or counter-culture. For example, as Mudrooroo states, 'the surviving fragments' of oral Aboriginal literature are 'important to Aborigines and others as a classical literature. They are as important to the Aborigines as the *Iliad* is to the Europeans' (Narogin 1990, p 7). Hence, postcolonial theory may, at times, be accused of reading resistance in minority groups where it may not be intended.

Chapter 4: Problems of the Postcolonial

Postcolonial theory can be considered problematic in that its concepts are firmly grounded in the Western academy, an institution associated at the heart of the metropolitan centre. It has been suggested that ‘post-colonial theory...[has] served to re-colonise the post-colonial world by re-incorporating its agendas into metropolitan academic concerns...’ (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p 203). Even postcolonial intellectuals from ‘Third World’ universities admit the ‘universalising and affiliative’ nature of the ‘institutional space of the university, which imposes the conditions of the profession uniformly everywhere and also institutes exchanges of knowledge (though admittedly unequally) through such means as publication, conferences, collaboration and so on’ (Rajan 1997, p 606). Perhaps postcolonial critique does not serve to promote alternative discourse but acts to incorporate it into the mainstream. After all, Indigenous writers must use English to access a wide readership and must often comply with the publishing and editing standards of the dominant culture. As Aboriginal author Jackie Huggins comments:

We still face the fact that most publishing in this country is controlled by white people who have very little knowledge of our culture. White publishers need to develop more co-operative relations with Black writers, finding ways of involving Black people more closely with productive decisions (1994, p 4).

Anita Heiss reflects Huggins’ position and notes that ‘[the] editor of Aboriginal writing has a larger role to play in the production of Aboriginal writing than simply editing text. That role includes being aware of cultural and intellectual property rights and issues’ (2003, p 82). Heiss’s study suggests that, while it is possible for non-

Aboriginal editors to successfully edit Aboriginal writing, the need for cultural sensitivity and awareness is apparent and recommends that such editors are trained appropriately so that their interventions do not continue to compromise the production of Aboriginal literature (2003, pp 66-82).

It is argued that using a colonial language maintains the subject as colonised. Is postcolonial critique simply a complex way of maintaining the status quo? If so, this is a legitimate issue of concern for all Indigenous writers as it equates to preserving the endemic racism within the dominant culture. This issue does not only apply to postcolonial critique but, as Stephen Muecke has pointed out, to all “interpretative devices” of a culture...constituted by the dominant class’ where there can be ‘no form of access to interpretations through which those from the outside can understand their conditions of existence on their own terms’ (Muecke 1988, p 408). Mudrooroo voices such concern when he writes that

Fringe cultures are under constant pressure from the centre to conform to its dictates.

These dictates are pushed by white researchers and educators on to Aboriginal people so that they learn to produce texts which in effect support the ideologies and mechanisms of oppression characteristic of conquest and colonisation (Narogin 1990, p 110).

Also of concern is the discontent that some Indigenous writers have expressed for the term ‘postcolonial’. With its misleading prefix inferring colonialism as a condition of the past, the term has provoked criticism from Aboriginal writers. Because of its temporal connotations, Anita Heiss claims that ‘most [Aboriginal] writers do not even consider the term in relation to their writing’ (2003, p 43). Heiss quotes a number of Indigenous authors who consider the term inappropriate, such as Kathryn Trees, who

says that postcolonialism is a 'white' literary concept through which 'Western nations attempt to define and represent themselves in non-imperialist terms' (Trees, cited in Heiss 2003, p 44). Bruce Pascoe refers to all Aboriginal writing as being 'influenced by the stories and culture which have developed for 200,000 years', indicating that a label such as postcolonial cannot adequately describe the wealth of culture that forms the basis of Indigenous writing (Pascoe, cited in Heiss 2003, p 46).

It has been suggested that terms such as 'neo-colonial' or 'anti-colonial' would be more accurate labels for the body of knowledge currently described as 'postcolonial', especially in relation to the purposes of Aboriginal writers. Hodge and Mishra describe Australian society as divided around an 'unresolved struggle with the original possessors for legitimacy and land, producing a neo-colonial form of literature from a neo-colonial mentality that is still obsessed with the exploited Other' (1991, p xiv). While using the term 'neo-colonial' they go on to say that there is also a 'flourishing oppositional postcolonial development in politics, culture and literature' that addresses the issues of neo-colonialism (ibid). From this perspective it would seem that the terms necessarily co-exist in relation to each other. Ashcroft *et al.* argue against such a term as 'neo-colonial' replacing 'postcolonial' as it 'refuses to acknowledge that the colonised can ever entirely free themselves from colonial influences', which they say is true only in that 'we never entirely discard any of our history, but we may appropriate and transform it in infinite ways, and the recuperation and re-acknowledgement of the pre-colonial is part of such a transformation' (2002, p195). The term anti-colonial³ may be considered an insufficient label to describe

³ Anti-colonial and postcolonial strategies work together to contribute to the process of decolonisation. The space limitations of this thesis prohibit a more in-depth analysis of anti-colonial methodologies, however Marcia Langton's '*Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...*' (1993) can be referred to as an important Indigenous critical text that focuses on anti-colonialist thought in order to

Indigenous writing because the discourse produced not only opposes the canon of English Literature, but also interpolates and transforms it (Ashcroft *et al.* 2002, p199).

The writing of Indigenous Australians is 'located at once within and without forms of postcolonial self-expression' (Boehmer 1995, p 228). Though many Indigenous writers disagree with the term 'postcolonial', they may identify with the postcolonial objectives of writing for historical reconstruction and the expression of personal and cultural identity. However, this takes place as a hybridised form of the cultural and personal because of the required participation with the dominant culture. Though many Aboriginal texts express traditional aspects of Indigenous culture such as stories related to the Dreaming and spirituality, these may at times be recreated and adapted to facilitate easier comprehension to a wider readership or by using selective material to complement the themes of a novel. There seems to be a paradoxical necessity for Indigenous writers to adopt aspects of the dominant culture (such as the written form itself) so that meanings of Aboriginality can be more widely understood. It could be argued, however, that contemporary meanings of Aboriginality necessarily include aspects of the dominant culture (or hybrid forms), therefore eliminating any paradox. From such adaptation there is liberation in such discursive techniques, discussed earlier, as language abrogation and appropriation. According to Boehmer, Indigenous writers aim to

accentuate hybridity: to write Indigenous stories using so-called 'white forms' like the novel; to weave constantly and creatively between what is native, and the culture of the invader; to cross registers and undermine fixed points of view; to use what Aborigines call

advance cultural representations that are self-determined rather than imposed and regulated by colonial paradigms.

gammon or bullshitting, a mix of fantasy and humour. Indigenous writers, in other words, try to embrace the inevitability of their impurity at all levels (1995, p 230).

Although Aboriginal writers often use written techniques that are considered postcolonial, unlike many writers from former colonised nations and other writers within Australia, theirs is still a struggle against ongoing colonisation. Postcolonial theory has been criticised for becoming so broad as to not distinguish adequately the different experiences of colonialism. Aboriginal writers are from a very small minority of Australians trying to negotiate a cultural space against a tide of historical inaccuracies that have created a mostly negative identity for them. As Mudrooroo writes, '[The] past is still with us. Survivors are still living, and I think that the awfulness of man's inhumanity to man should be dealt with until it becomes part of official Australian history' (Narogin 1990, p 25). It is important to consider Aboriginal history as the history of all Australians, some of whom will write from different positions of postcoloniality and adopt various postcolonial writing techniques, but all of whom will hopefully play a role in constructing a future, as well as a past, that seeks to represent the truth.

Reading Aboriginal Texts

Writing as a non-Aboriginal person, the kind of Aboriginal identity that I am able to describe is one that is interpreted and partially deciphered based on secondary and primary readings of the texts. Contemporary Aboriginal writing varying in style from the gritty realist fiction of novels such as Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs*, to the life story/fictional combination of Fabienne Bayet-Charlton's lyrical *Finding Ullagundahi*

Island and the powerfully understated language of Kim Scott's *Benang*, all illustrate the variety within the written form that contributes to the portrayal of Aboriginality. The descriptions used here to demarcate the language of these texts as 'lyrical' or 'gritty', or even as a genre such as fiction, automatically lock them into the dominant culture's system of analysis. A hybrid form of Aboriginal culture is the inevitable result of the interpretations of these texts when they are read through Western eyes that adapt the text to their own understanding and as they are perhaps, in part and at times, written for such a readership (although some Aboriginal authors would contest that they write only for an Aboriginal audience). A reader's interpretation of identity as constructed by novelists or as represented in the life writing of authors can only be that, an interpretation. Our reliability to understand the truth as written may, at times, be questioned, despite our best intentions. As an interpretation, like all critiques of literature, we can only aim to access truths as far as the literature and the ability of the interpreter allows.

Penny Van Toorn describes how white readers of Aboriginal literature 'are reconstructed and coerced to choose to disidentify with "typical" Australians while not being offered the choice of supposing it possible to become an honorary Black' (2000, p 31). This is where Indigenous writing, along with its representations of Aboriginal identity, establishes its difference and carves a space in the dominant culture. It not only takes up a position within the dominant culture but also alters perceptions by asking a readership to shift ground from conventional ways of knowing and engage with an 'other' culture. Stephen Muecke describes how Aboriginal writing contributes to the contemporary literary aesthetic through the 'renegotiation of subject positions, the definition of context and reading and ways of

rethinking the idea of “the book” (1988, p 418). He envisages these ‘theoretical positions’ as exposing the way ‘power relations are exercised’ within the social fields of ‘writing, reading, criticism and education’ (ibid). Reading Aboriginal literature, then, is not only about informing perceptions of Aboriginality and broadening the contribution to the literary field but also about altering notions of how literature contributes to and re-shapes social practice.

One of the main tasks in ‘reading Aboriginal culture’ is to ‘disengage the energies that have been locked up in the mechanisms of suppression and displacement, and to dismantle the discursive regimes that have hitherto been given the task of control’ (Hodge & Mishra 1991, p 74). This would suggest that the reader is not only challenged by what is written but must also challenge their own understanding of literary discourse. For a long time in Australian literary culture Aborigines have been restricted from representing themselves; treated as the ‘Other’, they have been seen as incapable of self-representation or being able to properly represent the world around them (Dodson 2003). The problem of ‘Aboriginalism’ as identified by Hodge and Mishra includes the ‘contradictory prohibition’ of a non-Aboriginal readership seeing itself as incapable of understanding Aboriginal texts and culture in general (ibid). This situation does, however, appear to be changing: the wealth of Indigenous writing is rich and continually growing in Australia and Australian history is being retold from the viewpoint of the Aboriginal people. As Jackie Huggins observes, the situation for Indigenous people has changed considerably:

Women of my generation are freer to express our anger and pain because now there is a more general acceptance to speak about child abuse; it’s politically correct to address the maltreatment of Aboriginals; honourable to elaborate my oppression as a Black woman, etc.

Still, Aboriginal women have to find our own ways of speaking about things. The healing time can then begin (1994, p 36).

Some Aboriginal people do not want to tell their stories or expose their cultural knowledge to the rest of the world. A reluctance or refusal to partake in literary discourse may result from a number of reasons, one of which Stephen Muecke identifies as a resistance to the demands of the dominant culture. Muecke refers to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* to illustrate how literary conventions demand personal exposure, such as in the form of autobiography, where we are socially conditioned to believe that by telling the truth, or confessing, we will be 'liberated' (1988, p 410). Muecke describes how the refusal to 'confess' a story (particularly amongst older Aboriginal people) could be a resistance to the power relations that the confessional implies (ibid). He also notes that this could be 'a possible Aboriginal discursive strategy which would take the form of *non-disclosure* in the face of the demand to speak' (ibid). Even where there is consent to speak, a voice may be censored not only for the comfort of the readership but also to protect the speaker. Truths can be revealed in the guise of fiction where the nondisclosure of actual individual identities acts as a form of protection, but while stories remain untold understanding between cultures cannot be nurtured and past wrongs cannot be redressed.

Alexis Wright comments how people from her mother's generation '[generally] don't like to talk about what they've been through. They don't want to be reminded of the past because so much was destroyed. And there's a lot of shame associated with those terrible times' (Ravenscroft 1998, p 76). Wright suggests here that it is not so much that people do not want to tell their stories but, rather, find it painful to do so. She is optimistic, however, that these stories 'will be said properly at one time or

another and by a whole range of Aboriginal people' (ibid). Expressing identities and retelling histories through the written form, then, may not be desirable for those Aboriginal people who find it difficult to speak of the atrocities they have witnessed or experienced or, as Muecke suggests, for those who may choose to resist the demands of the dominant culture. These are further reasons why we cannot assume that non-Aboriginal people will understand meanings of Aboriginality in their entirety. While the process of retelling stories of the past and present endures, understandings of Aboriginality will continue to grow. However, we need to remain mindful of Ian Anderson's point that

some Aboriginal writers would argue that it is not the case that all things can be 'known'. Some truths simply may not be reachable, no matter how deeply we dig with tools provided by 'western' thinking since the 'enlightenment'. For non-Aboriginal people, this may mean that some things about Aboriginal people and life-ways will always remain unintelligible (2003, p 23).

Though postcolonial critique does not always represent the particularities of Aboriginality in ways that are deemed appropriate by Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal people, it still provides a useful analytical framework for reading, and perhaps at times writing, Indigenous literature. While there are many analogies to be drawn between the theory of postcolonialism and the practice of Indigenous writing, this particular critical theory provides certain understandings that do not encompass all alternative and valuable ways of knowing literature. That it attempts to provide a framework for analysing such a vast array of world literatures is perhaps both a strength and a weakness. Most important is that it engages readers in new ways of thinking about literature and sets the stage for further critical enquiry.

Conclusion

The wish to re-establish and assert a positive identity for Aboriginal people is incorporated into much contemporary Indigenous writing. Much of Aboriginal history, culture and identity has been lost or misshapen through the process of colonisation, a process that many Aboriginal people still see as continuing, in one way or another, today. However, the variety and wealth of contemporary Indigenous writing is testament to how Aboriginal histories and identities are being reclaimed and are, at the same time, exploring new horizons. A connection with the land and the natural environment, with family and community, with traditional culture, including stories of the Dreaming and the use of languages, are all aspects of an assertion of identity in contemporary Aboriginal writing that successfully abrogates and re-appropriates the previously dominant discourses on Aboriginality. The ongoing production of contemporary Indigenous discourse continues to contribute to the process of de-colonisation and provides alternative ways of seeing our histories and, consequently, our selves. Although there is a constant struggle to avoid being engulfed by the universalising effects of the dominant forms of literature and culture generally, Aboriginal literature not only occupies a space within these modes but also challenges them and pushes boundaries. In so doing it exposes its readerships to new and more accurate understandings of Aboriginality, while creating exciting and interesting literary forms. The use of postcolonial theory in the realm of Indigenous Australian literature remains contentious, not only because it hints at a temporal post-colonial state but also because it hails from the universalising metropolitan centre. Despite these concerns, however, postcolonialism can offer empowering methods for

(re)reading and (re)writing that can promote de-colonisation and a re-placement of marginalized culture so that its value is recognised and continues to grow.

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