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Indigenous Writers Decolonising the Canon

Critical Review of Anita Heiss and Penny Van Toorn (eds). *Stories Without End.... Southerly*, 62.2 (2002). Sydney: Halstead Press. ISSN 0038-3732.

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Stories Without End is a collection of Indigenous writing, published as a special edition of the literary journal, *Southerly*, and gathered together by Anita Heiss and Penny Van Toorn, guest editors for the occasion. Lionel Fogarty designed the cover image and the collection's title is based on an essay contributed by Jennifer Martiniello. The result is a major achievement, a collection that easily achieves the editors' aim of "showcasing the work of recent award-winning writers, alongside new and emerging writers, and more established names ... [that will] help break down narrow assumptions of what Indigenous writing is." [1] But while the writers themselves offer work that is tough, intelligent and passionate, the editors seem to have missed the significance of their cumulative impact. This I think [2] is likely to lead to a more general under-estimation of the collection. I believe it has *mana*, [3] challenging and changing the Australian literary canon.

More than twenty-five Indigenous writers have contributed. Their art is expressed in story and poetry, essays, book reviews, interview and excerpts from two plays. [4] For me, the pivotal inclusion is Lionel Fogarty's *E-scripts of Poetry and Art*. In these documents he presents his poetry in manuscript, hand- and type-written, often incorporating drawings. Here are the traces of the artist at work, playing with image in word and picture, sometimes fully articulated (in colour in the original?), and at other times simple jottings with his pen/cil. There are nine poems included altogether, the earliest a draft of "BeAT" dated 1993. Individually and as a suite, they demonstrate Fogarty's mastery of language:

To armed loyalties is only for nature
 blood attackings
 Gumbulu speakheading lets end all
 materialist blacky and whiteys
 Modern weapons couldn't colonise
 a free post modern or newer
 committed popular resistances
 200 years in the future, the
 dreamtimeing then is still
 true land sky birds animals continuous. [5]

Fogarty was already widely published before this collection. In *E-scripts*, Heiss and van Toorn bring him into a radical new intimacy with his audiences. Fogarty's presence is literally more visible, his manuscripts practising his refusal of boundaries between art forms:

and peace is up ya
 and love is up ya
 And creation is down there
 Art as same lane as a painter [6]

Many writers address the question of visibility/invisibility in this collection. For them all, it is an enduring feature of colonisation. So Anne Brewster discusses the ways that Doris Pilkington's story, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, makes available an alternative history for Australia, of "Aboriginal resistance ... of heroism, triumph and survival against all odds." [7] But she shows this, in part by placing it with a novel by one of the early masters of the Australian literary canon, Katherine Susannah Pritchard. Brewster describes how Pilkington's story makes apparent the silence in Pritchard's novel, *Coonardoo*, (1929) on government policies of managing "the Aboriginal problem", given that "not only was Pritchard's novel based on Pilkington's ancestors but that *Coonardoo* - which was published in 1929 - was set in the same period as *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1966)." [8] Alexis Wright's passionate essay, *Politics of Writing*, explains that she writes to fight the ignorance she believes is killing Aboriginal people today. "Someone said to me the other day that ignorance is the weapon used now to kill Aboriginal people, instead of guns." [9] She is scathing about the selective blindness of Australians who she believes, prefer to see other people's misfortune from the safe distance of other parts of the world, "anywhere, except at home in Australia today, where *our books* will force them to see what they have refused

to see in two hundred years: the very existence of Aboriginal people.” [\[10\]](#)

All the writers share a radical understanding of how colonisation continues to shape Australia. Their work takes on a wide range of subjects: homosexuality and racism, refugees, deaths in custody, stolen children, the dislocations experiences by people split between country and the values of urban lifestyles. This is not the piteous cry of victims, but the tough, realistic insights of survivors. Rosie Smith’s *Scream of Fear*, shares the anguish of a mother facing the arrest and imprisonment of her adult child. Her poem begins quietly:

From the moment you are told your child is there or is to go
In that cell all alone, with nothing but their thoughts,
you scream

And escalates as despair and desolation grows, fed by recognition of what prison means. It ends in shrieking crescendo:

You just scream with fear.

Mother who screams. [\[11\]](#)

Several other writers show how family is misshapen and damaged by colonisation. Kerry Reed-Gilbert in her poem, *By Choice*, takes on a nasty bit of white Australian prejudice and in doing so, challenges white assumptions about the meaning of family and country.

“Aboriginal people, they live there by choice.
Out in those conditions, in those communities.
It’s by choice. They wanna live there.
No-one’s forcing them too”.

I look at you amazed, disbelief showing in my eyes.
Haven’t you learnt nothing yet?
Haven’t you heard a word I’ve said?
“Yes, it’s by choice. If a government picked you up
and took you away. Stole you from your land.
Stole you from your Mother.
Wouldn’t you, if you had a choice,
go home as soon as possible?
Go home, go home. To where you belong?” [\[12\]](#)

In *After He Drives Away*, Melissa Lucashenko describes the ordinary warmth of family:

Families are places to eat, sleep and drink.
To rest your head, weary of this century’s thronging
Music; places to enter into unspoken contracts.
To laugh and watch television, hang the washing out,
Curse the barking dog.

But this is only part of the story:

A multitude of families – angry, vicious, sad.
Families can be places where men despair of love,
And hope is parcelled away to that more golden continent.

.....

Sisters absent, fathers choked by life. Brothers do leave their
Sleeping children,
Drive slowly away, and take in their trembling hands
That crushing cloud of death. Men slip from us in
Torrents, floods. [\[13\]](#)

In her fable, *Capture*, Kim Scott demonstrates how academics inevitably wreak a murderous violence on the Indigenous, deafened as well as blinded by their own cultural assumptions and ambitions. When Peter and Corey, non-Indigenous academics, find a strange creature hiding where they live, their immediate response is aggressive. In pursuit of knowledge, they trap it, sedate it, stretch it out on a table to examine and measure. Excited by their “discovery”, they “also

agreed that it was imperative to not only keep this remarkable entity alive, but to also name, classify and, if possible, reproduce it. *Having rescued it from extinction and oblivion*, they would now nurse it back ... and document the entire process." [14] Scott reveals the deathly nature of knowledge production, not just in the collection of specimens that Peter and Corey store in their display room, but more fundamentally in the failure of empathy which leads them to reduce the subjects of their research to mere objects, source of "DNA patents and ... oh, all sorts of things.... proper subject(s) for scientific journals, in addition to the popular media." [15] So when the creature escapes and attacks them, they dismiss it as an irrational attempt to endanger *itself*. The voices they hear in this struggle, they dismiss as their own fantasy. For me, this is an uncomfortable story. Like all good fables, its message is clear. And it reminds me that in many of the early encounters between whites and Aboriginal people, the whites behaved in exactly this way. [16]

However, for all the writers the heart of colonisation is language, words and their silences. Several make language problematic by lamenting the loss of Indigenous languages. Jennifer Martiniello begins her essay, *Voids, Voices and Story Without End*, describing in "whitefella-way" how "the voices of colonisation have constructed the great voids of silence", how two-thirds of Indigenous languages and dialects have been lost, telling us this means growing up as a child in "voided space". [17] Kim Scott's poem, *Wangelanginy*, describes how this loss is embodied:

Was it that the old people,
each thinking himself herself the last,
and feeling their tongues shrivel,
their sound not returning...
Was it that each offered their tongue
in, say, the way of frog or reptile?

Tongues which flickered,
were snatched, twisted in the wind
until, thinning, drying,
they became... What? Something
like strips of cast-off snake skin,
like parchment curling in a fire... [18]

Other writers play overtly with language. Elizabeth Hodgson plays with translation in her poem, *The Tempest*, using the white space of the page to translate the formal language of policy, of government administration into the reality of lived experience for Aboriginal people. [19] In his poem, *Now Is The Time*, Nathan Tyson plays with two Australian cultural icons: biblical verses on time and purpose and Australia's most well-known election slogan, the ALP's 1972 "It's Time". [20] Samuel Wagan Watson offers the slick *Recipe for Metropolis Brisbane*, where the easy, empty slickness of form can be seen as a metaphor for the trivial emptiness of urban Brisbane. [21]

In a more profound challenge to form, Martiniello takes an ordinary activity for writers, storytelling, and uses it transformatively, refusing our expectations of a linear narrative, providing instead what she describes as dance in rhythm and rhyme that tells of language lost, voices silenced. Story instead of storytelling.

My flight is language-borne. Pictographic only in the clash of cadences, the intaglio of phrase, the impact of Dream against walls of theoretical construction, against immunities boosted by regular intraveinals of synthetic power. But then, these are but the tools of the story-teller. And as I am story and page, so am I also keeper and teller. You ask me about this story-telling business, but all I can tell you is how the notes before my eyes float up to the light like fire-flies to the night sky in shafts, columns of sparks from the fire – dancers in the circles of the wind. How the world is circle, wind, place, page, and page and turn and turn about the hub of scripted vertebrae- the unending choreography of an ancestral score. How I am music and step. [22]

It is Lionel Fogarty, however, whose work in this collection most aggressively shows the limits of conventional English and the power of breaking through them into new country. His poetry is powerful, aggressive and refuses to conform to expectations or conventions. This throws Hopfer, a non-Indigenous reader like me, into despair. Taking the conventions of English literature as her norm, she demonstrates the poverty, even the impossibility, of decoding or interpreting his words, and argues that this is Fogarty's intention: to thrust non-Indigenous readers into the experience of confusion, to feel what it is like to be overpowered with words. "I am made to understand what language genocide feels like rather than what it means in abstract form." [23] She argues that his goal of creating an Indigenous reality "freed from language genocide" runs the risk of "producing texts that may be untranslatable and unintelligible to a great degree," and that the responsibility of a non-Indigenous reader is "not to re-appropriate through translation the linguistic territory the writer has created for himself". [24]

She quotes Fogarty from his foreword to *New and Selected Poems*: "I know how white Australians write and I know how

they talk. They'll never come near the fourth world. White man will never know." [25] But does my desire, as a non-Indigenous reader, to enjoy Fogarty's poetry inevitably involve translation? Consider the" following:

Brains are protocols in memory we must
gather even the ungatherers.

Treasury the Murri masterpiece
uplift wisdoms crime for this
might have been not a crime. [26]

And:

Blackisms is as light as no night
power came as first food ate
"poor calli bring Guya Nulla"

Blackisms is my mother skins lifelines
being a being to blackisms
bring joy as fish fly up
trees and frogs jump
out of the mist, we dance
on the sunset evenings [27]

I want to suggest the possibility that Fogarty's work might change the Australian canon, *even if this is not his intention*. And that this is even more the case with this collection as a whole. In my view, *Stories Without End* demonstrates that Indigenous writing in Australia is no longer a mere supplement to the canon, in the Derridean sense of exposing the aesthetic judgements that construct Australian literature. Nor is it minority literature in Deleuze's terms, that is, one whose characteristics are defined by and in opposition to the canon. [28] Fogarty wants to decolonise Indigenous minds, to help establish Indigenous ways of writing. Hopfer reads this as a challenge to non-Indigenous readers to engage with Indigenous writers on their own territory. The problem with this engagement, however, is that if that is all that happens, then there is no challenge to the limits and stupidity of the colonisers' ways of writing, as Fogarty describes it. [29] However, when Indigenous writers, as in this collection, transport their readers into engagement with new experience through their talent, their passion and play, their originality in language and structure, then the canon begins to be transformed.

Scott's description of the necessity for Aboriginal people to speak and to find new ways of speaking, is for me, also a metaphor of the sort of changes to the literary canon that this collection makes possible:

Our mouths are choked and barred,
and yet there is this swelling, this welling
within the many cavities
of chest and cheek, of lungs and hollows of bone
Wangelanginy.
Together;
Wangelanginy.
Now;
Wangelanginy.
Speaking ourselves back together again. [30]

My disappointment is that this is uncelebrated in *Stories Without End*. The editors begin by questioning their own project, worrying that the collection might be little more than a cliché, a patronising offer of publication space that continues the practice of putting Indigenous writing into its own ghetto. They find some comfort in their celebration of the diversity of Indigenous writing and the fact that Indigenous writers, including some included in this collection, have won mainstream literary awards. What they have missed is the cumulative impact of the collection: the way that the very diversity and richness they celebrate has an authority, a presence that will influence Australian writers and writing.

And because of this, they have set the collection afloat, as if there were no tradition or history of Aboriginal writing, as if Aboriginal writing offered no challenges except politically to Australian writing generally. There is a brief editorial note to the excerpt from Wesley Enoch's play, *Black Medea*, for example, on the historical source of Medea in Greek mythology, but no discussion of the development of Aboriginal writing in the last century. Heiss and van Toorn might have considered, for example, whether this collection demonstrates that Aboriginal writers in the early twenty-first century have developed approaches that transcend the trends of the past: incorporating the political activism that characterised

Indigenous writing prior to 1988 and the life-story that dominated thereafter. [31] They might also have considered who are the main audiences that Indigenous writers target, and whether, as Narogin suggests, it is still the case that Aboriginal writers write for a white Australian audience primarily. [32]

Unfortunately this sort of grounding is essential for an even more basic reason: the persistence of racist stereotypes. In 2000, for example, notoriously not only did the editor of *Granta*, Ian Jack, fail to include any Aboriginal writers in the special issue he published that year devoted to new writing in Australia and the New World, but his justification revealed his racist assumptions: "Aborigines are excellent painters...Why expect them to be good novelists, too? How many things do people want them to be good at? It just seems as if there are impossible requirements." [33] That he is not alone in this is demonstrated only too clearly by the continuing need for protocols for non-Indigenous writers included in this collection [34] and the controversy over the film, *Australian Rules*. [35]

This collection is an important one in the development of Australian literature. My fear is that in the absence of this grounding by the editors, it will be too easy to overlook, to ghettoise, making the discomfort that the editors acknowledge into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, why does it matter that I am not an Indigenous person. Why is it necessary for me to declare my own cultural background? I came to believe that if I were not to fall back into colonialist practice myself in reviewing this collection, I needed to find a way to respect the writers, accepting our cultural differences, rather than acting as if they did not exist. In practice, this has meant accepting the challenge to engage with the writers on their own territory: the writers open up their worlds, share their performance with me and I, suspending my preconceptions as much as possible, wilfully and joyfully join them. And then try to share the experience.

[1] Anita Heiss and Penny Van Toorn, "Editorial", p. 6.

[2] I am a migrant woman, originally from New Zealand with Tongan and Anglo-Celtic family, currently a post-graduate student at Monash University with an academic background in women's studies and cultural change.

[3] *Mana* is a Maori word also incorporated into New Zealand English. It means authority, prestige, influence and is often used to describe Maori chiefs and non-Maori leaders. Sometimes it is accompanied with images of tall forest trees (totara, kauri).

[4] Unfortunately I have had space to discuss only a few of the writers published in the collection.

[5] Lionel Fogarty, "960723 *Chapel Communists*" in "E-scripts of Poetry and Art", p. 78.

[6] Lionel Fogarty, "960703 *Janelle*", in "E-scripts of Poetry and Art", p. 73.

[7] Anne Brewster, "Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalisation: Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*", p. 157.

[8] Brewster, "Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalisation", p. 153.

[9] Alexis Wright, "Politics of Writing", p. 18.

[10] Wright, "Politics of Writing", p. 18. My emphasis.

[11] Rosie Smith, "Scream of Fear", p. 21.

[12] Kerry Reed-Gilbert, "By Choice", p. 124

[13] Melissa Lucashenko, "After He Drives Away", p. 40.

[14] Kim Scott, "Capture", p. 27. My emphasis.

[15] Scott. "Capture", p. 28.

[16] For example, see Inga Clendinnen's description of the encounter between French scientists and two Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Inga Clendinnen, "Lecture 1: Incident on a Beach", The Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1999, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyers/stories/s66348.htm>, Date of Access: 31.05.04.

[17] Jennifer Martiniello, "Voids, Voices and Story Without End", pp. 91-2.

[18] Kim Scott, "Wangelanginy", p. 98.

[19] Elizabeth E. Hodgson, "The Template", p. 141.

[20] Nathan Tyson, "Now is the Time", p. 150.

[21] Samuel Wagan Watson, "Recipe for Metropolitan Brisbane", p. 44.

[22] Martiniello, "Voids, Voices and Story Without End", pp. 95-6.

[23] Sabina Paula Hopfer, "Re-reading Lionel Fogarty: An Attempt to Feel Into Texts Speaking of Decolonisation", p. 60.

[24] Hopfer, "Re-reading Lionel Fogarty", p. 62.

[25] Lionel Fogarty, *New and Selected Poems*, Melbourne, Hyland House Publishing, 1995, p. x, cited by Hopfer, "Re-reading Lionel Fogarty", p. 63.

[26] This is a selection from Lionel Fogarty, "Embassy", in "E-scripts of Poetry and Art", p. 71.

[27] This is a selection from Lionel Fogarty, "Overwritten Murri REP's", in "E-scripts of Poetry and Art", p. 77.

[28] See Sneja Gunew, *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), pp. 42ff. for a discussion of the approaches of different literary theorists in the context of Indigenous and ethnic writing in Australia.

[29] Fogarty, *New and Selected Poems*, p. ix, cited by Hopfer, "Re-reading Lionel Fogarty", p. 63.

[30] Scott, "Wangelanginy", p. 98.

[31] Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (Melbourne: Hyland House Publishing, 1990), pp. 14-5.

[32] Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 1.

[33] Jane Cornwall, "Hail the New World", *Weekend Australian Review*, July 2000, p. 10., cited by Michelle Grossman, "Bad Aboriginal Writing: Editing, Aboriginality, Textuality", *Meanjin*, 3 (2001), p. 152.

[34] Anita Heiss, "Writing About Indigenous Australia – Some Issues to Consider and Protocols to Follow: A Discussion Paper", p. 197.

[35] For example on ABC Television's "7.30 Report". See "Australian Rules" gets opposite reaction," The 7.30 Report, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcast 13.03.02, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2002/s503846.htm>. Date of access: 21.04.04.

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