THE WHITEMAN'S ABORIGINE

by

Ms Jeanine Leane

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
UTS Student No. 10255622

Supervisor: Professor N M Nakata (B.Ed. Hons. PhD)
Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning

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Ms Jeanine Leane

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the Aboriginal presence in Australian narratives. It is a study of continuities and discontinuities between what is known and what is unknown about Aboriginal people and communities, and particularly of how authors bring new terrains into the fold of meaning for consumption by a mostly non-Aboriginal audience. The study's focus on such transitions is to investigate what pedagogical opportunities lay within these textual formations for re-engaging higher education students with narratives that relate to Aboriginal people.

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THESIS PROJECT

As an educator for the past two decades in both secondary and tertiary studies, and as an Aboriginal person who has a keen interest in literature, it is always productive to revisit popular representations of Aboriginal people in non-Aboriginal people's narratives. For the first 150 or so years in Australia, and indeed from the early periods of writing voyager histories of Australia, non-Aboriginal writers, in their many forms as scientists, historians, novelists, filmmakers, photographers, journalists and others, across a range of genres have produced most of the portrayals of Aboriginal people. This corpus and range of materials continues to constitute the archives of Aboriginal Australia that are drawn upon when discussing Aboriginal matters.

In more recent times, Aboriginal writers, filmmakers, journalists, artists and photographers have been endeavouring through their various works to tell another story of Aboriginal people's lives and historical trajectory. It is gratifying to see that more and more non-Aboriginal students are being asked to read or examine materials written by Aboriginal people in their higher education programs.

While there is little doubt that representations by Aboriginal authors attempt a more faithful picture of Aboriginal people and their experiences in the historical and contemporary context, the inclusion of them as teaching content produces a range of tensions in classrooms. It is disheartening to witness responses from non-Aboriginal students who feel confronted or at least uncomfortable when the 'history', 'experiences', and 'images' of Aboriginal people that they are familiar with are displaced by Aboriginal representations. It is similarly disheartening to witness the tensions for

Aboriginal students when dealing with narratives written by non-Aboriginal authors.

These points of intersection that confront educators today offer new challenges. The possibilities for literature to extend all students' understanding of narrative construction are arguably contingent to an extent on how educators explicitly deal with the forms of representations and their production in the teaching/learning process. This is still a relatively unexplored area in research terms.

This thesis seeks then to explore elements in narrative formations and particularly the ways authors position audiences to engage with unfamiliar Aboriginal entities in their narratives. The proposition is that a better knowledge of how narrative formations transit audiences from familiar to unfamiliar meanings, and an examination of the conditions on which this is contingent, may help provide insight into the challenges students face when asked to engage with unfamiliar Aboriginal content of narratives. This study of continuities and discontinuities with what is familiar and known in narratives provides interesting grounds to explore what informs and limits subsequent engagements by students, when confronted by the unfamiliar and unknown to produce resistance to Aboriginal standpoints in these narratives

In my teaching experience, the reactions of non-Aboriginal students are very interesting because although very few are openly hostile and many are sympathetic, they are however uniformly reticent to confront and/or displace their understandings of Aboriginal people. A typical response is: 'That's terrible but…'. Most, if not many, students feel that it is very important to 'get on with the future'. Some express that they 'just want to help Aboriginal people'. Offers to discuss or revisit 'the past' through narratives however are quickly brushed aside, and dismissed by commitments to look to a better future.

Some specific examples from my teaching experience are worth exploring to provide context to this thesis project. As part of a core unit of a tertiary degree program, students were required to read a letter adapted from a Native American parent and reproduced in the *Journal of Aboriginal Studies* (Anonymous 1977.) The publication entitled 'Letter to a Teacher' is an example of a non-fictional narrative that outlines very articulately and in no uncertain terms the hope and aspiration an Aboriginal parent has for her child. Non-Aboriginal students have great difficulty coping with this letter on many levels. One level is the frank, succinct, technically correct way in which the letter is written. Initial responses to this are typically, 'it's very well written but does she have to be so blunt'? Or, 'she might have a point here but she could have been a bit nicer'! Or, 'she's making assumptions that all teachers will treat her child badly'. Or, 'why doesn't she send him to a different school if she's obviously got such low expectations of this one'. It is interesting at another level how students often assume that someone other than the child's mother wrote the letter because it is so succinct and articulate.

Aboriginal students have a different reaction. They seem to experience a sense of justice and feel that the tone of the letter is warranted rather than rude or aggressive. Most feel offended by the fact that many non-Aboriginal students find it hard to believe that an Aboriginal person could write so cogently. This of course is often met with challenges and questions of non-Aboriginal perspectives of histories and people.

I can recount a similar experience when exploring contemporary social issues with students. They were asked to view a short film called *Confessions of a Headhunter* based on a short story by Archie Weller and Sally Riley (2000). While inspired by true events the short story and the film are classified as narrative fiction. The film traces a month in the life of a Noongar[1] man,

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[1] This is a traditional name of one of the many Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, spelling adopted from the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council in Western Australia.

Frank, who discovers his Aboriginal heritage as an adult. Frank was adopted and raised by a Dutch family in the capital city of Perth. He freely admits that he was raised by a good family and that he was given good opportunities in life but there is something inside Frank that makes him feel incomplete. After his adoptive parents tell him the truth about his background he is drawn to a group of urban Aboriginal people who gather on a regular basis in a large park in Perth's central business district. His only link to his lost heritage is a photograph of the woman believed to be his mother. He plucks up the courage to ask the group if they recognise the woman in the picture. One of the men recognises the woman as his own mother's cousin and proudly announces and acknowledges the relationship to the rest of the group who are very welcoming of their newly found 'brother'.

Frank soon learns of and is angered by the treatment of his relatives by the police who attempt on many occasions to move the group on from the park. Initially the police do not target Frank because he looks 'White'. But Frank continues to seek acceptance from his newly found family and identifies himself as a member of the Noongar community. The police are not impressed and ridicule the affinity he has with the community. He is outraged by the racist comments and attitudes.

At this point non-Aboriginal students cannot understand what they describe as Frank's complete 'about face' as he moves quickly from thinking like a 'middle class White man' to 'thinking Black'. This transition for Frank is lost on many students because he is now thinking from a different standpoint, which he embraces very easily once he has been informed of his lost history. Students are reluctant to accept Frank's new situational and cultural context.

Frank devises a plan to appease some of the past injustice to Aboriginal people. He comes up with a very novel way of defacing national monuments that 'only tell one side of the story'. He uses his skill as a boilermaker to construct a faithful and respectful monument in Western Australia for his

Noongar ancestors. The non-Aboriginal students' response to the film is typically that Frank is 'overreacting' to the news that he is Aboriginal and does not appreciate that racism and prejudice occur on many different levels, and not just with Aboriginal people.

The students said about another scene in the film that when they thought he was going to commit murder with a blunt instrument instead of defacing a national monument they cringed and anticipated violence and destruction. A few alluded to *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Keneally 1972), which they either read or viewed in high school, and remarked that they feared a similar killing spree by the protagonist. One commented: 'I found the tension unbearable before I realised he wasn't going to slaughter innocent people'. Another said: 'For one terrible moment I thought Frank was going to take his anger on White society… out on a few unsuspecting individuals'. Most feel offended by what they describe as Frank's vandalism of national monuments, and interestingly many implied that they could have accepted Frank more easily as a violent murderer than they could accept his clever, strategic resistance that attacked colonial history.

Aboriginal students by contrast found the film to be an excellent example of Aboriginal humour and a faithful portrayal of contemporary experiences within 'mainstream' Australian society. Most felt that the film was successful in communicating serious themes such as identity, assimilation and politics of Aboriginal people. The most significant point brought to the foreground by Aboriginal students is that the film introduces some of the stereotypes and perceptions non-Aboriginal Australians hold of Aboriginal people (violent, lazy, drunk) but the narrative turns and the characters do not live up to such images in the end.

The notion of Aboriginal characters not acting or conforming to non-Aboriginal 'understandings' is a key issue in the reactions of non-Aboriginal students to such representations, and impacts on the reception and reading of

Aboriginal writing and other productions. To a large extent students find the explorations of the everyday reality of Aboriginal people too confronting. But there is a level of discomfort that result from the rupture to what is understood and 'acceptable', through representations in literature, folk stories, art, film, photography et cetera. has situated Aboriginal people in and through different historical periods in non-Aboriginal consciousness. For non-Aboriginal people, arguably the realisation that they no longer control the characters and images across such genres seems to be as confronting as the lived realities of Aboriginal people today. This suggests an impasse between the different situational and cultural contexts of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal representations in narratives and begs questions of what is going on between what is written and how it is interpreted by the reading audience.

Increasingly, I hear anecdotal reports from colleagues that portrayals of and by Aboriginal people are difficult to come to terms with for non-Aboriginal students, and particularly so if they disrupt 'myths' about Aboriginal people and culture that non-Aboriginal students were previously comfortable with. Students at the surface level appear to be uncomfortable with the idea that as Aboriginal people we can write our own histories and futures from the standpoint of our lived experience. This is unfortunate as the images and representations of Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people today are empowered by this standpoint, an agency of sorts, largely missing from non-Aboriginal forms of representation and portrayals.

Over the years I have found myself increasingly reading and thinking about what informs non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal people. What is it about these representations that hold such sway in non-Aboriginal consciousness they cannot be disrupted? It has been highlighted through the many experiences with students in classes that non-Aboriginal literature and film do not just have a binding influence on the impressions and images students have of Aboriginal people but also on the way we, as Aboriginal

educators, can or cannot engage them in contemporary times. However, I have never been able to decipher, at the level of textual production and reproduction, no matter how much literary analysis I read, what it is in the non-Aboriginal literary canons on Aboriginal people that informs as well as constrains what sort of readings are possible for non-Aboriginal people. My attempt to understand this has driven my interest in this thesis project.

This interest also carries with it a deeper concern that has implications for the teaching process. This is the position of Aboriginal students in the shared learning space of classrooms, who must contend with the tensions produced by non-Aboriginal interpretations of Aboriginal people and our experiences. An early positive thesis for Indigenous education put forward by the Torres Strait Islander, Martin Nakata, stuck with me. He contended that what students

> need most is an understanding of the political nature of their position, and that requires both the language and the knowledge of how that positioning is effected in the mainstream world. They also need a way of maintaining themselves in the face of it, as well as working against that knowledge system that continues to hold them to the position that it has produced for them. (1993, p. 66)

My teaching challenge is how to expose the production of Aboriginal representation and manage the ensuing discussions in shared learning spaces where both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are present. What do all my students need to know to enable me to assist my Aboriginal students to find the language to maintain and defend their own positions as they contest with other's understandings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is not difficult to locate studies in the literature that engage the intersections between 'people of difference' and others as a clash of two sides. Literary and post-colonial theories emphasize otherness, difference, oppositional/binary standpoints and homogeneity of otherness (e.g. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002, Knudsen 2004). Within the emerging Aboriginal scholarship, debates centre around definitions of Aboriginality, schisms between urban and traditional peoples, and whether Aboriginal people who write now construct more faithful portrayals of Aboriginal subjects than non-Aboriginal writers (e.g. Mudrooroo 1990, Huggins 1993). In the literature however there is little focus or exploration of transitions, intersections, or inter-subjective relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and the re-making of both in such situations. There is even less within this that informs how to deal with the transition "from what has made sense in the past to what no longer makes sense, whether it is past events or new ones demanding to be gathered to the fold of meaning" (Muecke 1996, p. 1).

In the early writings, Fredrick Macartney produced an essay entitled *Literature and the Aborigine* in which he claims that the "Aborigines blur the distinction between self and external objects" (1957, p. 17). In doing this, as Vijay Mishra (1988) points out, Macartney conveys Aboriginal Australians as without the ability to produce literary text. Macartney in his essay refuses to use the word 'literature' when he refers to Aboriginal narratives, all of which he labels either "tediously discursive and inchoate" or "incapable of critical reflectiveness" (1957, p. 17). Mishra (1988) aligns this practice to a quasi Hegelian approach[2],

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[2] In The Philosophy of Fine Art (1835), Hegel reduces Hindu philosophy and spiritualism to 'Fantastic Symbolism', a term reflecting the absence of a historical consciousness in the Hindu (cited in Mishra, 1988).

and the essay a replay of Orientalism[3]. One of the main themes of Orientalism, according to Edward Said (1978), is that it assumes that the 'Other' cannot represent themselves and therefore must be represented by a body of experts who know more about 'them' than they know themselves and who construct a body of theory and available discourses that describe and contain the 'Other'. Mishra (1988) describes Macartney's essay in the same way, as 'Aboriginalism', and claims that once armed with such quasi Hegelian ammunition Macartney can deny Aborigines the ability to produce what is considered in Western terms the grandest cultural artefact *viz.*, the literary text. Macartney expresses a view that had currency throughout the Nineteenth and into the Twentieth Century as 'the Aborigine' was taken up as a subject in fictional narratives and represented and interpreted to reflect non-Aboriginal understandings of Aboriginal Australians at different periods in time.

In 1859, Frank Fowler in *Southern Lights and Shadow*s wrote with reference to Australia, that "our fictionists have fallen upon the soil of Australia like so many industrious diggers and though merely scratching and fossicking on the surface have turned up much of the precious malleable stuff"(1859, p. 2). J.J. Healy (1978) aptly points out that 'the Aborigine' is definitely part of the malleable stuff. His work, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, is an extensive and early analysis of the works of fiction that deal with Aboriginal subjects in the Nineteen and Twentieth Centuries. The result is a phenomenological work in that rather than deal solely with raw historical accounts (journals, diaries, memoirs etc) he chose to look at how such accounts impact on and emerge in the genre of fiction, and particularly how 'Aborigines' are used as a vessel or vehicle to speak about and/or write of issues that cut right to the core of non-Aboriginal psyche and national consciousness.

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[3] Said (1978) identifies Orientalism "as a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western Experience" (p. 1).

Beginning with the character of contact, Healy's (1978) work tracks 'the Aborigine' as a subject in literature across the landscape of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Australia. The chapters unfold to explore particular time frames where Aboriginal subjects/characters are 'set' or cast, and themes are enacted within literary genres by Aboriginal characters. His (1978) work is an extensive coverage of the trajectory that is the Australian literary landscape, and the interest he takes in 'the Aborigine' as a subject within is seminal in Australian literary discourse. His analysis of Australian writers draws forward the way that 'Aborigines' are written about, and the way Aboriginality is constructed as manifestations of 'white consciousness'.

Healy's work uncovers the way non-Aboriginal authors drive the Aboriginal characters and experiences they create through the literary landscape, carefully navigated to arrive at a certain point that speaks to non-Aboriginal audiences. The lack of agency that comes through the use of Aboriginal people and experiences serves as a vehicle for transporting manifestations of elements of white consciousness. He describes the containment of Aboriginal people in literature over the past two centuries as "moths caught in webs of words" (Healy 1978, p. xvii).

Adam Shoemaker's (1989) *Black Words White Page Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988* overlaps Healy's work to some extent. Shoemaker's primary concern is to look at the beginning of 'black people's' writing in Australia since the 1960s and focus on the nascent literary canon emerging through Aboriginal writing. Shoemaker's (1989) work follows the same structure as Healy's (1978). He moves his readership through non-Aboriginal authors such as Prichard (1929) and Herbert (1938) in a chapter entitled *Popular Perceptions of Unpopular People to Progress and Frustrated Expectations: The Era Since 1961*. Where Aboriginal writing begins, for Shoemaker's purposes, is an area of literary production he describes as 'fourth world literature'.

Shoemaker's discussion of Aboriginal writers is significant for two reasons. First, his use of the descriptor 'Fourth World Literature' is the invention of a 'vehicle' to convey elements of a narrative. Second, 'the canon' he describes in Aboriginal writing is about speaking back to the oppression of a nation contained within a nation. This enables him to track the voice of protest and separatism in Aboriginal writings and extend his definition of political to include both activist and personal writings. This is an important observation for reading texts by Aboriginal authors and one which I will return to in this thesis. He clarifies that within the body of Aboriginal works 'a nation' is not necessarily a geo-military state. When Aboriginal writers speak of a nation, nationhood or pan-Aboriginal nationalism it is also a figurative concept–a unity and/or commonality in the quest for Aboriginal people to have a socio-political voice through creative works. This is evident in Shoemaker's interview with Colin Johnson (aka Mudrooroo Narogin). Johnson speaks of separatism, exclusion, protest activism and oppositional writings as the reference points of authenticity in terms of Aboriginality for this particular canon in Aboriginal literature. The 'new Aboriginal voice' becomes already laboured with qualifiers for authenticity.

Shoemaker's book title is a metaphor for containment in ways similar to Healy's 'moths'. He sets the scene for another phase of the debate that fleshes out issues of the limitations of the English language for Aboriginal writers and the constraints imposed by editing requirements, grammatical structures and literary genres of a Western order of things (Foucault 1970).

In their work, *The New Diversity Australian Fiction 1970 to 1988,* Gelder & Salzman (1989) position Aboriginal writing as emerging alongside the growing body of multicultural writers in Australia through the seventies and eighties. Their work pre-empts Marian Boreland's (1993) discussion of the competing voices and the relegation of Aboriginal and multicultural writers to victim spaces—essentially the confinement of Aboriginal writing to 'Other'. Gelder

and Salzman's analysis brings to the forefront the continuing debate over traditionalism/purism versus 'mixed heritage urban Aboriginal people' who appear to do nothing different, or nothing that non-Aboriginal readers relate to as representing Aboriginal culture.

In the late eighties when Sally Morgan wrote her autobiographical work *My Place* which describes the discovery of her Aboriginal heritage without jails, detention centres or the more negative features of social life, a different level of engagement came to the foreground. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal critics took issue with Morgan's autobiographical narrative. Jackie Huggins (1993) and Johnson (1990) criticised Morgan for her lack of community connections and her family's denial of their Aboriginal heritage when Sally was growing up. Shoemaker's (1989) criticism of *My Place* was that Morgan glosses over her own relationship with a white man and fails to explore her non-Aboriginal heritage. Huggins (1993) claims Morgan's narrative sounded like the narrative of a lower-middle-class white woman, and that she (Huggins) couldn't relate to it at all. She went on to argue that Morgan's Aboriginality is constructed and endorsed through her white audience. This view is also expressed by Bain Attwood (1992) in his critique of *My Place* in an article entitled, 'A Portrait of an Aboriginal as an Artist: Sally Morgan and the construction of Aboriginality'.

Huggins' (1993) criticism of Morgan's *My Place* proves something else, namely that pan-Aboriginality (or Aboriginalism) is a construct by non-Aboriginal theorists and academics. Criticisms of Aboriginal constructions and representations by Aboriginal critics is evidence of the diversity of experiences that constitute contemporary Aboriginality some of which are contentious for Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal audiences. Janine Little (1993) however points out that the critical discourse of Aboriginal women's narratives and prose has been largely generated through feminist theories that identify a 'common oppression' of all women. She argues that this comes close to the

notion of pan-Aboriginality and fails to acknowledge the dominant/subordinate ratio in which non-Aboriginal women maintain a convention of relative power.

Little contends that prose as a genre has strong links to orality and storytelling. Her analysis of Aboriginal women's autobiographies and memoirs brings to the forefront some of the limitations of fiction as a genre when governed by Western literary conventions. A reason for this is that much critique and theorisation of Aboriginal writing has focussed so far on issues of authorship (differences between Aboriginal and Western concepts of ownership for written works) and readership, revolving around the acceptance or rejection of certain works.

Stephen Muecke's (1996) article 'Experimental History?' and his book *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (1992) make two important points that can be transferred to a literary analysis. Firstly, Muecke refers to a 'process' of transiting a gap between 'sense' and 'non-sense' where the steps are elided. For example, he argues the discovery of such spaces, beyond the frontier and before 1788, forced a radical re-conceptualisation of national histories but the gap between the sense of what was always known and the initial non-sense of Aboriginal history is most often omitted in accounts which proceed from one certainty to the next. The study of alternative, in this case Aboriginal histories, reveals a gap between the established and the new. This approach can be useful in the realm of Australian literature because constructions of Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people in these spaces can and do impact on what has previously made sense to non-Aboriginal readers. Such alternatives, or previously subjugated and unfamiliar images, disrupt not only non-Aboriginal audience's understanding of Aboriginal people but also and perhaps more importantly their sense of self and the official history that previously instilled a sense of comfort and national pride.

Secondly, Muecke (1992) spends some time looking at what happens to Aboriginal narratives when they have to conform to, or are constrained by, Western literary conventions. He illuminates how writers generally shape their readers from their own language and associated conventions that make things meaningful and thus construct meaning within such parameters. Derrida (1985) observes this process in the work of Western colonial poets: "attempting to speak the language of others without renouncing their own but in doing so the language of the poet would probably collapse in the 'terrain' of representation already fossicked by the colonizer" (Derrida 1985, p. 294). The problem for Aboriginal writers is the limitation of having to employ another person's language conventions for narratives that are produced in different cultural and situational contexts. While Western writers/authors are able to scaffold the situational and cultural contexts of texts through familiar language and inter-textual devices for their readers, Aboriginal writers find themselves also confined within someone else's discourse on characters of 'difference'. Marcia Langton also speaks of the presence of inter-textual devices: "Aboriginality only has meaning when understood in terms of inter-subjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal are subjects" (1994, p. 15).

The appropriation of 'mainstream' language for the purposes of self-representation is an important point that has surfaced and remained in the debate on Aboriginal writing. It is within this debate over Aboriginal writers' use of English and other Western literary devices to represent ourselves that Johnson's work can be situated. He is a prolific writer and is credited with publishing the first Aboriginal novel *Wild Cat Falling* in 1965. His works span three decades and a number of genres including novels, poems and academic articles. Johnson's writing moves from social realism in *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) to what has later been hailed as an 'ancestral narrative' or 'new traditionalism' (see Knudsen 2004) in his 1991 novel *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (see Mudrooroo 1991). Tracing his work and the way it is positioned in academic

discourse demonstrates the emergence of what non-Aboriginal academics have labelled as two canons within Aboriginal writing.

The two canons are the 'social realism' of the urban, mixed race, assimilated and acculturated Aboriginal person (this is a description that has come from within the Academy to describe the works of some Aboriginal writers), and the 'new traditionalism' of Aboriginal writers who combine traditional narratives, beings and languages within their works as a contrast to colonial conventions and structures. Johnson (1991), Watson (1990) and Fogarty (1995, 2004, 2007) have all transited to the use of ancestral narratives, Dreaming stories, Aboriginal language and totem symbols and their writings have come to be associated with more authentic, more political, and less assimilated writing.

In *Milli Milli Wangka: The Indigenous Literature of Australia,* Johnson (Mudrooroo 1997) devotes a whole chapter to Fogarty's work where he speaks of Fogarty's legacy as a committed and revolutionary Aboriginal poet whose ability lies in singing and speaking the written word. He claims Fogarty creates a song cycle of past and present revealing a syncretism of the modern written and the ancient oral codes. The ancient ritual of ceremonial dance becomes a metaphor for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers of Fogarty's work. Johnson highlights this in his poem, "Lionel takes our lives into his mouth, /Spits them out, crying with our needs/Our desires our wants our triumphs" (Mudrooroo 1997, p. 12). He concludes that Fogarty's words serve as a means "to read, breakdance into our cultures" (1997, p. 85). Both Johnson and Hopfer (2002) are quick to identify Fogarty's circular style as it comes to the fore in his poetry. This style has come to represent 'new traditionalism' for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics and critics such as Johnson and Knudsen (2004).

Circular narratives and plot structures have been associated with Aboriginal writing since its emergence. Rather than following Standard English syntax

and word order, Fogarty develops what Hopfer (2002) calls a ceremonial kind of syntax that reflects a revolving and dancing around words. Indigenous dancing is acted out in his writing. Johnson sees Fogarty's work as a combination of ancient spiritualism and modern political activism. Modern activism on its own, particularly that which occurs in urban settings, is seen to be 'rootless' and 'fruitless' without some 'spiritual, ancestral connection' to pre-contact Aboriginal society.

Knudsen (2004) spent some time exploring the two canons within Aboriginal writing. The relationship between orality and writing, Indigenous traditions and appropriations, identity and representations are central in her work, *The Circle and the Spiral: A study of Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Maori Literature*. She chose to analyse a corpus of contemporary Australian and New Zealand novels written in the early 1990s. She puts forward the thesis that from the mid-eighties onwards "Indigenous writing in both countries left behind a strong narrative preference for social realism in favour of traversing old territories in new spiritual ways" (2004, p. xiv). She explains that with increasing intensity since the mid-80s, Aboriginal writers have developed a strong focus on tradition as artistic structure and the possibility of giving literary expression to traditional cultural forms. She contends that it became increasingly evident to Aboriginal writers that tradition interacted with the need for renewal and that this created a space where "roots could be converted to routes" (2004, p. xiv).

In the Australian context Knudsen (2004) analyses Sam Watson's (1990) *The Kadaitcha Sung* and Johnson's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (Mudrooroo 1991) and claims that these two works are sites of a transformation–a continual becoming and homecoming–that stems within writing as a camouflaged subtext of language, culture and spirituality in exile. She describes this movement as a creative return to what she identifies as the essential cores of Aboriginal Australian and Maori cultures: the 'circle' and the 'spiral'.

Knudsen's (2004) work maps the controversial debate surrounding the issue of orality and tradition and applies this to the oral narratives of the novels she analyses. In particular, she draws attention to the clarity with which these texts indicate the community or individuals they are addressing signalled by the recurrent deictic elements they employ, may enable the space of writing/reading to become a site for responsible communication. Because one of the most important requirements for oral tradition is the recurrent questioning and acknowledgement of positionality, accountability and responsibility in a community of speakers where Aboriginal narratives become a space of enunciation that forces a clear establishment of speaking positions.

In her analysis of the works of Sam Watson (1990) and Johnson (Mudrooroo 1991) Knudsen is identifying two distinct literary canons by the way she separates these works from those she describes as social realism. She describes Watson and Johnson's work as models for the future and as the most prominent examples of Indigenous Australian culture and consciousness. Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), Archie Weller's *The Day of the Dog* (1981) and Johnson's, *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) and other earlier works, are all classified as social realism because they employ the narration of life from the perspective of "mixed blood fringe dwellers who live in a landscape of unbelonging… feelings of anger and frustration are very much the dominant atmosphere of most novels written in the mode of social realism" (Knudsen 2004, p. 5). According to Knudsen, these works are characterised by 'placelessness' and cultural 'rootlessness' due to exile from place and memory.

By contrast, Knudsen describes the novels by Watson (1990) and Johnson (Mudrooroo 1991) as 'New Traditionalism' and a cyclic return to the core or essence of tradition, which admits in its process the possibility of transformation into new mediums, spaces and times. Knudsen's (2004) work is valuable for its use of Aboriginal and European theorisations of orality, and

through this she points out that post-modernist, post-structuralist and Aboriginal Australian and Maori cultures influenced post-colonial theories. Hugh Webb however argues that the term post-colonial is an "oppressive misnomer" (1991, p. 32) which gives rise to a new form of imperialising hegemony that emphasises a neutralised similarity between the culture of the colonised and the coloniser when in fact no such similarity exists. Webb points out that within the theoretical framework of post-colonial literature, Indigenous textuality becomes amorphous and is not explored within the different settler contexts in which it emerged.

Knudsen places particular emphasis on Johnson's *Writing from the Fringe* (Mudrooroo 1990). In this work, Johnson explains the possibility of the hidden meta-text or matrix. He claimed that Aboriginal Australian writers often echo the traditional secret/sacred prescriptions of their ancestors inscribing a camouflaged or hidden meta-text in their writing which doesn't open itself up to the understanding of the uninitiated reader. This hidden meta-text of 'Indigenality', in his view, could be uncovered by a retro-active reading which would disclose its essence to the aware or initiated reader.

Knudsen's (2004) application of Johnson's theory is the dividing line for two literary canons in Aboriginal writing. The definition itself (from Johnson) has vestiges of elitism for both writers and readers. More importantly this definition is essentialising and privileging cyclic returns to ancestry and tradition in Aboriginal writing as the core of culture over and above urban and regional social realism. Moreover, while armed with this theory, Knudsen (2004) assumes the guise of a Western/colonizing researcher who scrutinises texts with the 'aware, initiated reader' (see Mudrooroo 1990) in mind, constantly on the lookout for cultural metaphors that are circular and traditional to equate with a return or reunion of some kind. A circle or spiral can break space and move forward or horizontally.

It might also be interesting to see how works by Aboriginal authors who employ a combination of social realism and ancestral narratives within their plot structures fit into Knudsen's (2004) literary analysis. Examples of such works are Larissa Behrendt's *Home* (2004) and Kim Scott's *Benang from the heart* (1999). For instance Kim Scott's *Benang from the heart* (1999) employs a cyclic narrative and plot structure but deploys the narration of life, social realism within. For Anita Heiss "there is yet to be fostered a general Aboriginal reading audience, although many writers are writing with the aim of providing something for their Aboriginal communities and families" (2003, p. vii). Particular attention is given within Heiss's (2003) work to the tension between Aboriginal identity and literary sales and commercialism. Scott sees both limits and opportunities here: "The long neglect–the silencing of Australia's Indigenous voices must be noted. And then, this relatively blossoming of.. is it genre? A marketing niche?" (cited in Heiss 2003, p. i). Scott also poses the question of whose responsibility it is to cultivate an Indigenous readership. Is it Indigenous writers and people in general or is it the responsibility of educationalists?

Statement of the Problem

An analysis of the related literature reveals an emerging intellectual discourse surrounding 'writing the Aborigine' and Aboriginal writing. This discourse has responded to both the shifts in broader social theorisation of the position of Aboriginal people and the emergence of writings by Aboriginal writers. More recent analysis of Aboriginal writing focuses on the dilemmas and constraints for Aboriginal writers. For example, as writers giving representation to their world, shaped through a different knowledge tradition and a particular historical/colonial experience, but constricted in the telling by the English language and its literary styles and conventions. Or, as writers whose representations from Aboriginal standpoints are sites for judging the validity, credibility and truth of Aboriginal identity and experience according to Western framings of what it means to be Aboriginal. In these pre-

occupations, the focus has been on what Aboriginal writers have done, how they have done it, the meaning of their writing, the deeper symbolism they attempt to convey through their texts, and whether a text qualifies as authentic 'Aboriginal' narrative.

Only recently does the issue of readership emerge as a possible point for further exploration to augment the critical discourse in the literature on narratives involving Aboriginal people. The questions emerging around readership ask why particular pieces of Aboriginal writing are well-received by non-Aboriginal audiences (and therefore gain wider currency and influence in the now-contested terrain of Aboriginal representation) or not at all (thus failing to disturb more familiar representations). To include this focus in inquiry shifts attention to the role and location of the reader as an active constructor of the meaning of a text. That is, the meaning of a narrative lies not just in the language and construction of the text but also depends on the location of the reader. The intersection between text and reader thus is an important space for interpretation and exploration.

This intersection opens up a potential site for inquiry around the sets of relations between the texts of Aboriginal writers and the 'reading' of them by those unfamiliar with Aboriginal experience from the Aboriginal standpoint, but often familiar with other representations of Aboriginal people and history. There is a field of language-communication theory through which to understand more deeply this intersection between text and reader. However, in relation to Aboriginal writing, these 'text-reader' relations are engendered in a particular space where the textual practices of literary construction and understanding of the wider Australian narrative that serves as 'context', are arguably assumed to provide sufficient common space to allow 'translation' of Aboriginal experiences to sit alongside other Australian narratives. When Aboriginal writing fails to move the non-Aboriginal reader into the world of Aboriginal meaning and representation but instead invites contest or refusal

of the Aboriginal standpoint, it raises questions about what is being assumed in this 'context' and about the relations within this space. This space, where the Aboriginal writer 'translates' unfamiliar Aboriginal meanings through familiar textual practices to 'transit' the non-Aboriginal reader into an Aboriginal 'reading' of the world is more than that engendered by the presence of 'a' text and 'a' reader. In this space, much Aboriginal writing does not 'translate' well because other, less visible, elements are in play.

The review of the literature, then, reveals an absence of deeper inquiry around the conditions of this space and whether an explication of deeper elements at work are implicated in the way narratives are engaged. This is the wider social space in which both texts and the reading of the text are 'produced'. That is, the proposition of this thesis is that 'readings' of an Aboriginal narrative area are a function of more than the personal individual (dis)position of the reader against the technical or thematic construction of the text by an author. The text and its reading is situated within, and a complex function of, much wider sets of social and historical relations. This, in turn, raises a key objective for the thesis: what can be illuminated about these wider relations that shape the production and reading of narratives of Aboriginal people to shed light on why some narratives are contested or rejected?

If we accept that creative Aboriginal narrative, written from the Aboriginal standpoint, serves as an important vehicle for producing wider understanding of the contemporary Aboriginal human condition but fails to connect with non-Aboriginal readers, then the barriers to this deserve closer examination. In other words, if the world of Aboriginal literature cannot transport the non-Aboriginal reader across the historical, cultural and imaginative divide, into an unfamiliar, hitherto uncontemplated world of experience, then how will the Aboriginal position really come to be represented other than through the Western gaze? How will Aboriginal narratives transit readers or audiences from the familiar to the unfamiliar without disrupting the centrality and

diversity of Aboriginal standpoints and agency within such narratives? And conversely, the same can be said of narratives written by non-Aboriginal authors: how can Aboriginal students engage with the creative writings and narratives of non-Aboriginal authors that subordinate and silence Aboriginal understandings? These questions have significance for all students of Aboriginal literature.

Focus of Study

The focus of this thesis is deeper understandings of the discursive space in which the writing and reading of Aboriginal narratives are produced. The first task in the next Chapter is to consider social theories that attempt to frame the complexities of intersections that Aboriginal people face in contemporary periods. The next task will be to consider current theories of language and communication that attempt to explain relations between readers and texts. A key objective is to re-theorise the space, now understood as 'between' reader and text, to encompass a wider view of the discursive space in which both text and reader 'are produced' in contested terrains. From there the analytical chapters will examine the technical aspects of writing and reading Aboriginal texts to discern whether there may be implications for teaching Aboriginal literature in the cross-cultural context of Australian classrooms.

It is important to clarify from the outset that the primary focus of this thesis is not on pedagogy or classroom interaction. Such a focus would take theory and method questions in a quite different direction from the approach adopted here. My approach to this thesis places no direct focus on students' attitudes or behaviours in classrooms nor does it attempt to case-study individual student's readings of Aboriginal narratives. The approach to my thesis also places no direct focus on theorising the structural positioning of Aboriginal people in our intersections with Australian social and political institutions, which would also take theory and method questions in a quite different direction. However, the inquiry does have an interest in both these

elements in so far as the evidence of colonialism and racism appear in fictional narratives. It is important to acknowledge that exposing personal and institutional instances of colonial/racist relations in the form of textual misrepresentation, exclusion and omission of Aboriginal perspectives assists non-Aboriginal students engaged in literary studies to develop awareness of the positioning of Aboriginal subjects in texts. However, my thesis contends that this level of analysis is, of itself, not sufficient to enable non-Aboriginal students' entry to unfamiliar representations of Aboriginal standpoints. This is especially the case when Aboriginal standpoints call into question students' understanding of Australian history and social justice, and their own position in the national imagination.

It is important, therefore, to emphasise that student attitudes and responses to text and the significance of the broader social relations implicated in racist and biased treatment of the Aboriginal subject in texts are not ignored or denied in the proposed approach. These elements are a central interest in this study but are not the primary entry point for the investigation in the thesis. Instead, the emphasis in my approach is to shape an analysis that explicates the conditions which engender and evidence these elements, as they are embedded in and expressed through the construction of narratives and the possible readings produced in the process. This enables inquiry to move below the surface levels of 'literal' engagement with such narratives to more closely examine the textual apparatuses that provide the conditions for the text-reader engagement. This approach shifts the inquiry to focus on ways to understand what is brought to the work of constructing representations of the Aboriginal subject in narratives, and through text via the reading experience. The aim is to de-personalise the space in which texts and readings are produced without rendering the space apolitical. Understanding texts and reading spaces through this approach may provide the possibilities for non-Aboriginal students to engage with their 'disengagement' of Aboriginal writing in a more productive, more open, or less defensive way.

To sum up, the elected approach in this study is to examine examples of literature, which includes representations of Aboriginal people and are used in tertiary courses, to gain further understandings of the production of text-reader relations as they are engendered in and through the construction of the text. Understanding the specificities that condition both the production of texts and the positions from which the text may be read is of interest to this inquiry. A more useful meta-analysis of some of the elements at work in the spaces between a non-Aboriginal text and an Aboriginal reader, or an Aboriginal text and a non-Aboriginal reader, may emerge to produce other possibilities for students to engage with when encountering unfamiliar narratives. This is especially the case where Aboriginal writing confronts and unsettles deeply embedded and personally significant sensibilities associated with non-Aboriginal students' own identities as 'fair-minded' Australians. And the case where non-Aboriginal writing confronts and insults Aboriginal students and their understandings of the trajectory of colonialism in their everyday.

Chapter Two

METHODOLOGY

The priority for this study's elected methodological approach is to narrow the focus of inquiry to the particularities of the discursive, inter-discursive and intra-discursive spaces in which texts and reading positions are produced, with close attention to the ways forms of representations are afforded to Aboriginal people and community.

The first entry point for inquiry then is to begin with analysis of some seminal non-Aboriginal fictional narratives that include representations of Aboriginal people and realities and which in the process have constructed or propagated particular versions of Aboriginal history, identities, conditions, characters, choices, dilemmas and tragedies. For the purposes of this inquiry, the selection of texts to discern different ways of 'writing the Aborigine' into the Western imagination at similar or different points of time is argued to be useful to chart the significance of the broader social and political context at the time of writing. This helps to draw attention to points of rupture and shifts in representation across different temporal spaces, and to consider contemporaneous analysis as well as retrospective analysis of the same texts. This will sit alongside the more familiar literary/discursive analysis of the texts. This part of the inquiry will explicate what is at work in the space where these texts were produced by non-Aboriginal writers and through which readings of them have been produced and continue to be produced by non-Aboriginal readers over time.

Then, my inquiry will go on to explore, via literary and discursive analysis, some key Aboriginal texts to discern how Aboriginal authors write Aboriginal positions back into both the Western literary and Aboriginal imagination. And, how in the process, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are 're-

imagined' into the literary canon from an unfamiliar vantage point. This is intended to open up the investigation into the space where the unfamiliar and familiar rub up against each other in unsettling ways for further discussion of the implications.

Theoretical frameworks

While the method proposes to analyse some key relevant literary texts and to draw in relevant textual and critical analysis of Aboriginal representations in these texts, the theoretical framing of analysis needs to be identified. Literary analysis summarily deals with interpreting and reflecting on the meaning, form, construction, and execution of literary texts via plot, character, theme, language and textual devices and use of context, always with attention to the perceived intentions of authors and the effects for the reader. For example, Prichard's narrative constructed in the 1920s was trying to enlighten her readership of different contexts of Aboriginality than Johnson was in the 1960s or White in the 1970s. Attention to the socio-historical contexts that produce the writing should precede any specific textual analysis. In explicating texts and textual production, some standard literary analysis will inform this method.

But this literary analysis must also be guided by useful theoretical frameworks for exploring what is at work within the production of texts and the production of the reading of the text. This suggests the need for broader discursive analysis to tease out more deeply embedded and implicit meanings beyond the surface or literal level of meaning as they appear in text and as they connect with the assumptions of readers who make meaning and sense of texts from their own position. In addition, any theoretical framing must not only attempt to account for what social relations are at work in the intersections between texts and readers but must also be able to account for the Aboriginal standpoint within these relations, for it is this position that

arguably is now being 'written into' texts and producing challenges in the space between texts and readers.

Theorising the Aboriginal position

There is a range of theories available to analytically frame the Aboriginal position in social inquiry: post-colonial theories; Indigenist theory (e.g. Rigney 1997, Martin 2001); Whiteness theory (e.g. Moreton-Robinson 2000); and various interpretations of Marxist, post-structuralist or feminist theories useful for framing marginalised or minority positions, to name a few (e.g. Fanon 1952, Spivak 1988, Bhabha 1994). For the purposes of this inquiry, it is important from the Aboriginal position to frame analysis in a way that does not reify, reduce or confine Aboriginal texts or analysis of them in a singular relation with the Western, or colonial, or so-called post-colonial, or hegemonic order of things. From the theoretical perspective, one aim of this inquiry is to open up and disturb the Western-Aboriginal duality which is a construct of Western disciplines and which is deeply implicated in the way Aboriginal realities are narrowly represented in non-Aboriginal texts *viz.*, as the 'Other' of Western positions. Said's (1978) *Orientalism* illustrates well the presence of a Western order of things that works to inform and confine forms of representations of minorities to 'the helpless Other' who need representing by the empowered majority.

Because this thesis does have an applied interest in assisting students to transit the gap between familiar and unfamiliar representations of the Aboriginal position, it seeks to theorise the gap as a central condition at the site of inquiry. To this ends, two strands of theory considered useful to this inquiry can be identified. The first addresses the wider framing of the Aboriginal position by considering theories of an Indigenous standpoint and the Cultural Interface (Nakata 1997b, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). The second explores theoretical standpoints around language and text as a social practice. For example, Michael Halliday's (1984, Halliday & Hasan 1985) theory of 'register'

and 'contexts of situation and culture', Gunter Kress's (1985) work on genre, Norman Fairclough's (1989) definition of 'common-sense assumptions' that are implicit in language, and his work on Critical Discourse Analysis, and Stephen Muecke's (1992, 2005) work on Aboriginality and textual spaces are useful frameworks. These theories are useful for my understanding of the links between micro-aspects of language and textual conventions and the broader fields of meanings, interpretation, and social practice.

Cultural Interface theory

Nakata (1997b) theorises the Torres Strait Islander position as an interface position that is constituted by, and constitutive of, Islander and Western knowledge systems, practices and meanings. He contends that the constructions of Islanders within Western knowledge and discourse has achieved more than the construction of Islanders as 'Other' and in a secondary and diminished relation to all that is Western in earlier colonial times. He argues that more recent attempts to acknowledge the Islander position as legitimately attached to another (traditional) realm of knowledge, language, culture, and meaning has led to forms of analysis that continually seek to separate and clarify meanings and positions in the Islander-Western intersections. This results in a preoccupation with drawing back and relegating meaning into either the Islander domain or the Western one and asserting truth claims from the basis of these originating sources. The endless clarification of what is Islander (or Indigenous) and what is Western becomes an analytical pre-occupation and a site of endless struggle. Who can speak and who can claim to know becomes a major point of contest. This is a very useful strategy for theorists to contest the representations and authority of Western knowledge, its practices and its agents but Nakata argues that the question for Islanders that follows becomes 'then what?' How are Islanders to understand their position vis-à-vis Western practices as they move forward in a world where Western knowledge and practice is always changing and where Islander knowledge, which also changes, still remains locally-specific and

therefore in an already prescribed relation to the still assumed universal, monolithic category 'Western'?

Nakata (1997b, 2007a) agrees with Derrida's (1985) position that the pre-occupation with naming, recovering, upholding, and instating what is Islander or Indigenous as opposed to what is Western is a re-iteration of the binary as deployed in colonial knowledge construction. The binary configuration is dressed up in a more positive guise that gives Islander people a 'recognised' space that is 'our own' and from which Islander people can make contested truth claims. An example of this can be seen in his discussion of Williamson's (1997a) work on educating Torres Strait Islander children. Nakata initially saw Williamson's work as an opportunity to consider the Islander standpoint and how Islanders viewed the role of education. Potentially this approach could reveal, disrupt and disturb the way Islanders were generally inscribed as subjects of others' understanding. It was hoped that the work of Williamson and other historians would come closer to an understanding that Islander calls for education - proper schooling and university education - were not simple misguided aspirations to be 'White' but were instead a lived response to the changing context in which they lived and interacted with Westerners in the context of contact. However, Williamson concluded that Islanders' call for education was a misplaced hope because school learning was not always functional to the political, social and economic contexts of life on the islands. Williamson likened this to other marginalised groups by pointing out that mainstream schooling on the Australian mainland had little to offer even White working class children. By not problematising the underlying simplicity of the binary relations between them/us in the Western order of things, and to borrow again from Derrida, Williamson collapsed in the 'terrain of representation already fossicked by the colonizer'. He considered that Islanders have called for proper schooling and accepted this as a view that is separate from the Western position but he has relied on Western values, opinions, realities and assumptions to illustrate how Islanders are different

and this difference he argues cannot be catered for in the conventional education system. What he has not done is consider Islander perspectives and/or views that this is a political act necessitated by the interface shared now by both Westerners and Islanders. By a simple comparison between Islanders and working class White children he has acknowledged a diminished position but used difference to justify why this is so (Nakata 1997a).

Nakata's (2007a) theoretical position, in contrast to acceptance of the inversion of the binary to privilege Islander positions, is that the 'lived space' or interface between Islander-Western domains is one where knowledge, practices, and meanings have been entangled and re-worked for up to two centuries. This has produced an Islander-Western space of knowledge complexity that requires a different sort of beginning point for analysis of the Islander position. This interface position cannot simply be reduced to a single narrative of Islander or Western perspectives but carries the meanings of both and the history of their myriad engagements with each other. Sometimes, these meanings cannot be disentangled because they represent new meanings and experiences and practices that shift both Islander and Western meanings. The conditions in this space are often ambiguous, contradictory, contested, and confusing. Where Islander and Western positions begin and end is often uncertain and unclear. Although the Cultural Interface is theoretically a space of inter-subjective understanding, mutual recognition, and re-worked meanings, under historical and contemporary conditions the space also produces misunderstanding, misrecognition, and ambiguous meanings. The Cultural Interface is therefore always already a contested site for resolving and reconciling the uncertainties it produces (2007b).

Methodologically speaking, Nakata's basic argument is that this space provides an entry point for inquiry (see e.g., Nakata 1997, Nakata, et al 2008) and that the aim should not only be to seek resolution or reconcile meanings. Rather, the Cultural Interface presents as a site to explore the possibilities for

enriched analysis and augmented knowledge production, creative problem-solving, and more sophisticated constructions of Islander experience (Nakata 2007b). His argument is that historical and contemporary Islander reality, as a lived experience, is located in this space. The diversity of Islander experience and thinking which can be evidenced here should be brought to the surface for analysis in its entanglements with Western knowledge, rather than reduced down to fit the simpler polarised analysis of Islander versus Western.

This is a useful theoretical position for this thesis in conceptualising the space in which non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal texts and readers are produced and reproduced. It enables multiple, ambiguous, and less fixed meanings to emerge a site for study to investigate the 'gap', or 'space', and importantly it renders problematic polarisation, singularity, and fixity in the construction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects in textual narratives. But how are these polarised positions to be drawn in, to be worked on by students, when the evidence of them at work in text is reinforced through analysis? How are multiple, ambiguous or alternative Aboriginal positions to be considered possible and believable, when the understandings readers bring to their reading are insufficient to suspend older, entrenched meanings? How are different meanings and readings to be produced in this space when such meanings and readings make no sense to readers and where the search for meaning leads to contestation of Aboriginal writing rather than contestation of Western meaning?

This thesis proposes that the space in which texts and readers are produced may be better understood if theory can conceptualise a shared inter-subjective space for understanding that can include both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians' standpoints. That is, a theoretical framework for analysis is required to contemplate the more difficult or contested ground at the interface in order to increase the possibilities for accepting ambiguity, irreconcilability, and alternatives to the familiar Western standpoint that

frames impoverished representations of Aboriginal realities. Put more simply, the theoretical framework for investigation and analysis needs to be able to account for the presence of previously uncontemplated Aboriginal standpoints generated in this complex space of Aboriginal narratives.

Indigenous standpoint theory

However, accessing unfamiliar Aboriginal standpoints in Aboriginal writing raises two crucial issues: deeper issues of Aboriginal epistemology and the absence of written accounts of Aboriginal peoples' experience of living within disrupted Aboriginal realities. Both these elements, I argue, are fundamental to the context of Aboriginal writing and to the reading of it. To draw from Nakata's theoretical position (2007a, 2007b), contemporary Aboriginal standpoint is rooted both in traditional Aboriginal worldview and historical experience of colonial intrusion. The traditional worldview sits within its own epistemological realm that is oriented to life within a larger universal order, quite different from and not referenced to the colonial or Western order of things. Aboriginal people are also positioned in complex tensions between the accounts of our 'reality' as represented through Western knowledge, discourse and logic and the accounts ordered via the Aboriginal knowledge system and modified through historical experience of colonial regimes. As noted already, these tensions are not produced in a simple intersection between us/them, and the aspects of analytical standpoints which emerge from Aboriginal experience (and which are implicitly and/or explicitly given representation in Aboriginal writing) reflect this.

Nakata (2007b) suggests an Indigenous Standpoint Theory, following feminist standpoint theory (e.g. Harding 1986, Smith 1987, Pohlhaus 2002), as a method for inquiry and a tool for analysis. Where feminist standpoint theory developed in response to the paucity of accounts of women's experience (see for example, Smith 1987), Nakata argues its potential for investigating the social relations that organise Islander experience, in any social inquiry around

the intersections between Islander and Western positions. In his development of an Indigenous standpoint theory, he assumes the conditions of the Cultural Interface as the grounds of inquiry – that space where quite different knowledge systems and accounts of historical experiences produce quite different ways of understanding social realities. The entry point of inquiry, then, are sites of convergence where these elements produce deeply entangled sets of meanings and a range of possibilities for elevating alternate accounts of lived experience. In the relative absence of Aboriginal representations of our own knowledge, worldview and experiences, Aboriginal writing contests and competes with non-Aboriginal representations and produces a 'contested terrain' of meaning and 'truth'. Nakata's standpoint theory suggests that to explore the complexities of the contest between Aboriginal-Western meanings, particularly for the purpose of informing literary analysis and reading for meaning, that the following three elements need some consideration: locale, agency and tension.

Nakata uses the "notion of 'locale' to denote the situatedness or positioning of [Aboriginal people] in relation to those broader social relations which organise and orchestrate everyday lives and actions" (2007a, p. 104). This notion "refers to the collective position… how it is to be positioned as a member of the Indigenous group and how it is to experience the world from that position" (2007a, p. 104). In literary analysis, examining text for the presence of discursive elements that inform and limit what can be said or written about Aboriginal people's positions and experiences via the usual array of literary devices helps to open up a space for readers to understand the constraints at work in firstly understanding and then re-presenting Aboriginal standpoints in non-Aboriginal texts. The notion of 'locale' assists us to consider peeling back the discursive circumscription of the Aboriginal position by the established ways of understanding Aboriginal people and Australian history as expressed in narratives.

Nakata (2007a) then introduces the notion of agency as a way of considering active Aboriginal engagement at the Cultural Interface. This assumes that far from being singularly the victims of others, historically and through to the present Aboriginal people have been engaged at the Aboriginal-Western interface. From the Aboriginal standpoint this can be represented as

> a site of Indigenous resistance, contestation, refusal, and, as well, of assimilation of the new, of inclusion of other practices and understandings derived from non-Indigenous knowledge traditions….these both inform and are expressed in individual, family and collective choices and decisions. (2007a, pp. 105-6)

Understanding agency assists students to consider the many and varied ways individuals reference and represent themselves as their different worldviews converge. Nakata explains,

> this provides a means to see the [Aboriginal character] in a particular relation with others, to investigate how they act to maintain themselves according to [Aboriginal] sensibilities and within the limits of their own understanding of their position. (2007a, p. 107)

This is not a quest to establish the truth or morality of Aboriginal versus Western positions. It is rather to find within the textual formation of the Aboriginal condition, the agencies that point towards Aboriginal attempts to resolve continuities and discontinuities of their own standpoints at the site of converging worldviews.

In literary analysis the reader or the social inquirer must then look closely at what is enacted in text and textual production as choices made by authors (and readers)—as an elected standpoint that enables something to be conveyed and comprehended within a particular context for a particular audience; or as Foucault (1972) noted, a point in the production of knowledge where things are able to be said in a particular way and not in another. Agency, in the Aboriginal standpoint sense, invests in producers and consumers of texts the idea that there are always possibilities for engaging,

shaping and reshaping the world in which we find ourselves, however constrained the range of options. Actions can be understood in the context of the broader social relations embedded and/or described via textual/discursive conventions.

The final referent for the exploration of the complexities at the Cultural Interface, 'tensions', helps me to consider that in textual production and reproduction of Aboriginal positions there is something attempting to be resolved in the production of a narrative. This notion can assist to explicate the choices authors and consumers make in the textual production process to understand more fully the motivation, purposes and effects of naming, classifying and relating positions and experiences in particular ways. What elements in textual construction allow or disallow wider possibilities for writing/reading the Aboriginal perspective or standpoint? What leads a reader to see only one way of resolving a situation or to be frustrated or disbelieving of an Aboriginal position that is irreconcilable to their own? By rendering into conscious awareness, the unconscious allegiance a non-Aboriginal reader (or writer) has to the entrenched familiarity of the Western order of things and its logic (however this is represented in a fictional narrative), a reader gains insight into how a seemingly neutral, fictitious, textual engagement enables the circumvention of the Aboriginal order or worldview. In Nakata's view, this keeps the Aboriginal standpoint out of the common purview. Drawing some analytical attention to the tensions inherent in the Aboriginal experience of being at the Interface assists in revealing Aboriginal writing as a form of textual construction that attempts to give expression to these often uncontemplated tensions of the Aboriginal position. As with the notions of locale and agency, the aim is not to reach any certain or single truth about the Aboriginal position. Rather it is to understand that the Aboriginal position is one where promoting continuity and guarding against discontinuities with Aboriginal worldview while responding to, and engaging with, another Western worldview produces tensions that have no easy resolution. There are

choices, and understanding the tensions within Aboriginal experience of the continuing non-Aboriginal order is part of understanding the motivation and intentions of Aboriginal writing and character development. These 'tensions' then are a significant element to investigate in the textual production processes to achieve a deeper understanding of how producers and consumers of narratives transit (or fail to transit) the Cultural Interface.

To sum up, the case for utilising Nakata's Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint theory for my exploration of the conditions that inform different authors' choices when constructing Aboriginal people as a literary subject is not about contesting the 'truths' of their constructions of Aboriginality. Such quests merely re-establish the set dualities. A more productive analysis aims to centre on why Aboriginal people are positioned as they are in particular narrative contexts and what informed the formations of the Aboriginal subjects described, and how such images and the contexts in which they were cast transit reading audiences from familiar to unfamiliar representations of the Aboriginal presence. To do this, I need to also turn to other theorists of textual production and spaces.

Theorising textual and social practices of reading and writing
It is in this complex cultural interface space that my inquiry seeks to weave together theories of an Aboriginal Standpoint with theories of language, discourse and social practice. If, as Norman Fairclough argues, common-sense assumptions are implicit in language and that "language is a dialect with an army and a navy" (1989, p. 21), and if we accept that there is an existing 'common sense' that is unique to a people, the problem then for writers as well as readers of literature is how to traverse different sets of commonsense assumptions manifested through language, especially that which is transmitted in the form of text and textual production.

What transits a reader from the familiar context or the commonsense where non-Aboriginal writers re-present Aboriginal people's experience to the

unfamiliar context where Aboriginal writers represent Aboriginal experience is a largely unexplored site for inquiry. Derrida's (1985) concept of 'terrain' is useful here in that it draws attention to an area of textual production in terms of a bridge, or connecting point, from which to scaffold ways of understandings and to transit reading audiences from familiar to unfamiliar contexts. Muecke's (1996) notion of 'experimental history' is also useful here as a platform from which canonical texts – the relationship between the text, the experiential and interpersonal connections that readers make and bring to texts, and the discourses that inform the textual production – can be made more explicit. Importantly, they bring into relief the ways of introducing new and unfamiliar texts into the space of a 'common' sense.

Texts as artefacts

Both Halliday and Hasan (1985) and Muecke (1992) use 'text' as a general term to cover 'speech' and writing, as the material manifestations of negotiated meanings. Texts in this sense can be understood as artefacts that have been worked upon by people in their different engagements to make them meaningful, and to be interpretable in a 'speech community'. Texts, as these theorists argue, are as material as 'reality' is itself.

It is then the situational and the cultural contexts in which texts are negotiated and produced that creates and constructs a reality for readers (Halliday & Hasan 1985, Muecke 1992). This is what makes text communicable and interpretable. However a textual formation that is meaningful or symbolic for one cultural group will not necessarily be meaningful, relevant or readable to another group unless the conditions of production behind the text and the language and conventions used within are already familiar. The fact that tension exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences about what can be conveyed about Aboriginal histories and experiences and what is to be left unsaid evidences a juncture between the way different groups interpret and language their perceptions of reality. So a text is something that is not just

desired by a speech community for particular purposes but boundaries are omnipresent to protect what is within. These are the unstated tensions that Nakata writes about as always already present in cross-cultural negotiations. Ross Chambers alludes to what is at stake potentially for speech communities, "to change the desires of a subject (or subjects) is a way of changing the world" (1984, p. 128). This is a key component to consider in any exploration of the process, production and consumption (readership) of literary texts.

Discourse Analysis

In his work, *Language and Power*, Fairclough (1989) teaches us that 'discourse' is socially determined language use. It is what a community of speakers form as a 'common' or 'agreed' way of speaking about the world. His approach to analysing discourse, Critical Language Study or CLS, is a useful way to show up the related links that may be hidden from readers such as the connections between language, power and ideology. He argues for example that commonsense assumptions are implicit within different contexts and conventions of language and something which people are not generally aware of. The way commonsense is negotiated and sets up particular orientations that produce agreed or understood ways of speaking about the world is more than just social practice—it is, to Fairclough, also ideological.

Fairclough (1989) also suggests that people bring to textual production and interpretation interplays between properties of texts and what he calls 'member resources'. 'Member resources' (MR) reside within people's heads, as already understood and negotiated, and are drawn upon when they produce and interpret texts. The MRs that people draw on to produce and interpret texts are to Fairclough, cognitive, in the sense that they are processed in thought but are socially generated, and their nature is dependent on social relations and struggles out of which they were generated.

Context and text relations

Halliday & Hasan (1985) makes use of Malinowski's model for studying language, which identifies two important components necessary for understanding spoken and written language that can be defined as text. The first of these is context of situation, and the second of these is context of culture. 'Context of situation' refers to the environment of the text. When Malinowski studied islanders in a fishing village he used the term context of situation to describe the pragmatic, narrative language of certain situations for example a fishing expedition. This is language in action and it is impossible to fully comprehend the situation or action apart from the fact that there is some sort of interaction going on.

Malinowski recognised that any adequate description required more than an immediate account of what is happening at the time but also about the cultural background because any kind of linguistic interaction or conversational exchange is the whole cultural history behind the participants and behind the kinds of practices they are engaging in determining their significance from the culture whether practical or ritual. This is what he refers to as the 'context of culture'. He argued that both contexts are necessary for the adequate understanding of textual formations.

Halliday & Hasan (1985) contend also that language is functional, whether it is spoken or written, it is doing 'a job', serving a purpose, in some context, rather than just existing as isolated sets of words. A text then for them is a semiotic unit. That is, it may look or sound like words and sentences but it is really there in its role to make meanings. Halliday & Hasan thus sees a text as both a product and a process. They are products of a certain social (and historical) environment he argues and they are processes also of the functional organisation of language for meaning making within a socio-historical environment.

For analysing context situations, Halliday & Hasan (1985) propose three levels of engagement that lie behind the processes of making meanings and producing understandings. These levels are: the 'field of discourse' or what's happening; the 'tenor of discourse' that describes the participants or interpersonal relationships within the field; and the 'mode of discourse' or the written or spoken text. These are his levels for analysis of the functional aspect of language used to construct meanings in a particular context or situation.

Halliday & Hasan's (1985) proposition is that the field, tenor and mode of discourse determine the context of a situation. These are, they suggests, the functional components that individuals as part of cultural groups bring to the reading and interpretation of spoken and written texts: it is a way of (a) constructing meanings in certain situations across space and time; the functions of language are also (b) experiential, interpersonal and textual; and there is (c) the relationship between the field, tenor and mode of discourse and the function of the language used. In other words, the functional components of a language of a cultural group situate as *a priori* elements that both inform and limit the meaning of texts as well as their possible responses.

For writers and readers of Aboriginal narratives, and for the writers producing contemporary texts, issues come to a head over the conventions that govern the processes of textual production and this has wider implications for readers and readership. While a situational context analysis of Aboriginal writing may recognise the literal or surface meaning of a context, the construction of meanings from the field (experiential), the tenor (interpersonal) and the mode (textual) may be too unfamiliar to construct meanings from. That is, the field of experience may be out of range or inaccessible, the tenor of the interpersonal may be unrecognisable, or out of tune, and the mode of the text may be unfamiliar or not the familiar *modus operandi*.

Halliday & Hasan (1985) points out for literary narratives the context of situation is the external situation of the reader and the inner situation has to be constructed from the reading. Inferences are made from situation to text and from text to situation. Prediction in the reading of literary texts is closely linked to familiarity. Halliday & Hasan (1985) uses the concept of 'register' to help explain the potential of the reader to make predictions about certain texts and which give rise to certain expectations within literary texts that are linked to familiarity within the context of culture.

'Register' is, for Halliday & Hasan (1985), a semantic concept. Within the context of situation and the context of culture there are a range of different registers. Halliday and Hasan use the terms 'open' and 'closed' to help differentiate between types of registers. A closed register is a very structured situation such as a doctor's appointment or filling out an application form of some kind, where the types of responses are limited and all those involved understand the 'boundaries' of the situation. While no register is entirely open, informal conversation and narrative are the most open ended registers. Registers for Halliday & Hasan therefore are semantic configurations that are associated with the particular social contexts defined in terms of "field, tenor and mode" (1985, p. 38). People will read a literary narrative with a certain set of assumptions and expectations initiated by what Halliday & Hasan (1985) calls registers and Fairclough (1989) calls common-sense assumptions that exist in different contexts of situation and in the broader, institutional context of culture.

Halliday & Hasan's reference to the "meta-functions of language" (1985, p. 42) is also useful to consider here. It has two levels *viz.*, the interpersonal or the 'doing function' and the ideational or the 'thinking/learning function'. Halliday & Hasan's concept of textual "meta-function" (1985, p. 44) is that in order to listen with understanding, or to read a text effectively, we have to be

able to interpret it in terms of all these meta-functions of language (interpersonal and ideational).

Because of the nexus between text and context (situational and cultural), readers make predictions and have expectations and assumptions. The whole point of a passage may be missed or misinterpreted if the reader or listener does not bring to it the appropriate assumptions derived from context of situation. More importantly according to Halliday & Hasan a text has to be interpreted in its culture of context because context of culture determines collectively the way the text is interpreted in the context of situation.

According to Halliday & Hasan then every part of a text is simultaneously text and context. Each element of discourse whether a single sentence or an entire narrative has a value both as a text itself and as context for other text that is to come. This is the foundation of inter-and intra-textuality that I will draw on in places in this thesis. Focussing on the narrative which forms the basis of common-sense assumptions and from which people read requires an awareness of both these functions of a particular textual formation.

Genre and Inter-textuality

Gunther Kress (1985) points out that every aspect of education is about the transmission of society's culture through language in the production of spoken and written texts. He too draws forward notions of 'agency' that are worth considering in a methodological approach for this thesis. Using Foucault's definition of discourse as organised modes of talking and speaking, Kress points out that a discourse organises and gives structure to the manner in which a topic, object, or process can be talked about. This for him underpins genre theories and conventions in Western literary construction and production.

In his discussion of texts, and in particular what gives rise to the process, production, and classification of written texts, Kress argues that listeners and

readers are "not passive" (1985, p. 4). The active role they play in the reconstruction of texts as readers and listeners underlies the learning/thinking/interpretative process. This, for him, is cultural transmission and stresses that linguistic and social processes are connected, which for him emphasizes three related categories: discourse, genre and text *viz.*, categories where underlying socio-linguistic forms can be rediscovered.

A discourse, contends Kress (1985), colonises the world imperialistically from the point of view of one institution. Social processes are spoken and written about in discourse that makes such occurrences seem natural. This set of common-sense assumptions/consensus ideologies constructed through speaking and writing is the power of controlling factor/mechanism of discourse. To him the speaking/writing/reading/listening of individuals is determined by their position/place in institutions, by their place within a certain discourse, and their place particularly in intersecting sets of discourse.

Kress (1985) points out that each different socio-cultural group uses a number of different discourses, or a number of significant institutions exist for one group. For example the discourse of Christianity and that of capitalism can co-exist or exist simultaneously. This is what he terms discursive multiplicity. Such difference, within a controlled space (the post-modern industrial state for example), is both a description of the history of a particular group and an account of their present social condition at any given time.

Following on from this, then, individuals from similar social positions will have similar forms of language available to them. The language theory that can be gleaned from this explains two fundamental factors simultaneously: the social determination of an individual's language on the one hand and individual difference and differing positions *vis a vis* the linguistic system on the other. Texts in Kress's (1985) work are essentially about differences and contesting discourse within a 'known space'. For this reason he argues that

every text has three dimensions: the manifestations of discourses, the meanings of discourses, and the sites of attempts to resolve problems.

Given that all narratives are situated in difference or dialogue, a particular text could be used to change the way all texts are read. A certain text then could be used to construct a new and coherent reading position for future texts. It is helpful to understand that a text has no life of its own and is totally dependent on reading positions/registers/formations to construct meaning from both within the text (through experiential, interpersonal and grammatical formations) and externally through their social condition or position that determines the way individuals within groups make sense of the world. The pathway for narratives then is to construct texts that either confirm or alter the manner in which particular texts are read. Closely linked to this is the task of educators to scaffold particular types of reading positions in relation to a large body of texts from a particular culture as a whole.

Kress (1985) also contends that genres construct reading positions, or that texts and readers are both constructed by discourse and genre. Taking on this argument it could be said that a text is the meeting place for reading a certain discourse categorised by a certain genre. Certain discourses have certain similarities across a range of genres for example colonial discourse or feminist discourse. To Kress the genre encodes a certain set of possibilities to the reader. Or, in other words the genre already always informs the reader of the ways to be a social agent within a certain discourse. Along with the possibilities encoded in genre, texts simultaneously present the range of resources available within discourse, in particular values and what is appropriate, or at least the expectations of that particular discourse.

Approach to study
This thesis will draw on the aforementioned theorists and their work on textual production for exploring narratives involving Aboriginal people and exploring points of disruptions, or points of continuity and discontinuity, with

extant discourses. However, these theories do not adequately address agencies of Aboriginal people. For the purposes of this thesis, inadequacies in this part of their theory formation renders textual engagements with Aboriginal subjects in a contingent relation to a singular and static Western hegemonic condition, uncomplicated by the Aboriginal reality of converging worlds of experience. At the applied level, this limits understandings of individual writer's/reader's variations in textual engagement as contingent on 'member resources', indeed a situation of under-explored 'discursive multiplicity'. However the incorporation of theories that address the agency and problematic of Aboriginal Standpoints (following Nakata) embedded in a different order of things that is also entangled within the Western order and imagination (following Muecke) and represented via Western theories of text, language, and discourse (following Fairclough, Halliday & Hasan & Kress) will, I contend, enable a way for this thesis to explore and re-discover processes in writing/reading/comprehending/re-engaging Aboriginal narratives in textual production and reproduction.

Sites of study

Australian literary critic, Geoffrey Dutton commented at the beginning of his extensive work *The Australian Collection: Australia's Greatest Books* that "[t]o understand a nation one has to read its books" (1985, foreword). Since the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, the Whiteman's Aborigine has been identified, named, related, divided and inscribed in Australian literature and these characteristics cycle through various narratives and genres to retell over and again the same story of Aboriginal experience as at the peripheries of all things Australian. The commonsense is well established. We exist as Aboriginal people from the past, and interestingly without a present. In looking at the placement and position of 'the Aborigine' in Australian literature as a phenomenon in non-Aboriginal consciousness, I have chosen to look closely at three narratives: *Coonardoo* by Katharine Susannah Prichard (1929), *A Fringe of Leaves* by Patrick White (1976) and *Remembering Babylon* by

David Malouf (1993). All three are critically acclaimed Australian authors, nationally and internationally and all employ the style of social realism for representing Aboriginal people and experience. Prichard, White and Malouf begin their representations of 'the Aborigine' with familiar stereotypes and assumptions, common to the time they wrote and use these as a context to move their readers beyond what is known and assumed in order to re-locate and re-present 'the Aborigine'. What these authors also do is represent non-Aboriginal Australians' consciousness of 'the Aborigine'. On occasions, other Australian authors are also discussed in relation to the representation of 'the Aborigine', to explore a particular point further.

In the 1920s Prichard represents 'the Aborigine' through the theme of transgressive love between an Aboriginal woman and a White man. White in the 1970s deploys the noble savage and the practices associated with this state of existence. In the 1990s Malouf constructs hybridity as an ideal but yet to be embraced state of co-existence between Aborigines and settlers. The narratives of Prichard, White and Malouf construct both settler-colonists and Aborigines living on the edges of each other's community, at the intersection between what is known and unknown. Motifs of frontiers, fringes, boundaries, fences and edges are prevalent and sometimes allegorical for edgy states of mind and consciousness as well as physical borders. They all move non-Aboriginal characters away from the thickness and comfort zones of Australia's southern metropolises to edges that border the relatively unknown world of 'the Aborigine' where they are confronted by differences in laws, morals, even social and religious practices.

The narratives following these are *Wild Cat Falling* (Johnson 1965) and *My Place* (Morgan 1987). Both authors have been the subject of controversy in the wider Aboriginal community and both have been chosen for study here as they introduce for the first time new possibilities for readers to consider thinking, speaking Aboriginal characters with Aboriginal standpoints.

Johnson's narrative of an angry young man was published in the mid-sixties and supported by wealthy Western Australian pastoralist and author, Mary Durack. Morgan's narrative of a young Aboriginal woman becoming aware of, tracing, and embracing her missing family history will also be considered.

The five texts provide opportunities to rediscover points of continuity and discontinuity with the held commonsense and to revisit points of transition in narratives which include the Aboriginal presence in order to understand in more depth the possibilities for readers to navigate between what is familiar to what is unfamiliar. This, I propose, will help further our knowledge to inform more productive teaching engagements around narratives involving Aboriginal people.

C h a p t e r   T h r e e

COONARDOO

BY KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD

Prichard's *Coonardoo* was written two decades after *We of the Never Never* by Jeanie Anneas Gunn (1908). While both are frontier narratives, Prichard's *Coonardoo*[4] is framed quite differently from *We of the Never Never*. Gunn's narrative is a contemporaneous account of bush life at the turn of the Nineteenth Century, and of the characters who lived and worked in the far outback of the Northern Territory. Gunn is credited with having written one of the greatest classics of women's writing in Australia because her account describes the impact of a highly educated, city bred woman on Aborigines and the European stockmen. Gunn's narrative introduces few Aboriginal characters. Those she does portray are mainly children, for example Bett-Bett who is the central character in another narrative by Gunn (1905) *The Little Black Princess*. Both narratives dealing with Aboriginal characters were non-controversial, reflected the attitudes of her time, and gave authority to the belief that Aboriginal Australians should change their traditional ways and emulate the more civilised ways of colonialists.

Anthropologist, Baldwin Spencer, praised Gunn's narratives noting in particular that "[o]nly one who really understood and liked the natives, and who at the same time was liked by them, could possibly have written it" (cited in Dutton 1985, p. 86). Thalia Anthony describes the narrative as one of the best known literary representations that projected the new compassion and a fresh approach to the early colonial periods:

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[4] I use italics for Coonardoo when referring to the book, and normal font when referring to the character Coonardoo.

> Contrasting colonisers' relentless approach to cattle spearing on the frontier, she advocated the 'judicious giving of an old bullock at not too rare intervals' in order to keep the Aborigines 'fairly well in hand'. Her response of 'granting fair liberty of travel and a fair percentage of calves or their equivalent in fair payment' reflects changing mentalities from frontier violence to paternalism. (Anthony 2007, p. 41)

Gunn's focus on children enables her to represent their presence without inciting question or controversy about colonial presence, activity or impact. By writing about her experience of the frontier, the unfamiliar can be relegated its place within the larger 'taken for granted' colonial project as something to be worked on and changed. The writing serves to draw in, to suspend, and to re-make the Aborigine in the colonial world rather than illuminate the world as understood by the Aborigine. Geoffrey Dutton writes that "[h]er love and understanding, both of the Never Never and its inhabitants, give the book a sense of unity" (1985, p. 83). Colonial activity – the theft of land and submission of Aboriginal people – is not only silent but the sense of it is reinforced. The so-called unity of the narrative is achieved through the coherence of colonial thinking and analysis remaining undisturbed.

An early rupture to the colonial imagination
In writing *Coonardoo,* Prichard (1929) makes a radical departure from Gunn's and other narratives written to that date that feature Aboriginal characters. As Vance Palmer (1959) pointed out, she constructed mature Aboriginal characters and cast them in relationships with non-Aboriginal characters. In particular, she brought to the forefront the representation of Aboriginal women as attractive and desirable. This departure excited controversy for a number of reasons and makes Prichard's text a useful site for closer examination, for she did disturb the colonial imagination and dared to mention the unmentionable. She did this by revealing a slice of the early contact zone – the inter-cultural space of social/sexual relations – that contained possibilities for shared and common understanding between

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. She characterised her Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal protagonists as belonging to, and in, this emerging space of highly charged moral dimensions, and as characters tugged at always by the stronger, more deeply entrenched meanings of their separate social domains. But her imagined drama also highlights that the consequence of entertaining this world of fragile possibilities was personal ruin. The ambiguities of the shared space present as sites of confusion, conflict, moral dilemma, and irreconcilability, while the entrenched meanings of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains provide the parameters for a certain belonging, resolution and/or inevitability. Prichard attempts a challenge to colonial sensibilities about the boundaries between 'races' but she did not threaten them. Nakata's (2007a) sense of the ambiguities and irreconcilabilities of the Cultural Interface are borne out in Prichard's representations but so are his frustrations, with the narrative resolution returning to the certainties of separate domains rather than the contemplation of alternate possibilities for Indigenous-Western relations. The impossibility of love between Aboriginal woman and non-Aboriginal man is inevitably upheld.

Coonardoo was inspired by a story Prichard was told by a friend who lived on a remote cattle station in the north-west of Western Australia. It was the story of an Aboriginal woman mustering cattle with her child slung against her body who flung her baby with desperate rage and abandoned it among the rocks of a dry creek bed. Ric Throssell, Prichard's son, wrote later in his memoirs that:

> Before she could write the story of that primitive, simple tragedy, Katharine believed she must see and know the country—to try and understand how a woman could be driven to such terrible madness. (Throssell 1975, p. 48)

Prichard made the journey to the north-west of Australia accompanied by her young son, Ric Throssell, and wrote later that it was through watching the childhood games of Ric and the Aboriginal children on the cattle station that

she conceived the idea for the tragedy of an Aboriginal girl's love for a non-Aboriginal man.

When *Coonardoo* was announced the winner of the 1928 *Bulletin* competition, and later serialised in the *Bulletin*, it aroused a storm of controversy–although literary critics in Australia, England and America recognised it as a major literary achievement. Leonard Gould for example wrote in the *London Observer*, "A novel of which Australia may well be proud" (Throssell 1975, p. 54). Correspondents of the *Bulletin* on the other hand questioned the validity of the novel's characterisation, as well as the reality of station life depicted. They also complained in shocked protest at the casual sexual relationships between non-Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women which the book revealed (see Throssell 1975). This attitude was by no means confined just to the suburbs. The writer Mary Gilmore wrote to prominent Australian author Nettie Palmer to convey her disgust: "What an appalling thing *Coonardoo* is! It is not merely a journalistic description of station life, it is vulgar and dirty" (Throssell 1975, p. 54).

Adam Shoemaker (1989) points out that it was not just the narrative's explicit handling of a love affair between a non-Aboriginal man and an Aboriginal woman that attracted criticism. Prichard's novel was damned with ironic praise for its romantic idealisation of traditional Aboriginal life. For example in 1928, the *Bulletin* reported,

> Miss Prichard (Mrs Throssell) paints a vivid picture of a woman's life and work on a remote run. There are fine incidental glimpses of the aborigines of those parts- easily the finest type of blacks in Australia. (1928, p. 5*)*

Cecil Mann, one of the competition judges, believed that in refusing to keep off the subject of "black velvet", Prichard had tried the almost impossible task of making "the Australian aboriginal a romantic figure" (cited in Throssell 1975, p. 55). He went on to say

With any other native from fragrant Zulu girl to fly kissed Arab maid, she could have done it. But the aboriginal, in Australia, anyway cannot excite any higher feeling than nauseated pity or comical contempt. With the white flame of the author's creative power burning through it, it is itself vital—a harsh but living piece of literature. (Mann cited in Throssell 1975, p. 55)

Prichard's narrative shocked Australian readers to the extent that the *Bulletin* refused to serialise Vance Palmer's 1928 manuscript *Men Are Human* (See Palmer, 1930) that dealt with the same issues as *Coonardoo*. S. H Prior, editor of the *Bulletin*, wrote to Palmer saying,

Our disastrous experience with *Coonardoo* shows us that the Australian public will not stand stories based on a white man's relationship with an aborigine. There is no chance I suppose of you white washing the girl? (Letter from S.H Prior to Vance Palmer, 9 May 1929. Palmer Collection, National Library MS 1174)

The early reviews and controversy surrounding the serialisation and subsequent publication of *Coonardoo* placed much emphasis on the love story and the exoticness of place and characters involved. For those in mainly southern areas of Australia, far away from remote regions where traditional Aboriginal people lived, Prichard's narrative offered a slice of a different world and a glimpse of what her work pre-empted as a new social reality or phenomenon. The Australian reading public was yet to see Aboriginal women cast in romantic liaisons with non-Aboriginal men as a subject of literature, and the criticisms of pastoralist writers such as Mary Gilmore fuelled an interest in the narrative as an exposé of something previously considered a taboo subject of conversation, let alone public literature.

Despite the controversy over the depictions of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal relations, the images Prichard constructed of Aboriginal characters in the situational and cultural contexts of the narrative became familiar over time and engaged, in turn, new conversations of the 'Aborigine' until they were

later disrupted and moved on again by writers such as Patrick White in his 1961 and 1976 novels.

Expanding colonial consciousness

Healy (1978) points out that Nineteenth Century Australian literature was haunted by the presence of 'the Aborigine' in literature. The writings for example of Harpur (1861, 1883), McCrae (1867), Stephens (1873), Boldrewood (1888), Furphy (1903) and Tucker (1929), evidence this even though their Aboriginal characters were in the main child-like, pathetic or contemptuous. But this consciousness receded at the turn of the Century, around the time of Federation and did not re-emerge until the late 1920s when established authors such as Prichard, Palmer and, later in the 1930s, Xavier Herbert sought to capture the growing awareness and changing consciousness of the Australian public towards 'the Aborigine'.

Healy (1978) writes that Prichard's interest in 'the Aborigine' as a subject of fiction in the 1920s was a product of a re-emergence of metropolitan interest in Aboriginal affairs stemming from a number of devastating incidents in the centre and north-west of Australia. The 1926 Umbali Massacre in the Kimberley region of Western Australia led to the formation of a Royal Commission. The findings were published in 1927 and had repercussions beyond Western Australia. Shortly following the publication of this report, the Conniston Station Massacre occurred on the Lander River north west of Alice Springs in 1928. Healy notes that the crimes and the actions of the colonisers were evident but the debate they generated lasted into the thirties and was the most intense in Australia since Gipp's governorship of New South Wales.

Hodge and Mishra (1990) also note that *Coonardoo* was immensely popular and recognised to have polemic and radical intent while, at the same time, it drew on resources and traditions from within the colonial system that complied with its prescriptions. They point out that to *Coonardoo* Prichard emphasised the factual basis of the novel and its grounding in first-hand knowledge and

research in the field. Her preface appealed to Ernest Mitchell the Protector of Aborigines for Western Australia at the time who openly stated that "no one in this country has wider knowledge and more sympathetic understanding for the No'-West tribes" and that he "could not fault with the drawing of aborigines and conditions in *Coonardoo* as he knew them" (cited in Hodge and Mishra 1990, p. 54).

It is important to pause here to note the context of debate and changing opinions at the time that *Coonardoo* was produced. A broader rupture in non-Aboriginal Australian consciousness was occurring and this fracture and subsequent tension raised difficult questions in colonial Australia in the 1930s. Consciously or unconsciously Prichard's narrative reflected such questions in the forum of public literature and national fiction. Outside of the plot, setting and characters of *Coonardoo*, the theme is broader and captures the beginning of a shift in colonial consciousness towards 'the Aborigine'. She attempts a theme that taps into the changing consciousness of the times but the reading of her text is constrained by the persistence of an embedded moral/colonial discourse around Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. The production of the text runs ahead of the reader's disposition to relate to the text.

A narrative, then, positions its subjects in a particular frame that sets the background and situational context for action and character development. Writers frame for their own particular purposes: to make the narrative work, to distinguish the narrative from others, to highlight a particular setting or situation, to address broader themes, to provide insight into the human condition. A reader's access to the meanings within the narrative hinges not just on the particular formation of storylines and the language used but also the inter-textual connections with associated fields of knowledge – in this case, of the social mores of the time, of frontier history, of anthropological knowledge of Aboriginal people or geographical knowledge of the country and so on. The reader is invited to look within the chosen frame and to

understand and interpret via background setting, genre, plot, character development, structure, and language use and their own prior knowledge or 'member resources' (following Kress, 1985, Halliday & Hasan 1985, Fairclough, 1989).

Healy (1978) notes that Prichard moved with creative insight into a new field of Australian experience – mixed romantic/sexual relations – in advance of any signalling from her society and in defiance of any restrictive prejudices. There are two significant points that warrant further examination here. Firstly, the new field of Australian experience that Healy refers to is not something new but arguably something making itself felt in different ways beyond the frontier. *Coonardoo* was the harbinger of a new direction in non-Aboriginal urban consciousness of Aboriginal people. Secondly, Healy notes that Prichard allowed herself to be free of restrictive prejudices. But this is questionable. Her prejudices arguably give shape to the particular characteristics of Coonardoo. For example, Coonardoo's loyalty and industriousness are constructed as desirable, positive traits but she is unable to fully capitalise on her potential strengths because as an Aboriginal character she is also confined as being superstitious, simple and a victim of her own sexuality.

Hodge and Mishra (1990) contend that the narrative does not demonstrate a fresh or original grasp of Aboriginal life. The representation of the character Coonardoo is the combination of a number of stereotypes:

> Its heroine, Coonardoo, an Aboriginal woman born on a White station in Western Australia, is represented as capable and even reliable in performing domestic duties, but otherwise is shown without powers of thought or conceptualisation. She is passionate, intense, loving and loyal to the White station owner, Hugh, beyond his merits—but intellectually she is not far above a faithful dog or horse. (Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 54)

For Hodge and Mishra, the narrative's originality lay in its grasp of the intrinsic connection of Aborigines, however superficially constructed with the problems of legitimacy.

> What Prichard did grasp, at the same time she was failing to understand the Aborigines of the north-west, was the complex patterns of ownership in the frontier situation. As a result her novel was able to lay down the outlines of a new foundation myth for European invaders. (Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 54)

Notwithstanding stereotypical and superficial the portrayal of Coonardoo is, the narrative is arguably a social commentary on the changing conditions that began to agitate the conscience of colonialists at the same time as becoming a narrative which played to the tension in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships during the 1920s and 30s. Colonial poet and critic, Charles Harpur states: "[t]hat to make any matter, of what kind so ever, the subject of set, or artistic thought, is not only to exalt, but to some degree to cleanse it" (cited in Healy 1978, p. 141). Prichard can be credited with elevating the status of Aboriginal experience through *Coonardoo* and in particular with providing non-Aboriginal readers an opportunity to come to terms with the idea of intimate relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

In her later life Prichard outlined her reasons for writing the narrative. The motivation for the book she writes "was to draw attention to the abuse of Aboriginal women by white men - a subject that demanded immediate attention" (cited in Irwin 1956, p. 31). While the comment is retrospective, *Coonardoo* does evidence Harpur's earlier comment and represents what Muecke (1992) describes as an attempt to bring the marginalised (in this case the Aborigine) closer to the centre for consideration through literature. Hugh and Coonardoo are victims of a colonial settler society that did not tolerate inter-racial relationships. Yet such relationships were known to exist and became the tension that drove the narrative as well as the social context in which the narrative was produced.

Positioning the background context

The setting of the narrative is microcosmic. As Anne Brewster (2002) points out, there is no mention of the oppressive and restrictive government policies that existed at the time for Aboriginal Australians. It is interesting to consider for instance that while Doris Pilkington's (1996) work *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* was written retrospectively from an Aboriginal standpoint, it speaks of the same period in Western Australia in which Prichard wrote *Coonardoo* but brings to the forefront a completely different reality for Aboriginal people. Healy writes,

> Katharine Prichard, at the time she wrote, was essentially writing in a vacuum from which historical dimension was almost entirely lacking. She saw her subject in a void because in terms of a general consciousness it was a void, unconnected with war and markets. (1978, p. 151)

The 'void' in which the context of the narrative is constructed enables Prichard to assign Aboriginal characteristics in ways that help to reduce reader awareness of the political position of Aboriginal people at the frontier and to render silent the possible critical readings of colonial activity at the same time. Unlike Pilkington's (1996) narrative, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence,* which arguably implicates all Australians by complicity in the oppressive government policies that governed the lives of Aboriginal people, *Coonardoo* transports the reader to a context that is remote, exotic and unconventional. The central characters are star-crossed lovers and Prichard's use of inter-textual devices, an ill-fated love story, a curse, and the tragedy that unfolds through the dramatic turns in the narrative moves the reader away from the 'bigger picture' and more confronting images of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experience in north-west Australia such as those described by Pilkington. This however makes it possible for non-Aboriginal readers to relate to the emotions and predicament of certain characters within the text without needing to consider the wider implications of what makes this situation possible in the first place.

From the Aboriginal students' standpoint, many are shocked by the violence and exploitation of Aboriginal women described in the narrative. Many are also critical of the way Prichard constructs the rough and degrading treatment of Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men as common place and of how the author goes on to rationalise this behaviour as a 'natural' transgression and outcome of the passing of power to the pastoralists. More notable for them, is the contrast with non-Aboriginal violence, which is constructed as the individual actions of colonial settlers under pressure from an exotic frontier environment. What frustrates them most, is the ease by which non-Aboriginal students reading *Coonardoo* can detach themselves from their colonial history and its ongoing consequences for Aboriginal people, by their failure to notice or consider the basis for the social relations constructed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters in the narrative.

For teaching purposes, the context where Prichard's characters are cast is a potential site for mediating reading responses. Prichard's focus on the immediate situation and context of characters opens up possibilities for re-discovering the terms of what is possible and what is not possible for Aboriginal characters in the narrative. The text can be examined to consider how the characters are positioned to open up certain possibilities for Aboriginal subjects and then close them again. For example, as Healy (1978) points out Coonardoo operates in a void, as an ahistorical subject. Prichard's central Aboriginal character is assigned a presence only within Hugh's settler world. This affords the character of Coonardoo little dialogue as the action of the narrative is played out. Her thoughts are mediated through Prichard as an omniscient narrator. She is represented with no other ambition than to remain on the land where she was born, now the cattle station, and serve Hugh. As a character without a past and without her own thoughts, she is cast in a timeless vacuum where she moves between the static world of her own people and that of the onward progressing world of hard-working pastoralists. The tragedy of the ending relates to Coonardoo being driven

from this timeless, changeless state by Hugh's rage. She moves from being 'unsettled' in her own land by the presence of pastoralists (and where she had come to terms with the relationship) to being cast out by the man she has helped. While Aboriginal students, with their own 'member resources' of Aboriginal historical experience may read an instance of dispossession, non-Aboriginal students read the dramatic resolution of a love story that was never meant to be. Notwithstanding this, the narrative successfully reaches the void in Australian psyche that Healy refers to as it constructs and re-presents certain Aboriginal characters as exceptional individuals under the 'care' and control of well-meaning but misguided pastoralists.

The achievement of Prichard's text, through the setting of the narrative is that the political presence of the Aboriginal position is submerged, rendering the discomfort of this Aboriginal reality invisible to non-Aboriginal readers. The more comfortable myth is preserved – that there was in this historical moment no possibility for loving 'mixed-relations', not even in the ambiguous space of the frontier – and the emerging world of the new colonies is the only new order possible. Any empathy for the Aboriginal position is domesticated to conform to the ongoing narrative at the time of a dying/assimilating 'race' (Herbert 1938). The particular standpoint of those times is thus preserved as logical and sensible, even in a retrospective reading.

By contrast to Aboriginal students, many non-Aboriginal students express that when they have read this work they have read an 'Aboriginal story' rather than a story of 'Aboriginal representation'. Coonardoo as a colonial subject remains elusive to many of these students. As Healy argues, while

> theses that surround [Prichard's Coonardoo] fade, she remains and what remains is substantial. But it is also passive, and in this passivity we can detect an inability to connect Coonardoo with a real world and a real history. (1978, p. 152)

Without mediation of the writing/reading positions to situate Prichard's narrative and make explicit its relation to the larger historical Aboriginal reality at the time, non-Aboriginal students' capacity to, firstly, recognise the textual practices that work to position their reading and secondly, to access other constructions by Aboriginal writers that are unfamiliar is likely to remain impeded.

Prichard's depoliticised context represents the writer's choice whether consciously or unconsciously and can be contrasted to Xavier Herbert who less than a decade later writes of the frontier but without rendering it an apolitical space. Like Prichard's (1929) work, Herbert's *Capricornia (*1938) is also a tragedy of Aboriginal people caught between two worlds and belonging to neither, and of non-Aboriginal people's cruelty, confusion and inability to relate to Aboriginal people. With few exceptions, the settler characters in the narrative are portrayed as cruel, harsh, insensitive and disturbed by their encounters with the frontier and its original inhabitants. Like Prichard's central character, Hugh, they have an inability to express this confusion and it transforms to anger and 'understandable' aggression.

Herbert's (1938) narrative, however, is not absent of broader societal dimensions. He refers to the oppressive and restrictive policy governing the lives of Aboriginal people at the time. The storyline of Tim O'Cannon's discovery of Connie Pan and Tocky (a mother and child of mixed heritage), and their delivery to the local authorities and their re-location to the 'Half-caste Home', is an example of such.

Unlike Prichard's work, Aboriginal characters in Herbert's narrative are not romantic. Aboriginal characters are predominately tragic, hopeless figures in the throes of either dying or relinquishing their culture as the allegory at the beginning of the narrative predicts. Norman (which in the narrative means no-name) and Tocky and her baby who perish under tragic circumstances at the narrative's conclusion are the dominant Aboriginal representations.

While Herbert continues Prichard's inferred theme of the passing of the 'Aborigine' in *Capricornia* (1938) and accepts it as inevitable, he questions the process (the treatment of Aborigines while they are passing) and acknowledges himself as part of this process. Unlike Prichard, Herbert seeks to subvert the Australian frontier myth as expressed in the pioneering saga. All attempts to 'civilise' the land of Capricornia are constructed as being absurd, inhumane and immoral. The absurdity of the situation according to Herbert is the feeble and incompetent challenges of non-Aboriginal settlers to the savage caprices of the Capricornia inhabitants and their nature. Encounters between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal often end in death or tragedy in the narrative and this brings this aspect of colonial history into the realm of reader consciousness.

While the tone of Herbert's narrative is sympathetic to the original inhabitants who had to either relinquish their land and heritage or die, his narrative subscribes to a 'natural' order of things where the primitive are consumed by the march of the civilised. Herbert (1938) acknowledges the cruelty and deprivation for both parties involved in this 'inevitable process' of progress. *Capricornia* revolves around the clash of the rational, capitalist economies of the West with the so-called primitive minds of nomads in hunter/gatherer societies who cannot recognise the economic resources on which they are living. Herbert also sees the colonial process as damaging and detrimental to both colonisers and colonised. In the immediate sense the damage appears to be a one-way- process where Aboriginal people, lands, customs, beliefs are decimated, but his narrative alludes to a sense of retrospective colonial guilt and the need for non-Aboriginal Australians to acknowledge the dishonest premise on which the colony of Australia was occupied. Patrick White extends this theme in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), and his inter-textual play on the narrative of Joseph Conrad and the Belgian Congo in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) suggest that order is sometimes reversed and the 'savage' is civilised and the so-called 'civilised' are savage.

Both narratives *Coonardoo* (1929) and *Capricornia* (1938) continue a certain order of things that were assumed in colonial society during the inter-war period. Prichard's choice of context does not concern itself with questioning the order of things. She asks rather what the 'moral' choices available to non-Aboriginals are now that they have extended the boundaries of their control to a contact zone. The context of the cattle station with a benevolent owner who tolerates Aboriginal people because they are 'passing' brings into the realm of coherence an image of a deferential parental relationship between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal as natural and necessary. Herbert (1938) does seek to question the processes of the order of things but not the inevitability of such order. Comparisons of these narratives reveal that authors construct the realities they represent to express particular themes that are of interest to readers and which provide a motivation to write. A point of inquiry emerges around how readers' consciousness is also contained and/or expanded through other techniques and practices of writing.

The genre of romance: positioning mixed sexual relations
In choosing to write about sexual relationships between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men, Prichard exposes what had already become an exploitative colonial practice. She deploys the frontier as the context where the emotional life of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can be explored with some safety as a subject of literature. Within this context an ill-fated love story unfolds between two main protagonists - one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal.

The tragedy builds around the containment of the two main characters from expressing and enacting their affection because of colonial attitudes to Aboriginal people and more specifically White Australia's intolerance of inter-

racial relationships[5]. Prichard promotes this frontier as one where power is precariously balanced and where the development of interdependent relations between Aboriginal people and settlers was more likely to be understood. Unlike the pastoral empires of the southern states of Australia, where the Aboriginal population was by that time outnumbered by colonists, the north-west Australian frontier operated on a different dynamic, where the colonists were outnumbered by the Aboriginal population. Pastoralist authority there was dependent on utilising local Aboriginal labour and, as in the case of the fictitious Wytaliba property and the Watt family, local knowledge of the environment they were attempting to develop for profit and posterity. In this context, social relations to some extent reflected the inter-dependence between Aboriginal people and the early pioneers. More intimate relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can be explored safely in this fringe setting, even if they inevitably must fail and end in tragedy to resolve the moral dilemma produced in such social relations.

In constructing the possibility for this love story, Prichard built a narrative that enables her readers to understand the basis for deep love between her protagonists. The inspiration she took for the narrative from observations of her own child playing with Aboriginal children on the cattle station should not be underestimated for its capacity to scaffold non-Aboriginal readers to a position where they can access and believe the narrative. Much is made within the narrative of Coonardoo and Hugh's childhood friendship—a shared space of inter-subjective understanding where each was introduced to and grew with a foot in the other's world. As a child Coonardoo is considered a suitable play-mate for Hugh. In this interaction between the characters of Coonardoo and Hugh, Prichard elicits the non-Aboriginal perspective of the exceptional qualities of the Aboriginal child. An Aboriginal student may see that what the

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[5] The White Australia Policy dictated Australia's obsession with racial purity. For a detailed view of the development of the White Australia Policy as it related to the control of immigrant labour see Myra Willard's (1923) History of the White Australia Policy to 1920, Melbourne University Press.

author is highlighting, for example the child's intelligence, willingness to learn, loyalty, fineness of features, cleanliness, and so forth are all traits that many non-Aboriginal readers at the time would not have associated with Aboriginal people. Coonardoo, through her long association with Hugh and familiarity with his ways, becomes more acceptable as a possible partner.

The genre of romance, as a well-established form of narrative, produces particular readings of romance and therefore of character and drama. Expectations and predictability anchored within the assumptions of what romantic and sexual relations mean (or can possibly mean) in the Western context frame the unfolding narrative for non-Aboriginal readers. Although providing an important access point for readers, the choice of genre produces a particular reading of the Aboriginal subjects.

Positioning possible relations: approaching the discomfort zone
Healy (1978) proposes that if literature is one of the dominant modes by which a culture becomes conscious, then it is only by studying that consciousness in that form that one can discover its shape. The consciousness that Prichard brings to the forefront is that White Australia can no longer ignore relationships between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men and that such relationships bring with them consequences and changes to the way non-Aboriginal Australians see themselves. The meaning of new phenomena within a text, such as *Coonardoo,* is actively negotiated and produced in specific social contexts by specific participants who are positioned to accept an understanding of the world that they are reading about, by both the text and the *a priori* knowledge and assumptions about the subject that they bring to the reading of the text. In this way the primary world of the reader and the secondary world (see Berger & Luckmann 1966) of the text interact to produce new meanings and different understandings. A new layer of understanding can be incorporated into what is already understood about a

subject or a topic. This new layer may go so far as to de-stabilise and disrupt what has made sense in the past and act as a catalyst for re-evaluation.

Healy (1978) traces the genesis of Prichard's use of Aboriginal women as a subject of fictional narrative in a previous work by Prichard, *Brumby Innes,* which won the Triad Prize in 1927 (see final publication of this work as Prichard 1940). He argues that Prichard does not elevate the dismissal of the main female character, May, as a fully fledged thesis. There is, however, one behind it which Healy proposes comes to fruition in Prichard's *Happiness* (1932) and in particular, *Coonardoo* (1929). The emerging thesis Healy identifies has its structural presence in *Coonardoo*.

> What station life in the outback needed was white women free of pretension, who recognised the task their men faced in settling the land. Because white women were not up to the task white men were placed in an impossible situation. With the absence, or spoiled presence of white women, the question boiled down to the kind of relations the men would have with Aboriginal women. (Healy 1978, p. 145)

As a character, however, Coonardoo is presented as flat and simplistic. In relation to Hugh's needs and to a lesser extent the needs of his daughter Phyllis, she has flashes of intuition and insight that bring her into the intellectual domain of the non-Aboriginal world but these are fleeting and stem from her deep-set loyalty and love of Hugh. Her main actions and dialogue revolve around Hugh and his best interests. She continues to bear his cold behaviour, aggression, surly moods and despondency as her responsibility and her lot in life. Any escape from this or attempt by Coonardoo to improve her situation is denied her within the narrative.

The narrative is also developed through a series of micro tragedies that accumulate for the ultimately tragic ending. Underlying this is Mrs Bessie's (Hugh's mother) prejudices and her obsession that her son will 'marry White'. Her insistence that he promise her this on her death-bed along with the

extraction of a promise from Coonardoo that she will serve Hugh as a faithful servant and never leave Wytaliba form the basis of the 'curse' that looms over the station after her death and causes the demise of Hugh and Coonardoo. Hugh breaks this promise by taking Coonardoo as a lover, fathering their child, Winni, then driving her from the land. Prichard constructs this as a White man's dilemma. There is no dilemma for Coonardoo moving between two worlds if only Hugh would accept her. For Coonardoo the situation is simple and her choice of possibilities as an Aboriginal subject in the textual production is limited.

The main tragedy that Prichard (1929) constructs for her readers is Hugh's inability to accept such unconditional love and loyalty from an Aboriginal woman. The acceptance or rejection of this by Hugh is pivotal as Coonardoo acts and reacts solely in relation to him. When she is forced to leave Wytaliba, the land will not produce for Hugh. In the seasons that follow Coonardoo's banishment the station falls under a curse. Good rains fall on all the neighbouring stations but Wytaliba is by-passed. No longer able to make a living from the cattle industry Hugh tries his luck exporting horses to the Philippines but this too fails to make the money needed to maintain his tenure of the land. Winni leaves to go off in search of his mother. The bank forecloses on his mortgage and Hugh is forced to sell Wytaliba to Sam Geary whom he despises and whom his mother despised for his open relationships with Aboriginal women. Geary, however boorish, has overcome the restrictive prejudices of his own society's social mores. His acquisition of Wytaliba opens a possibility for the recognition of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians as a basis for settler legitimacy and inheritance of land and property in the future.

Prichard exposes the moral dilemma of inter-racial relationships between men and women at the frontier in a literary narrative for her readers to consider. She asks an old question in a new form. She positions the Aboriginal subject

within the romantic discourse and allows the Aboriginal subject into the personal realm where non-Aboriginal men re-discover Aboriginal women as desirable subjects (see Muecke 1992). Healy (1978) describes Prichard's depiction of Aboriginal subjects as the recovery of White consciousness.

Sam Geary is the ironic alternative to Hugh. Prichard's construction of Geary is worth exploring for what it says to non-Aboriginal readers. Geary practises polygamy and has no dilemma about taking Aboriginal women as wives. He openly expresses the view that the north-west frontier is not a suitable place for non-Aboriginal women. On the frontier, the treatment of Aboriginal subjects is far from ideal but ironically, despite Prichard's construction of Geary as deranged, his treatment of Aboriginal women and the children of such relationships is preferable to that of Hugh. Furthermore, Prichard's construction of Geary as rough and crass, implicitly says to non-Aboriginal readers that this (Geary) is the type of man suited to relationships with Aboriginal women because he is not burdened by the same sense of guilt or decency as Hugh is. Geary, with fewer scruples and morals, accepts and treats Aboriginal women and their children better than Hugh. This comparison between the characters of the non-Aboriginal men in the narrative and the different choices they make defines the basis of morality being played out and to a large extent highlights what informs the limits of what is possible and not possible for Aboriginal women in the narrative. Even more ironic is the fact that the end of the narrative sees Geary emerge as financially and emotionally unscathed by his experiences with Aboriginal women, whereas Hugh at the closure of the narrative is financially and emotionally destitute.

The possibilities for relations between non-Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women are thus held in contradiction. The choice of a disreputable male character to dispense with providing a legitimate and recognised status for Aboriginal women is upheld by the construction of a weak but reputable male character who could not maintain respectful relations with the Aboriginal

woman he loved. In this way, Aboriginal women's relations with non-Aboriginal men are constructed as problematic in and of themselves, whatever the education, morality, and character of the protagonists. The resolution of contradiction could only be via the demise of or distaste for the characters. The moral to be drawn suggests Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal relations at this level are unviable and in this way the official and moral line of separation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is upheld.

Mediating the unfamiliar: The use of exotica

Prichard provides some interesting textual means to mediate the expectations of a narrative resolution embedded in the romance genre. The exotic location of the romance, and the exoticness of the central character Coonardoo, positions readers to accept some differences in the predictability of the romance and in the detail of the unfolding events. The conditions are expected to be different in this time, in this inter-cultural 'contact' zone, where different knowledge/ignorance of the land and social mores are continually made evident. Mann's comment above (cited in Throssell 1975, p. 55) is worth returning to as his identification of exoticness and fringes in Prichard's text are key transit points for non-Aboriginal readers to enter the realm of a different world that Prichard constructs. The narrative offers a glimpse of this other world where certain Aboriginal characters are described, explained and fore-grounded in ways different from anthropological or scientific discourse. Coonardoo's value to Hugh is recognised and this elevates her presence as a central character. Her presence enriches and complicates the narrative by drawing in the exotic world that produces the barriers between her and Hugh. The acceptance of the proposition of the exotic and the forbidden is important when understanding and gauging non-Aboriginal responses to *Coonardoo*. An Aboriginal perspective may find little if anything exotic or novel about such situations because these were lived experiences with more often than not painful legacies and consequences that are still within memory.

Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2002) note that one of the more complex features of settler colonies is how systems of thought are manifested through writing. The use of Aborigines as subjects in literary texts represents an attempt by settlers to incorporate or utilise a pre-existing aesthetic dimension identified with the Aboriginal people of the country. They cite the example of the Jindyworobak movement in Australia in the 1930s and 40s as a loose attempt to develop an identifiable Australian aesthetic from the rich fabric of Aboriginal culture. The use of eclectic Aboriginal words can be seen as appropriation in this movement as a way of claiming something from a lost culture—a form of selective salvage through textual discourse as both romantic and anthropological.

Prichard was attempting to bring the Aborigine into the realm of understanding for non-Aboriginal audiences and in doing so she constructed certain characteristics and images of Aboriginal experience such as superstition, ritual, promiscuity and violence. Through these characteristics and images, Prichard's narrative re-names and re-positions Aboriginal experience according to the Western order of things and locates unfamiliar representations into the proximity of what is already understood and accepted. Increasing awareness of an author's techniques for successful transportation of unfamiliar concepts, characters and relationships in the formation of narrative, to within reach of what is known and accepted by the reader, implies explicit attention to this aspect of textual positioning for student readers.

Shifting the boundaries: Opening new spaces
The success of Prichard's narrative, in terms of public readership over time and the place it has been assigned to in the Australian literary canon, lies in her ability to move and position the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters to a common space, the frontier, and bring to the forefront the needs dictated by the environment where they are both contained. In the case of Prichard it

is the construction of a microcosm where complex emotions of individuals appear to be beyond the broader influence of markets and governments. She positions the non-Aboriginal characters away from the thickness of the metropolis that are the domain of the settlers to the thinness of the fringes or frontiers, previously the domain of the Aborigine, where the rules and social mores of the metropolis are placed under pressure, change in dysfunctional ways, perhaps, but are also easily understood as necessary. She constructs a suspenseful veneer of colonial morals versus frontier needs. In the case of *Coonardoo*, it is the needs of the non-Aboriginal men on the frontier for sex and domestic companionship, and the potential Aboriginal women have to fulfil this need that bring the two into intimate contact. Prichard reduces her Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects to relations as basic and essential for survival as food, shelter, protection and sex. She moves her subjects, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, away from the comfort zone of the metropolis and into the discomfort of the contact zone. The context of the contact zone becomes a secondary world for readers to contemplate. The reader is positioned to view this secondary world, however, through the lens of their primary world, shaped through the language, discourse, logic and experience embodied in the reader and expressed in the author's text. The edges of continuity and discontinuity with familiar and unfamiliar representations evidence a way of moving from one to the other within the narrative and a process for maintaining coherence with both.

In explicating the practices of Orientalism, Edward Said (1978) identifies similar textual processes used in the ways the Orient comes to be experienced by the West,

> ....they shape the language, perception and form of the encounter between East and West. What gives the vast number of encounters some unity, however, is the vacillation… Something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another, a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel and completely

well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things. (1978, pp. 58-9)

Said understands the Western construct of the Orient position as a precarious space that "vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers from delight in - or fear of - novelty" (1978, p. 59). Through similar textual practices, the Aborigines on the frontier are constructed by Prichard around familiar and sometimes contemptuous stereotypes but they are also, through Coonardoo's character imbued with new and unfamiliar characteristics and/or qualities that have the potential to re-engage students' understanding of Aboriginal Australians.

In sum, Prichard extends the boundaries beyond what has previously been possible for the Aborigine in the Australian literary landscape. She casts Aboriginal women in relationships with non-Aboriginal men and asks her non-Aboriginal audience to consider the consequence. Healy (1978) attributes the success of *Coonardoo* to Prichard's recognition and ability to articulate four significant issues to her reading audience. The first is her sense of the Aboriginal world as an intersection of the physical and the mythic *viz.*, as a source of both wonder and value.

> Her subject was islanded into unreality, and she was faced for the first time in her history, with a world commensurate with her capacity for wonder. So we have genuine contemplation: of Aborigines, of station life, of the country. For her and her contemporary readers, it was a world full of wonder. Coonardoo was a celebration of Aboriginal Australia. (Healy 1978, p. 151)

The second is Prichard's awareness of the type of accommodation (isolated stations) available to non-Aboriginal men on the frontier. Third is her knowledge and understanding of the role of women, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in the process of settlement. Fourth, and most importantly in

Healy's assessment, the success of the narrative was Prichard's intimate knowledge of the fundamental tension of the settler world at the frontier.

Containing the Aboriginal world within colonial understandings

The settler world defines the primary reference point and sets the boundaries for the reader. It marks the point from which Prichard intends to lead her audience into a secondary world (see Berger-Luckmann 1966) where the experiences and actions of the characters can be made finite for the consumption and understanding of the readers. Martin Heidegger notes that "[a] boundary is not that at which something stops, but as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*" (1971, p. 152). A boundary then signals disputed territory. A text constructed within this space has the potential, as Kress (1985) points out, to be a site for change. Prichard brings into the realm of non-Aboriginal understanding the frontier as a boundary where the presence of Aboriginal subjects intersects with colonisers to cause a moral dilemma.

What Prichard does is contain the Aboriginal characters she constructs in genres that are familiar to non-Aboriginal readers. Within these confines she constructs images of Aboriginal people that have been familiarised through anthropological, romantic and racist discourses. Here, Muecke's (1992) notion of available discourses on Aboriginality is useful to understand how the field of possible meanings is shaped for readers. While early criticisms of the narrative made accusations that the work was 'vulgar and dirty' because of its explicit handling of casual sexual relations between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men, Prichard did for the first time afford an unfamiliar status and character to an Aboriginal woman – mutual recognition and desirability. Prichard constructs these alongside many other images of Aboriginal women that are familiar. She continues the familiar assumptions of Aboriginal people contained within the romantic, anthropological and colonial discourses

available and introduces other tensions and dimensions which re-position the subject for the reader.

Healy's (1978) comment on the passivity of subjects within Prichard's narrative is also salient. To control the verb is to control the action and therefore agency of the subject. Coonardoo is always the recipient or the subject of Hugh's actions. Her character vacillates between animal characteristics, such as the loyalty of a faithful dog, the energy of a young horse, the promiscuity of a minx, the helplessness of a bird before a snake and inanimate objects. She is the stick Mollie uses to beat Hugh with. She is also the link which anchors Hugh to Wytaliba, "Coonardoo had been the one sure thing in his life when his mother went out of it. He grasped her. She was a stake, something to hang on to" (C: 108-9). And finally, Coonardoo is "a shaft of deep tranquil devotion" (C: 108-9) on whom Hugh depends and relies. In each case she is both the subject of and subject to the action—as an object of the main character.

Healy (1978) goes on to argue that this passivity of subject leads to an inability to connect *Coonardoo* with a real world because the essence of Aboriginal existence within the narrative is ahistorical. Her continuity with the Aboriginal world renders her inadequate and her discontinuity with the Aboriginal world also renders her inadequate to the task of managing relations within the non-Aboriginal world.

The placement of subjects within the context is highly significant. For the non-Aboriginal characters there are choices. Although Hugh becomes an ultimately tragic figure, as does Coonardoo, Hugh has made his own choices and has the privilege to do so. Prichard infers that he has made the wrong choice with Coonardoo and that only through their union and the recognition of Winni as a worthy heir could the land have been maintained. The Aboriginal characters, Coonardoo in particular, have restricted choices. Right from the very start of the narrative it is established that Aboriginal people are

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the valued or de-valued possessions of pastoralists, and their placement and actions throughout the narrative reflect this. The agencies afforded to Aboriginal subjects in the narrative are obedience and subservience to the settlers; and primitive, magical, ritualistic ones when left to their own.

Healy argues that while Prichard's construction was imbued with a genuine curiosity for Aboriginal life and was non-anthropological and non-philanthropic, the casting of Coonardoo and the action she is afforded within the narrative suggests otherwise.

Summary

The frontier is an interesting site for literary representations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. It denotes the physical pushing of a boundary and the movement from the known into the unknown – the transporting of one world into another largely unknown world and, quite literally, the superimposition of a new set of meanings onto the land being 'settled' and the de-meaning of Aboriginal people being 'unsettled' from their land and way of life by the process. It could be said, in the case of the non-Aboriginal writing of this time and in this space, the writer imagines and narrates to reveal at least a slice of the unfamiliar, which is able to be observed and ascribed to this 'contact zone' where two different worlds meet.

The aim of revisiting how an author's construction of text mediates particular representations at the expense of others is not to imply that historical fictional narratives should now be read from a more politically correct, or anti-colonial, position. Subversion of the colonial position might be a political outcome of this approach but is not central to my task here in this analysis. Rather, the intention is to re-examine how the text produces and reproduces, across historical periods, the parameters for any reading. It is to learn more about how the narrative in early texts reproduces colonial sensibilities and logic in text-reader relations in the present times. My effort here is to understand more fully how understandings of both historical and contemporary

Aboriginal experience is so firmly anchored in a long history of capture within the Western literary imagination and intellectual thought, and why the colonial or Western standpoint prevails in present times when students are confronted with writings from an Aboriginal standpoint.

A FRINGE OF LEAVES

BY PATRICK WHITE

A Fringe of Leaves (1976) by the Australian author Patrick White is another fictional narrative which speaks to unsettle readers' familiar and culturally-bound understandings of social relations and values. Like Prichard before him, White illuminates the contingency of psycho-social mores on the conditions which produce them. He does this by plotting a narrative that relocates his non-Aboriginal protagonists in changing social and physical contexts, including the untamed Australian landscape and the Aboriginal realm of understanding. His Aboriginal representations constitute a relatively small part of *A Fringe of Leaves* and yet this section of the text plays a central and critical role in the way he constructs an allegory of the mental journey required to transform non-Aboriginal consciousness. This Chapter asks what sort of exploration and interrogation of the text is needed in classrooms to draw students' attention to the representations of Aboriginal society when these are largely incidental to the larger authorial intention. That is, how are students to be assisted in their journey to develop analytical readings that can rediscover the processes that produce the positioning of Aboriginal people in Australian narratives? And what is it within that process that can be made more explicit for students to enable them to transit from the familiar to unfamiliar spaces of representation?

Patrick White was the 1973 winner of the *Nobel Prize for Literature* and an acclaimed author of the Australian experience. His talent for crafting allegory and symbolism on a broad canvas from within the minutiae of the lives of his characters and for revealing the idiosyncrasies, fragility, resilience, and complexity of human character under stress is unquestionable. On these

grounds he is a staple in Australian literary studies courses in Australian universities. Patrick White in his post-Nobel Prize years also carried a certain authority in his publicly-expressed thoughts on the Australian (un)consciousness of his time and, arguably, his reputation as an insightful provocateur influences the way his authorial voice is analysed and interpreted in university classrooms. His status as a great writer has also ensured Patrick White has been the subject of detailed biography (e.g. Marr 1991) and his works well-reviewed and analysed (see for example Beatson 1976, Heltay 1983, Bliss 1986, Ben-Bassat 1990, Collier 1992, 1999, Schaffer 1992, Goldie 1993, Williams 1993, During 1996, Giffin 1999, Concilio 1999, & Vanden Driesen 2002, 2009) meaning that there is ample material for both teachers and students to draw on. This enhances but also mediates the possible readings and interpretation of his texts.

For the purposes of the thesis, a number of points drive my interest in *A Fringe of Leaves*. One is the historical event on which he himself acknowledged it owes much namely, the survival of the English woman Eliza Fraser who was rescued by Aborigines following the shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle* on the shores of (now) Fraser Island, Queensland in 1836 (Marr 1994). By constructing a fictional narrative containing some parallels to the Eliza Fraser story, White writes retrospectively almost a century and a half after the time of which he is writing. This provides opportunities for considering the positioning of the Aboriginal subject in a narrative of the frontier written from the vantage point of historical distance. White's representation of the 'contact zone' in *A Fringe of Leaves* is therefore temporally distinguished from that represented in *Coonardoo*. Prichard wrote contemporaneously as Aboriginal people were being dislocated from their way of life by colonial 'settlement' on their lands in the 1920s; and she also wrote in an earlier era, forty years before White wrote *A Fringe of Leaves*. In addition to this difference, White makes use of an historical event that has been the subject of much documentation and creative development, and which continues to

capture the Australian imagination. Not only did Eliza Fraser write her own accounts of her ordeal, there is some official reporting in archives that has been utilised to detail the historical record (e.g. Russell 1888). There have also been a number of artistic and fictional representations over time that revisit, invent, or re-present the assumed facts of the event for artistic purposes. These include Sydney Nolan's series of paintings and films, most notably the 1976 film, *The Rollicking Adventures of Eliza Fraser* and *Eliza's Rat Trap* (See Healy, 1997). More recently, analytical contributions by Aboriginal academics and others, including the descendants of the Aboriginal people who rescued Eliza Fraser have put forward the version of events passed down and have augmented and/or contested the non-Aboriginal interpretation of the same events (see for example Russell 1888, Foley 1997, Behrendt, 2000). In these ways, the story of Eliza Fraser, with its archive of documented, fabricated, and creative iterations provides rich grounds for rediscovering the blurred lines between actual events, what becomes established as historical fact, and what is accepted as fiction.

The context of change

A Fringe of Leaves (1976) is set in the 1840s and constructs a female protagonist, Ellen Roxburgh, who in the course of the narrative is captured after a shipwreck by a nameless tribe of Aborigines and lives for some time on the fringe of an exotic paradise and with savages. It is White's third and last major work depicting Aboriginal characters. The others were *Voss* (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). White's personal correspondence (see *Letters* by David Marr 1994) and his biography, *Patrick White* (Marr 1991), evidence that White obsessed over Ellen Roxburgh and that *A Fringe of Leaves* begun in 1961 and finally completed the year before its publication in 1976 had the longest gestation period and actual writing time of any of his works.

A Fringe of Leaves had its gestation and was written at a time when new social phenomena abroad influenced the Australian context. Cliff Watego (1988)

asserts that the most important of the waves of social change filtering from abroad was the ascendant position and activism of 'Blacks' and the swiftness of the media to report on such events. For example, more than twenty Black African countries received their independence from colonial rule between 1957 and 1963. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States rose to prominence under the leadership of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Watego (1988) goes on to point out that during the 1960s many educated Australians were conscious of the indications of change despite the strong conservative ideology of the post-war Menzies era and goes on to argue that this prevailing mood abroad cannot be discounted as having had an influence on race relations in Australia.

Patrick White was attuned to these changes and used various occasions as opportunities to make social comment. In 1974, shortly after he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, White was named Australian of the Year. White was initially horrified at being chosen and tried to think of someone else to receive the award and make a speech on his behalf. However, on further consideration, he saw it as an opportunity to "tell them a few things about themselves" (Marr 1994, p. 544). In his acceptance speech he thanked no-one and declared Australia Day "a day of self-searching rather than trumpet blowing" and announced to the assembled Establishment that "the nation's future lay with those men and women who saw and articulated Australia's faults" (Marr 1994, p. 544).

In the same year, when White was half way through his first draft of *A Fringe of Leaves,* the political crisis that beset the Whitlam Government took him from his desk. While White did harbour some general disillusionment with the Whitlam Government he could not bear the thought of the old conservative parties returning to power. Despite some disappointments White believed that the Whitlam Government had to be supported as it tried to

> come to grips with complex problems of poverty and Aborigines and guide the nation through the labyrinth of foreign affairs and end the terrible stagnation of Australia by creating an intellectual climate from which artists would no longer feel the need to flee. Marr 1994, p. 544

With twelve major published works and a large readership in Australia and abroad, White was very aware of the power of images and the role of the arts and literature in influencing the thinking public and in shaping national consciousness. As an author he assumed his readership to be not only well educated but to some extent familiar with European history and the classics. *A Fringe of Leaves,* for example, makes reference to Cornish and Anglo mythology and Roman classics and their various authors. His style of prose is dense and heavy with inter-textual references. In addition to this, the whole context of the narrative depends upon an understanding of imperialism, capitalism, the wealth of nations and the then current socio-political context in Australia.

White's background and experience

In attempting to understand more of the position from which White wrote *A Fringe of Leaves,* it is also important to note that although he was recognised in 1974 as Australian of the Year and was fourth generation, his background and upbringing gave him a somewhat bifurcated consciousness and insight into the Anglo-Australian condition. An understanding of some aspects of his background is helpful to understand the way he shaped this particular narrative. He was born in Cheltenham, England of Australian parents, with close ties to their English ancestry. His early formative years were spent in Australia where his father owned sheep stations but he was sent back to England at the age of thirteen to attend school and university. Following the Second World War, in which he served as a R.A.F Intelligence Officer in the Middle East and Greece, he lived both in Australia and England until his death in 1990. His works elicit clearly his familiarity and relationship with the Australian landscape and society. At the same time, his English education

strengthened his understanding of his Anglo heritage. His life, which was lived in cycles of leaving and returning to Australia, created spaces for observation and reflections over time on the contrasts and similarities between two physical and social landscapes and the historical antecedents of the people who occupied them. The relation of immigrant Australians to both the Australian physical landscape and the original inhabitants who related to the land so differently became a focal point for White in this literary imagination and production. However, with regard to the import of White's heritage, Healy asserts that

> To describe Patrick White as a fourth generation Australian descended from Somerset yeoman stock, is not helpful. Somerset in the early nineteenth century contains very little answer to Australia in the middle of the twentieth century. (1978, p. 187)

Healy's comment suggests that given Patrick White's distance from his heritage it is not helpful in examining his work. However, it is possible to argue that while fourth-generation-Australian, White's lived experience between English and Australian social and physical landscapes gave him insider/outsider perspectives of both that afforded insights to the contemporary Australian psyche not recognised within the national popular imagination at the time. White is writing across a gulf that engages temporal, social and physical dimensions and he does have some personal experience of traversing such disconnects. White is well positioned from this standpoint to give expression to particular kinds of disconnect between the two places and societies, which he has been able to reflect on over time through his own experiences. In *A Fringe of Leaves,* he explores psychic dislocation by narrating his protagonist's journey through a series of physical and social dislocations, each moving her closer to her most extreme experience of physical and mental dislocation - her encounter with Aboriginal society. Through the engagement between Ellen Roxburgh and the Aboriginal 'tribe', he positions his readers to consider how immigrant 'settlement' in the Australian landscape requires reflection of more than their imported heritages but must also

consider what might need to be re-viewed, discarded, or transformed when imposing themselves on the land of the now dispossessed original inhabitants. He in effect suggests non-Aboriginal Australia, as an immigrant society, is not just about adjustment to a physical relocation but requires a mental journey also to understand the relocation of the self in relation to place, which includes relations to the original inhabitants of this place. White writes this from the context of the 1960s and 1970s when issues regarding the massacres of Aboriginal people and the theft of lands are beginning to be openly discussed in the wake of events such as the Freedom Rides of 1965, the Referendum of 1967 and the Tent Embassy of 1972. The social context that produced the narrative shapes White's use of 'the Aborigine' to explain the changing values and consciousness of non-Aboriginal society.

A Fringe of Leaves emerged, then, from White's personal experiences of traversing different social worlds, his knowledge of historical heritages and against a backdrop of social change. Marr (1994) also described the book as a mark of new freedom that appears in White's writing after the Noble Prize. The publication of *A Fringe of* Leaves brought critical acclaim and review to White's body of work.

Some critical responses to White's use of the Aboriginal subject
The book's genesis and appearance at this time of social change has also meant that analysis of it often speaks to White's authorial intentions in relation to what the narrative is saying of Australia and indeed Australians. It is important to note when discussing critical analysis of *A Fringe of Leaves* that the issue of Aboriginal representation is only one aspect that analysis draws to attention. More broadly, White reconstructs Australia in the 1840s against a multi layered class-structure, transportation of convicts, and not just the sanctioned practice of dispossession of Aboriginal peoples. Relationships to the physical landscape, class and gender constructs, and the meanings of these for the national consciousness have arguably received more attention in

analysis of his work than Aboriginal representations (see for example Schaffer 1993, Goldie 1993, Giffin 1999, Collier 1999, Vanden Driesen 2002, 2009).

White, like Prichard, uses 'the Aborigine' as a literary subject to locate non-Aboriginal consciousness in not so familiar terrain. Like Prichard's construction of Coonardoo, White's construction of the 'tribe of Aborigines' in *A Fringe of Leaves* serves to illuminate a space of possibility, in this case, of the psycho-social transformation of an Englishwoman immersed into Aboriginal land and society and disconnected from her own. White himself emphasised, in a letter to Peter Sculthorpe in 1974, that "…all other characters are only there for her [Ellen's] sake" (Marr 1994, p. 252). The representation of Aboriginal society is secondary to his purposes. They are, for him, a vehicle through which Ellen gains new awareness and knowledge of her own social origins, values and practices.

White also claims that *A Fringe of Leaves* was not intended to represent a frontier history. In a letter to Geoffrey Dutton he explains, "...my approach is not historical at all, …I deal with states of mind, and …the content is very contemporary although in a Victorian setting" (Marr 1994, p. 245). While White emphasised the narrative was not history, it is encased in the familiar genre of a frontier adventure and readers can easily recognise some parallels to the historical events of Eliza Fraser's ordeal. Even though White emphasises the narrative as a journey of the mind and an allegory to unsettle contemporary Australian consciousness, in the way the narrative articulates to other iterations of the Eliza Fraser story, it contributes to the amplification and continuing resonance of this historical event.

In the circumstances of his times and within his authorial intentions, the accuracy of the representations White gives to Aboriginal subjects is not a focus of concern for him. He himself had admitted, when interviewed about his 1961 novel *Riders in the Chariot* as to whether the persona of the Aboriginal character Alf Dubbo was based in any sense on a living individual,

No not at all. I've only known one or two Aborigines in my life. The inspiration came purely from my head…I don't know what Aborigines think of my books. (Shoemaker 1989, p. 95)

However, representations are subject to the influence of a range of historical, contemporary, and popular or commonsense discourses and observations of Aboriginal people, including the anthropological, the romantic and the ignorant (Muecke 1992) as White suggests in this following statement:

I had to interweave four pretty important lives, so I concentrated on what would reveal their essence. Dubbo does some very squalid things. One reason for this is that the Australian aborigine (sic) in contact with civilisation is a very squalid creature. (I have read an account of aboriginals (sic) in their normal state in the last century eating maggots and lice on one another's heads). (cited in Marr 1994, p. 196)

White did indeed include a grooming scene in *A Fringe of Leaves* with clear resonance to such an account. His Aboriginal 'tribe' in *A Fringe of Leaves,* not yet in contact with 'civilisation', draws on romantic and anthropological discourses to represent them, not yet squalid, but 'essentially' savage, albeit sometimes noble.

As well, Marr (1991) reports that in the course of his research for *A Fringe of Leaves*, White met with Wilf Reeves, a descendant of the Butchulla (Badtjala) people who rescued Eliza Fraser, and who advised him to be sceptical of all non-Aboriginal versions of the event. White knew the Badtjala people's version of these events had been recorded, as well as passed down orally. Vanden Driesen also points to the many references that were available:

In 1874 Archibald Meston spoke to old blacks at Noosa and Fraser Island who had actually seen the party come ashore. They told a very different story of how the white people were received in a friendly manner and were passed on in canoes to the mainland (Evans &Walter, 1977: 39-105). Information from the Badtjala people also recorded that there was no attempt to keep the woman captive, that she had been despatched marked with ochre signs indicating that she was not to be harmed, to the

groups further down the coast so she could be handed over to the official search party (Miller, 1998:34). Another convict living amongst the blacks, who had been detailed to accompany her, denied accusations of rape that she had made against him. Evans and Walker (cited above) also refer to the story of the second convict in an account given by another white settler, Henry Stuart Russell in his memoirs entitled Genesis of Queensland (1888). (2009, p. 36)

However, to Vanden Driesen, White was not concerned with either side's version of historical events but rather constructed the predicament of his central protagonist for his own purposes. Nevertheless, not buying into either side is not to assume a position of neutrality when White's textual production is firmly embedded in the wider contests of the historical truth of the Eliza Fraser story.

To Healy (1978), acknowledging White's previous works, asserts that White struggled with the problem of being Australian and that this was connected to the issues of autochthony. This problem arises for European Australians born in Australia and considered 'native' to its soil. What does this mean in the context of the imposed European heritage over a landscape which has provided the conditions that shaped the older culture of the original inhabitants who have been summarily dispossessed? White grapples with this aspect of being Australian in the Twentieth Century by drawing attention to and attempting to highlight the nature-society duality. As he grapples with his own position of being an immigrant Australian he poses that Australia as a settler society is not just about physical adjustment and relocation, it requires a psychological journey to understand the relocation of self and the dispossession of the original inhabitants. The Aboriginal subject is positioned for the intellectual consumption of the non-Aboriginal reader in an attempt to create a sense of belonging in contemporary Australia. By taking readers back a century and a half and drawing stark contrasts between English and Australian physical and social landscapes, White extends the possibilities for non-Aboriginal Australians to consider, what Vanden Driesen now interprets

in the Twenty-first Century as "the possibilities of a myth of indigenization for the erstwhile white invader" (2009, p. 35).

Some critical analysis credits White with moving the Aboriginal themes in his works beyond the prevailing view of Aboriginal Australians at the time. Shoemaker in particular argues that White's works depict Aboriginal people as more than "mindless objects of white condescension" (1989, p. 97). Including White among other authors, Shoemaker asserts that Aboriginal Australians "were treated by some Australian authors as creative subjects, even if they were not yet portrayed simply as men and women" (1989, p. 98). Vanden Driesen supports this view but contends that

> [t]he White text …writes back to Orientalist constructs of the Aboriginal world as degenerate and innately inferior to the European. This represents a major re-invention of the historic representations of the Fraser story and interrogates the nineteenth century accounts which represent the indigene as innately degenerate, savage, and in need of the saving influence of the white culture. In contrast, the indigenous world emerges here as one with its own established rituals and way of life, an autonomous order, a community which brushes off the white invasion as irrelevant to its own way of life. (2009, p. 38)

From this perspective Vanden Driesen extends discussion on the theme of 'white indigenisation', asserting White's re-construction of Eliza Fraser's story as "a myth of reconciliation, and possibilities for growth" (2009, p. 36). She contends that like other creative writing by settler societies, White's imaginative reworking of the Eliza Fraser story works to "rewrite the nation" (2009, p. 35) by increasing the sense of belonging of those not Indigenous to this land.

What White works towards, and Vanden Driesen (2009) alludes to this, is to 'unsettle' consensus views of what is 'civilised' and what is 'savage', in a similar way to Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness* which explores such themes through Belgian colonialism in the African Congo. This inter-textual

play leaves open the possibility for readers to explore similar themes in the Australian colonial context. Vanden Driesen acknowledges similarities between Conrad's narrative and that of White's but argues that in *A Fringe of Leaves* the line between savage and civilised is interrogated with much more rigour through the experiences of the central female character, Ellen Roxburgh. While Ellen is initially confused and despairs for herself when with 'the tribe', as time passes, she begins to draw parallels between her former structured life as an English lady and the practices and protocols of 'the tribe'. Through her love affair with Jack Chance, an escaped convict who lives among the Aborigines, and her reflections on his character and experiences, she is also able to arrive at the realisation that the white world can be guilty of extreme, excessive cruelty to its own kind.

It begins to become clearer from an Aboriginal standpoint that as the field of analysis develops over time, so must the critical analysis of Aboriginal representation that occur within this field. Vanden Driesen's (2009) interpretations is useful to re-read old meanings inscribed within Aboriginal representations and to appreciate White's attempts to disrupt the field of meaning, her comments also remind us that to 'rewrite the nation' assumes perpetual creative licence to overwrite or disregard the Aboriginal standpoint. As Badtjala descendant Fiona Foley outlines:

> In 1836 she was marooned for five weeks on Fraser Island and her saga has been allowed to continue for throughout two centuries.... The absence of a dialogue with the Badtjala people has irrevocably damaged and put this people to rest. I often wonder when she will be put to rest. (1999, p. 165)

Positioning the Aboriginal subject

The reader of *A Fringe of Leaves* comes into contact with Aboriginal society via the gaze and thoughts of Ellen Roxburgh, the central female protagonist. The representations of Aboriginal society and characters are hers and the narrator Patrick White's. The mental journey of Ellen, expressed via descriptions of

the Aboriginal society and their treatment of her, her responses, adjustments, and her reflections on all she has experienced in her varied life, leads the reader to journey with her amongst 'the tribe', seeing, experiencing and learning from them as she does. This journey is an allegory that symbolises the mental journey non-Aboriginal Australians need to undertake to transform consciousness about their place and relations to the Australian environment, including its original inhabitants. On this journey, Ellen is detached from her social and psychological moorings and placed in a state of psychological suspension. The physical location, actions and demands of the 'savages' force her across the boundaries that delineate her world from the Aboriginal world. From this vantage point, she eventually comes to a consciousness of the savagery within her own society. It is through her relationships and shared experiences with members of 'the tribe' that she also recognises her shared humanity with Aboriginal society. The relativity of meanings to their own social and cultural contexts is revealed to highlight the assumptions that inform judgements of 'others' shaped by different contexts and sets of circumstances and social relations.

Framing the Aboriginal subject

White's first task in taking readers on this journey into Aboriginal society is to draw the Aboriginal character through Ellen's eyes as a recognisable bone fide savage. Without this there is no contrast through which to force her reflections, prepare her to reconsider the assumptions on which her notions of what is civilised and savage are based, and to illuminate her consciousness of her own society. Aboriginal subjects in these ways are framed through familiar colonial discourses. In positioning Aboriginal characters and society in *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White moves within these available discourses. While not having first-hand knowledge of Aboriginal people and having determined not to be swayed by any historical re-tellings of the Eliza Fraser story, White can only imagine his Aboriginal subjects by drawing on the

historical, colonial, and anthropological archive for language, context and imagery for description.

Naming the Aboriginal subject

The descriptors of Aboriginal characters in these pages are familiar colonial ones. Except for two male characters, Aboriginal subjects are unnamed. Individuals within 'the tribe' are distinguished from each other through physical characteristics, for example "the old woman with heavy jowls", "the beefier woman", or the "wrinkled old man" (AFOL: 236). The reader comes to know 'the tribe' through the narrator's repeated and largely negative descriptions such as "hostile" (AFOL: 238) "savages" (AFOL: 239) who are "starving and ignorant" (AFOL: 272), "all sinew, stench" (AFOL: 242), "runtish" (AFOL: 278), "hags" and "nubile girls" (AFOL: 243) who move around arbitrarily to escape their fleas (AFOL: 257), which set them "scratching themselves with the vigour of their similarly afflicted dogs" (AFOL: 262). Aboriginal actions are those of the uncivilised and brutal men who "lounged about the camp…scratching themselves" or "gorging themselves" (AFOL: 247); "scornful blacks", "vindictive" enough to "thrust a firestick into her buttocks" (AFOL: 263). The children "pinch" and "jab with vicious sticks" (AFOL: 245). "[W]retched" women "grovelled" (AFOL: 248), "slouched, grown slummocky…" and "[t]he monkey-women snatched" (AFOL: 243). They are "tormentors" (AFOL: 243) and "depressed", "plodders, or innately dejected souls" (AFOL: 278), inclined to "pinch or pull" (AFOL: 278). None of these characters speak for themselves. The men utter "gibberish" (AFOL: 238, 279), "emitted horrid shrieks" and "howls" (AFOL: 239). The women are prone to wailing (AFOL: 248, 249), they "glowered and cowered" (AFOL: 243) on hearing Ellen's voice. At night Ellen is surrounded by "grunts and cries of animal pleasure" (AFOL: 254).

Interspersed are glimpses of the noble male savage of romantic discourse who is described in clear contrast to degraded women to whom "occasional

morsels were thrown…in keeping with their humble station" (AFOL: 248). These men "with the solemnity of the superior sex…did look superior" (AFOL: 250). Ellen, as narrated by the author, recognised them as "exultant in their mastery" (AFOL: 242), as "superior beings" of "physical splendour" and "solemnity" (247) who were "worthy of celebration" (AFOL: 248). Through this gaze "[e]vening light coaxed nobler forms out of black innocent savages and introduced a visual design into what had been a dusty hugger-mugger camp" (AFOL: 247).

Relating the Aboriginal subject

In these negative descriptions the colonial black savage is contrasted to and measured in terms of distance from the civilised white European. The 'blacks' are rendered as Other to 'whites' in the broader descriptions of the activities, which in the eyes of Ellen and her narrator, preoccupy them. In these ways, Aboriginal characters are positioned towards the more familiar 'animal-like' rather than the 'fully human' end of the savage-civilised continuum. The women's minds do not produce thoughts but "flitt[er] on in search of further stimulus" (AFOL: 244) like Pavlov's dogs. Their capacity for human feeling and grief is brought into question as the animal instinct to feed takes over:

> they found a hollow log in which to shove the body. At once their grief evaporated, except in the mother's case, who was prepared to keep up her snivels, but only a while, for they were returning to the fish feast. (AFOL: 261)

'Native' sexual behaviour also serves this contrasting of the exotic 'Other'. In this example, the unmentioned Victorian 'missionary' position assumes the civilised norm in contrast to the deviant 'wheelbarrow' position of the savage. This language and imagery is presented three times to the reader via the imagining of Ellen in her dreams (AFOL: 249) and her sharing of sleeping quarters with Aboriginal families, where "she had seen the head of her adoptive family take possession of his wives after such a fashion" (AFOL:

298), a fashion Ellen rejects when her rescuer Jack Chance attempts to take her this way, "was she not after all Mrs Roxburgh" (AFOL: 298).

Another example of 'Othering' occurs via an instance of Aboriginal healing, which is positioned as superstitious magic and non-science conducted by "the physician-conjurer", the "pseudo-physician" who could only "jabber" (AFOL: 261). Likewise, the formality of Aboriginal prayer is judged by Ellen on the basis of their wails becoming "less emotional" (AFOL: 248) – emotional being the opposite state of the rational mind. Such Aboriginal 'prayer' or laments are speculated to placate the "malign spirits" (AFOL: 249) rather than be offered to a supreme being.

Indeed, the only Supreme Being in the Aboriginal world that receives mention is Ellen who is alluded to as a supernatural phenomenon and demigod in the eyes of the primitive native. This colonial construct of apotheosis also positions the Aboriginal society as Other—the described tendency of some Indigenous peoples to deify whites, who 'appear' as if from nowhere. If considered the embodied spirit of departed people, some white-skinned people would be spared from death and adopted or revered (Obeyesekere 1992). For example in relation to Ellen,

> …they submitted her also to ceremonies… they treated her with almost pious respect. They anointed her body… They enthroned her on an opossum skin rug … and sat in a semi-circle staring at her. Their faces were glass, in which she and they were temporarily united, either in mooning fantasy or a mystical relationship. What the blacks could not endure it seemed, was the ghost of a woman they found haunting the beach. They may have felt that were the ghost exorcized, they might contemplate with equanimity the supernatural come amongst them in their own flesh…

> Members of other tribes, several of which must have shared the island, called on their neighbours at intervals to examine the phenomenon, their faces expressing incredulity, fear, envy as well as worshipful respect for this demi-goddess temporarily raised

from the drudgery which the black's practical nature and poverty stricken lives normally prescribed. (AFOL: 240)

Dividing the Aboriginal subject

However, no colonial discourse is more representative of barbarism than cannibalism. In his essay 'Cannibalising Indigenous Texts: Headhunting and Fantasy in Ion Idriess's Coral Sea Adventures', Robert Dixon (2001) argues that the cannibal complex—the British obsession with headhunting, cannibalism and captivity—was produced from a combination of pseudo-sciences such as phrenology and anthropometric measurements, and an insatiable British appetite for travel writing, ethnography and adventure novels. Certainly, it is the most powerful discourse at the author's disposal to establish a baseline of savagery against which both civilised behaviour and the relative contingency of morality upon cultural and contextual circumstances is measured and wielded. In the text that describes Ellen's sojourn amongst Aboriginal society, the reader, via Ellen's observations is witness to two instances where 'the tribe' eats both dead Europeans and their own (AFOL: 256-257, AFOL: 271-272). These glimpsed but relatively lengthy descriptions are further reflected on by Ellen (AFOL: 274, 315).

In the developing context for the narrative, the reader contemplates such barbaric horrors as "roasted skin noticeably crackled down one side…legs…hacked away" (AFOL: 256). She "guessed" that particular savages partook in this practice by the "greasy smears on lips and cheeks" (AFOL: 271). White's use of cannibalism draws the clearest line of contrast between the civilised and the savage and deploys the most powerful trope of colonial literature.

Unsettling non-Aboriginal consciousness

Patrick White positions Ellen as the primary narrator of her journey to symbolise for his readers the necessary transformation of Australian consciousness to come to terms with place and history. Aboriginal society

becomes the mirror for non-Aboriginal society to more clearly see themselves and consider the meaning of their cultural origins in relation to the landscape and settler identity and nation. White uses and appropriates the Aboriginal world, once again, via his central protagonist Ellen, through her own observations and reflections on her changes in behaviour and thinking as she responds to the conditions forced upon her. To achieve this, White plots a series of severances, comparisons, transgressions, and attempted inversions of colonial discourse. These are attempts to unsettle the racialised order of meaning expressed through the colonial black-white relations and its set of inter-changeable oppositions, such as civilised-savage, rational-emotional, superior-inferior, moral-sensual, etc. Along the way, his protagonist is brought to a new consciousness of her own basis for rational thought and the civility of her society.

At the beginning of this journey into the Aboriginal world we witness Ellen's symbolic severance from white society at the hands of Aboriginal women. While the reader knows she is captive, when the women strip her naked "she [is] also finally unhooked….and [with the removal of her last shift] she was entirely liberated" (AFOL: 244). This is an early unsettling of oppositions, in this case captivity and freedom, symbolising perhaps the importance of location and standpoint to consciousness.

The concept of time also shifts to represent this severance. Aboriginal timelessness provides a distinct contrast to the progression, pace, organisation and structure that characterises the society that Ellen has left behind. Up to this point Ellen marks time very specifically in days, dates and years through her journal. As readers we are never sure exactly how long Ellen spends with the tribe as days, weeks, months meld together. This disconnect with Western time is one of many severances that Ellen is forced to make with her past and her culture.

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As an element of romantic/anthropological discourse timelessness naturalises the concept of Aboriginal society as undeveloped and innocent, content to just 'be' as they always have, rather than act in any purposeful way in response to change in their world. In this way, Ellen is severed from her own progressive world and gets to take a journey back to where time stands still and less developed humans live a more natural state devoid of the man-made trappings of 'civilisation'. But the tribe seemingly has nothing to learn from this interaction and there can be no parallel mental journey for people who lead unchanging lives.

The reader can also be led to awareness of Ellen's shifting consciousness through some of the comparisons she herself draws between Aboriginal society and her own. For example, when coming face to face for the first time with the Aboriginal women who threw sand in her face and dragged her to her feet, the narrator observes Ellen "had not encountered a more unlikely situation since forced as a bride to face the drawing rooms of Cheltenham" (AFOL: 243). When forced to carry loads of fish for the women, she reflects on her renewed awareness of the importance "of food which is, after all, life, as she had forgot while sipping chocolate and without appetite nibbling macaroons at Birdlip House Cheltenham" (AFOL: 258-9). In another example of her comparative insights, when being made presentable to visiting tribes "she accepted when some elderly lady of her own tribe advanced to adjust a sulphur topknot; it might have been old Mrs Roxburgh adding or subtracting a jewel or feather in preparation for a dinner or ball" (AFOL: 268). Through Ellen, the author hints at cultural relativism – quite different social practices serving recognisable social functions.

In contemplating the continuities and discontinuities, Ellen is assisted by her early experiences as a farm girl and the early closeness to and enjoyment of the natural world, which was displaced when she moved into refined English society. This enables White to continually re-establish her closeness to nature

in her time with the tribe. Even when disoriented and confused, Ellen connects with elements of beauty and peace in the natural setting of the tribe as White attempts to call into question the nature-society divide to suggest that the unfamiliar and hostile environment can be recognised in terms of comparative beauty. For example:

> Disgust might have soured her had it not been for a delicious smell of dew rising from the grass their feet trampled…The sky was still benign. Were she presently to die, her last sight, her last thought, would be of watered blue. (AFOL: 252)

Again, via Ellen, readers are challenged to use not just their minds but also their senses as a way to re-locate familiar elements of consciousness in an unfamiliar environment. Ellen's first line of adjustment is her ability to distinguish some favourable and unfavourable parallels between her life as working farm girl, as a member of English society, and as a captive of Aboriginal women. For example, Ellen's immersion into a world where procuring food is the major pre-occupation of a physically hard life, reminds her of her farm origins before she entered English society and as she reflects "…she realized that most of her life at Cheltenham had been a bore, and that she might only have experienced happiness while scraping carrots, scouring pails, or lifting the clout to see whether the loaves were proved" (AFOL: 286). In these ways, the author positions his protagonist and her Aboriginal captors to tease apart the strict oppositions that characterise the colonial relations.

Following her rescue from 'the tribe' by Jack Chance, Ellen and Jack's shared experience of living with Aboriginal society allows an intimacy that reveals a more complex basis for social judgement on Ellen's part. Despite Jack having murdered, she knows herself to be a fellow transgressor of the laws of morality under the right conditions. With insight into her own 'savagery' and with knowledge of his cruel treatment as a convict and its effects on him, she gains insight into the injustice and savagery of her own society. Even as she assures him he would not be refused a pardon for rescuing her because it

would be unjust and unnatural, he replies with what they both know to be true: 'Men is unnatural and unjust' (AFOL: 281).

It is not until Ellen returns to 'civilisation' that the reader gets the sense of how far she has come and how what she has learned has transformed her consciousness of self and her own society. The whole notion of rescue is rejected suggesting that with her insights she will have tough times ahead, by being unable to share or explain what she learned and what she did:

> I bet you had a tough time yourself, Mrs Roxburgh – before the rescue.'
>
> She answered "Yes'. As though the rescue ever takes place!
>
> 'They say you lived among the blacks.'
>
> 'That is so – and learned a great deal, of which I should otherwise remain ignorant.' (AFOL: 378)

The reader absorbs the notion that these experiences have changed her consciousness of socio-cultural relations for ever – she can never go back.

Transgressing boundaries

Not all Ellen's comparisons compare the demands of Aboriginal society in simple ways to those of civility. Ellen's behaviour is also transformed and described in terms closer to the savage, as her more basic instincts prevail over her civilised sensibilities in her effort to survive. Some of these transgressions are limited to social etiquette and sensibilities. Hunger, for example, could drive her to "…have fallen upon these agonized creatures, torn them apart, stuffed her mouth, even before the fur was singed, the flesh seared, before the blood had ceased bubbling in them" (AFOL: 247). When she was able to eat sufficient "…she too was satisfied, not to say gorged, bloated, stupefied" (AFOL: 261).

In a clear sexual reference, English morality is contrasted to raw sensuality when she eats roasted snake and is overcome by "an ecstasy such as she had never experienced before" (AFOL: 265). Though the reader is given a hint of her suppressed sexuality in civilised English society, it is her shift closer to the sensual savage state that allows her to acknowledge this aspect of self:

> Now reduced to an animal condition she could at least truthfully confess that ecstasy had flickered up from the pit of her stomach provoked by a fragment of snakeflesh. (AFOL: 266)

In this transgression the language of savagery begins to be applied to herself: "her soul had grown too dull and brutish to concern itself with spiritual matters (262). In one instance, while trying to get out of the shelter, "[s]he fell upon her knees, and crawled instead on all fours toward the entrance, like any sow shaking off the night and lumbering out of a foetid sty" (AFOL: 255). When eating the vermin off the heads of the children she was grooming, she reflects on "the level of bestiality at which she had arrived" (AFOL: 267).

But nowhere does Ellen transgress European morality and engage savagery more clearly than in her brushes with cannibalism. The reader is brought to contemplate this through a series of shifts. The possibility of white cannibalism is first pre-empted by Ellen's husband, Austin Roxburgh's dream of feasting on the body of Spurgeon, who passes away while the crew of survivors are drifting in a life-boat. This dream is produced by the delirium and hunger of a desperate white man. In Austin's dream he imagines that Spurgeon's body is given to him in a religious ritual that mimics a religious communion, symbolising the body and blood of Christ. Although it is not the subconscious thoughts of a rational, but rather a delirious, being, it does build a religious connotation for the act of cannibalism. In this way, the reader is prepared for Ellen's experience.

Ellen's first suspicion of this practice leaves her "gasping and sobbing" (AFOL: 257) when she stumbles on the charred and dismantled body of one

of the crew. By the time she stumbles on more evidence, she is already adjusting and presenting the practice on relative terms. For example, "she might have felt sickened had the …men not frightened her instead" (AFOL: 272). Her feelings are also portrayed as more ambiguous as she attempts to separate "fear from amazement, disgust from a certain pity she felt for these starving and ignorant savages, her masters" (AFOL: 272). Detached from her own social moorings, her movement into the world of savagery is clearly articulated and completed through her participation in it:

> Renewed disgust prepared her to kick the bone out of sight. Then, instead, she found herself stooping, to pick it up. There were one or two shreds of half- cooked flesh and gobbets of burnt fat still adhering to this monstrous object. Her stiffened body and almost audible twangling nerves were warning her against what she was about to do, what she was in fact already doing. She raised the bone, and was tearing at it with her teeth, spasmodically chewing, swallowing by great gulps which her throat threatened to return. But did not. She flung the bone away only after it was cleaned, and followed slowly in the wake of her cannibal mentors. She was less disgusted in retrospect by what she had done, than awed by the fact that she had been moved to do it. The exquisite innocence of the morning, its quiet broken only by a single flute-note endlessly repeated, tempted her to believe that she had partaken in a sacrament. But there remained what amounted to an abomination of human behaviour, a headache, and the first signs of indigestion. In light of Christian morality she must never think of the incident again. (AFOL: 244)

Ellen crosses the established civilised-savage divide. The conditions of mental dislocation which produced her transgression are highlighted as she becomes a singular embodiment of both the Christian and savage. She blurs the boundaries as she attempts to rationalise her action as the partaking of "a sacrament" in Aboriginal society and elevates Aboriginal practices as ones of "rites" (AFOL: 273). Ellen understands in her subsequent reflections that her eating of human flesh has been a spiritual experience that has represented an adjustment to her circumstances accompanied by deeper insight into herself:

> She was tolerably happy, happier…than the principal source of her unhappiness should have allowed. In 'not remembering' she continually recalled the incident….It seemed less unnatural, more admissible, if only to herself. Just as she would never have admitted to others how she had immersed herself in the saint's pool, or that it's black waters had cleansed her of morbid thoughts and sensual longings, so she could not have explained how tasting flesh from the human thigh-bone in the stillness of a forest morning had nourished not only her animal body but some darker need of the hungry spirit. (AFOL: 274)

In this way, cannibalism is re-presented as part of a different but nevertheless regulated social order rather than the paramount evidence of what constitutes the savage. Cannibalism is redrawn for the reader as the ritual enactment of a belief, rather than the evidence of instinctive animal behaviour. This draws on both romantic discourse of the noble savage and anthropological discourse of cultural relativism, a developing sensibility in the discipline of anthropology occurring in the first half of the Twentieth Century. It is claimed in non-Aboriginal analysis of *A Fringe of Leaves* that White uses cannibalism as a vehicle to unsettle non-Aboriginal consciousness of what constitutes readers' notions of the savage and the civilised. Vanden Driesen, for example, claims that "cannibalism in the Aboriginal world has a spiritual motivation that dictates the indigenes' practice" (2009, p. 97) and that the narrative by White shows quite clearly that cannibalism, which Europeans regard as the ultimate signifier of savagery, is sometimes practised by whites themselves and is in such circumstances bestial compared to the mystical purpose prompting indigene behaviour.

Making the new space familiar

White attempts to unsettle the racialised civilised-savage dichotomy by revealing Ellen's reflections on her empathetic connections and changing feelings for some members of the tribe. The first hint of shared human connection occurred when she was first brought back to the camp and submitted to an older women for inspection "but thought she detected a sympathetic tremor, as though the personage recognized one who had

suffered a tragedy" (AFOL: 246). The reader is introduced to the possibility of mutual recognition, which presupposes recognition of common humanity. Ellen

> realized she was beginning to develop a skill in 'potato'-sticking, and when one of her companions looked in her direction, she laughed with pleasure for her discovery. Overcoming her instinctive suspicions the black woman laughed back". (AFOL: 253)

The death of the child Ellen was charged to look after was another experience that united rather than divided the women:

> While Ellen Roxburgh wept for her own experience of life, the pseudo-physician, to judge by excited jabber, appeared to be holding her responsible for his failure. He did not succeed, however, in rousing opposition. For the first time since meeting on the beach, the captive and her masters, especially the women, were united in a common humanity. (AFOL: 261)

Further on in the narrative when the young girl dies, "she added her grief to that of the mourners, and took her place without second thought in the procession" (AFOL: 270). Though she was not allowed to continue, we see her identification with the grief of the others. But it is with the children that we see the most deeply felt connections develop on both sides. When the children imitate her falling and land in the same place as her,

> [t]hey all lay laughing awhile. The young children might have been hers. She was so extraordinarily content she wished it could have lasted for ever, the two black bodies united in the sun with her own blackened skin and bones. (AFOL: 257)

The passage suggests an attempt to disturb understandings of divisions between blacks and whites, via her changing sensibility relating to skin colour and human relationships that was able to be reciprocated by 'innocent' children:

> The black children laughed to hear her. They were growing to love their nurse, and initiated her into their games….She indulged their every caprice, and received their hugs and tantrums with an equanimity. (AFOL: 276)

The role of ambiguities in domesticating the unfamiliar

The relationship between Ellen and the children is a subtle inversion of the colonial discourse on the primitive. Nakata (1997b), for example, has outlined the positioning of the mentally inferior 'primitive' as a child in relation to the colonial parent, who uses this imaginary relation to rationalise the protective regimes of colonial governments. In White's text, Ellen is not given access to significant adult ceremonies but is allowed her fullest freedom in the company of children. The relation is rendered ambiguous. Is she a substitute parent or is she reduced to child?

There are other examples that render the established relations, at the very least, ambiguous in meaning and, often, in imagery that clearly inverts commonsense understanding about European superiority. For example, early on when the killing of the crew began, "the party of ineffectual whites was soon surrounded by the troop of blacks" who soon "started driving their white herd, by thwacks and prodding" (AFOL: 242). Further on, Ellen reflects on her own situation and notes that "[a]n automaton she must become in order to survive" (AFOL: 247), a reverse play on the colonial construction of Aboriginal people as mentally inferior, un-thinking people who just go about their lives without reason or rationale. When sent up a tree in search of possums, "[h]er actual blackened skin, her nakedness beyond the fringe of leaves, were of no help to her; she was again white and useless, a civilized lady standing surrounded by this tribe of scornful blacks" (AFOL: 263). Other examples of inverting popular imagery of Aboriginal people describe Ellen as "their passive slave" (AFOL: 251), with skin "shamefully white" (AFOL: 251) who "sat listless and disaffected" (AFOL: 252), used as "their beast of burden" (AFOL: 260).

Symbolically, White uses Ellen's body to mirror colonial practices inflicted on Aboriginal women. Ellen has to toil and labour but she also experiences a freedom of movement and the opportunity to ponder her own thoughts and reassess her prior assumptions of rational behaviour and social order. For example, when searching for roots, she seems to acknowledge the basis of women's knowledge by gliding over the split between experience versus science to underline that their activity is not random or their success due to luck:

> Yet the black women's fate was not so far determined by invisible walls that science and experience could not guide them; their probing was almost invariably attended by success, while the benighted slave stabbed the ground more often than not fruitlessly. (AFOL: 253)

Ellen's journey into the conditions of Aboriginal reality conveys her learning of the contingent basis of cultural behaviour and thought, including what counts as rational behaviour. With the tribe,

> the whole of life revolved round the search for food, which by her own aggravated hunger made seem the only rational behaviour. It was in any case what she had accepted as the answer to the hard facts of existence before she had been taught the habits and advantages of refinement. (AFOL: 253)

But perhaps the most powerful indicator of the unsettling of the black/white divide comes with Ellen's reflection as she watches white children play back at the settlement:

> Innocence prevailed in the light of the garden, and for the most part in her recollections; black was interchangeable with white. Surely in the company of children she might expect to be healed. (AFOL: 379)

A Fringe of Leaves was the product of a new direction in urban consciousness of Aboriginal people and of a new consciousness on the part of non-Aboriginal people of themselves in relation to Australia's Aboriginal past. As

a literary artist, White attempts the changing consciousness of his time but his narrative is fundamentally aligned with the more familiar colonial discourse about Aboriginal Australians. Hodge and Mishra (1990) note of Prichard that while she fails to understand the Aborigines of the North-west, she grasps the complex patterns of ownership on the frontier. The same may be said of White. While he fails to understand the Aborigine he grasps the changing national consciousness of the late 1960s through to the 70s and the continuing need for immigrant Australians to belong here through some understanding of the past through 'the Aborigine'.

Opportunities for re-positioning readings of Aboriginal representations

The above analysis reveals that a range of literary techniques have been used by White to transform the consciousness of his central protagonist. In the process, White creates a lens through which 'the Aborigine' can be experienced by the non-Aboriginal. White's narrative of Ellen's experience shapes the language, perception and form of the encounter. Some non-Aboriginal analysis attempts to persuade that by writing in the 1960s and 70s and having a particular political stance on Australian consciousness and the condition of the Aboriginal population, that White produces less inferior, more human Aboriginal subjects for reader consumption (see e.g. Shoemaker). Similarly, some critical analysis from the 'post-colonial' perspective of the Twenty-first Century, attempts to persuade that White has written against the constructs of Orientalism with suggestions that he unites particular dualities and provides opportunities for reconciliation (e.g. Vanden Driesen 2009). However, even without contesting the validity of these claims, it cannot be assumed in classrooms that the student reader, in following Ellen's journey, is confronted with colonial (or Orientalist) assumptions about what constitutes civilised and savage behaviour.

Nor can it be assumed that the reader is led to re-contextualise this understanding on a culturally relative basis rather than the simple black-white,

primitive-progressive distinctions that delineate the colonial boundaries between savage and civilised human beings. That is, to assume the reader is taking Ellen's journey and Ellen's journey is allegory, also assumes the reader notices or recognises that Aboriginal subjects have been framed and described within the colonial construct of the Other. Another assumption is that the reader is confronted by this or by Ellen's crossing of boundaries, and notices the author's attempts to reposition the Aboriginal subject. A third assumption is that transformed consciousness, whether Ellen's or the reader's, produces a consciousness of the Aboriginal subject that subverts the colonial Aboriginal. My classroom experience indicates students often have negligible awareness of colonial constructs and see them as natural, commonsense, and taken for granted truths of the period being represented.

The ability to recognise Ellen's journey of transformation rests more with understanding that in contemporary times Aboriginal people are no longer thought of as savages. Students are therefore quite comfortable with colonial representations and do not feel positioned by them – for them that is what Aboriginal people once were. This suggests that particular and quite explicit forms of mediation are required if students are to locate these meanings in the text as evidence of an ongoing textual practice of positioning Aboriginal subjects in the literary and national imagination.

An important question remains, however, beyond structural, ideological and post-colonial analysis of what else is going on in the text. The question is whether this sort of explicit mediation is likely to be sufficient to enable students to access representations of Aboriginal experience as it is differently contextualised, characterised and described by Aboriginal authors. To consider this, suggests another level of analysis is needed namely, one that seeks not just 'what is said' about the Aboriginal subject in the text. As well, it requires some consideration and illumination of 'what is not said in what is said' (following Foucault 1972). This requires more than drawing attention to

background, context, and colonial constructs that shape the writer's representations in particular ways. It also requires considering the effects of appropriating the Aboriginal subject for Western consumption.

White's appropriation of the tribe for Ellen's transformation provides a useful example. White is quite accurate when he says 'the tribe' is only there for her, and students, in my experience, often resist any attempt to focus unduly on Aboriginal representations for this reason. From this point of view, Aboriginal representation in this text is incidental to the larger purpose of the author – the unsettling and transformation of settler consciousness – and requires only superficial attention in analysis because his representation expresses historical thinking representative of the era. The evident mediation of the colonial savage by the author, at this level of analysis, is seen to be more than sufficient. So, with just minimal awareness of 'old thinking about Aborigines', the evidence can be found in the text that White is moving the reader on from historical images of the colonial period via Ellen's reflections on her experience.

However, there is something 'not said in what is said' that students have much more difficulty in teasing out of the text. Both the focus on Ellen and her journey and the positioning of Aboriginal subjects as the route to Ellen's self-revelations pushes into the background and reduces the visibility of other effects of the positioning of Aboriginal subjects. White moves 'the Aborigine' as a subject into a new realm of non-Aboriginal consciousness through the contrasts he draws out between two societies. But while Ellen and the reader can move on to 'resettle' a transformed consciousness of themselves and where they belong, the Aboriginal subject is left out in the symbolic wilderness, the savage in perpetuity. That is, to achieve his protagonist's transformation, White moves Ellen into the space of the primitive-savage-Aborigine rather than moving his Aboriginal subjects into the fuller humanity that colonial literature inscribes as the domain of the 'civilised' and white

European. In this way, the language, discourse, and imagery of Aboriginal savagery is reinforced and re-circulates, even when re-framed by the discourse of cultural relativism. So, for example, the reader gets a more acceptable explanation of Aboriginal cannibalism but is not led to question the discourse or the need to include its representation. In such ways, *A Fringe of Leaves* offers different reasons for reader consideration for why 'the tribe' is savage, rather than disrupting the familiar images of the savage, primitive Aboriginal existence. Non-Aboriginal students rarely remark on this effect, while Aboriginal students notice it routinely. For non-Aboriginal students, the 'standing still in time' (and the textual disappearance) of the tribe while Ellen 'progressively' moves on is unremarkable, even if noticeable, because, once again the narrative is about Ellen. For Aboriginal students, the same textual positioning is not invisible. It stands right out of the text as another instance of the Aboriginal experience of exclusion, misrepresentation, appropriation, and of the secondary relation to the European that ensured our real historical experience was being put to work for the European or alternatively put right out of their sight, through death, removal or assimilation.

This 'Aboriginal reading' can be a shocking revelation for non-Aboriginal students. From a defensive position, this reading can be refused on the basis that their own identity/experience shapes their reading or, somewhat ironically, through rebuttal on the grounds that Aboriginal students/teacher are reading into the text what is not there and overlaying their own experiences onto White's intended meanings.

Asserting Aboriginal standpoints to contest the non-Aboriginal representations produces defensiveness, resistance and contest of literal meanings or authorial intentions. This often closes down rather than opens up the text for analysis at deeper levels. Different strategies are required to open up a space to consider this invisible, silent subtext, even though it

arguably does require a consideration of Aboriginal standpoint to illuminate the silences in the text.

Teaching implications

In aiming to explore what is not said in what is said, one indication to emerge from students' natural propensity to defend their own position is that it may be more effective to design or stage explorations of the text in order to lead students to engage differently and come to a more ambiguous, more complex or deeper analysis that is their own. An important shift for them to make in order to eventually access unfamiliar reactions by Aboriginal students is to recognise the existence of Aboriginal subjects as also self-defined outside of the secondary relation to the European. This is a pre-requisite for being able to acknowledge that there is something that can be named as an Aboriginal standpoint. This first requires noticing how the text produces Aboriginal subjects that cannot be understood on their own terms but only in their relation to Europeans, as the above analysis begins to reveal. This opens up the questions around relations between writing positions and the resources/discourses available to the writer and the standpoint subsequently produced. The question of how Aboriginal characters might speak or give representation to themselves is a moot one in the minds of many students, given the symbolic intent of the narrative. But while illuminating how the author constructs and positions the Aboriginal subject, there are opportunities to draw in students to notice how these Aboriginal subjects are also rendered silent, or how their thoughts and motivations are absent, or how they are stripped of agency – how they are products of other's imaginations. This strategy shifts the emphasis from one of classroom contest between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal standpoints to one that leads students to consider the possibility that there are indeed silenced standpoints. Not only do possibilities open up for re-considering what White's textual production is able to achieve as it strives to construct an allegory for Australian consciousness. In addition, by being sensitised to notice the absence of

Aboriginal standpoints in non-Aboriginal representations, the argument is that a space may open up for students to be prepared for the much more unfamiliar representations that may be advanced by Aboriginal students. In pedagogic terms this is strategic development of 'advance organisers' to position students to be open rather than closed to the possibilities to alternate reading positions. This is far different from simply expecting non-Aboriginal students to somehow read a colonial narrative primarily through an Aboriginal standpoint rather than their own.

In the case of *A Fringe of Leaves*, building the context of the author's writing position can be helpful for students to understand how Aboriginal characters and social practices have been appropriated by the author for a purpose unrelated to Aboriginal interests and concerns. White's description of Aboriginal people and action is not primarily designed to shift the reader's focus and concern to the Aboriginal plight, the Aboriginal story of white intrusion, or the Aboriginal journey into the Australian national consciousness. Rather it is designed to keep the focus of concern on Ellen's plight in order to understand her ordeal and the insights she gains. It is unsurprising then that non-Aboriginal students resist a transfer of attention to the representations of Aboriginal realities. However, in drawing attention to the author's purpose for including Aboriginal representations non-Aboriginal students can be made more aware of the literary techniques that submerge Aboriginal experience and how Aboriginals are incidental to and therefore contained as products of the literary and national imagination.

This makes it easier for students to grasp that the first casualty in texts that attempt to re-write the colonial era is often accurate descriptions of Aboriginal society and behaviour. Ellen Roxburgh, as a re-iteration of Eliza Fraser, adds to the Fraser myth, as Fiona Foley asserts, rather than dispels it. While the text is fiction it is also historical with parts assumed to be informed by historical knowledge of actual events. It is important in this case for

students to be clear that White himself admitted to inventing his Aboriginal subjects by drawing on the archive and things he had heard or read of Aboriginal people. While such generalisations of Aboriginal cultures and characters can be substantiated as consistent with understandings held at the time, they can also be mediated in classrooms through the literature that contests and critiques the colonial imagination and its attendant archive, including Aboriginal analysis of these representations. Students can be made aware of the choices that authors make, as ones of literary license and imagination, rather than representations of the truth of Aboriginal people. So even though the author Patrick White knows there is an Aboriginal account that says Eliza Fraser was marked with safe passage back to the settlement, drawing this in would disturb the representation of the timeless, undisturbed, innocent and ignorant savages he needs to contrast and establish the distance between the 'native' and the European. Mediation is required if students are to consider that the Aboriginal account demonstrates Aboriginal awareness of the settlement at Moreton Bay and awareness of Europeans as more than 'apparitions' of ghosts and spirits that must be deified to exorcise the malingering spirits. The Aboriginal account suggests a humanity and compassion not usually afforded to the savage in non-Aboriginal representations and also provides an alternative reading of apotheosis. The line between fiction and history is redrawn for students.

Likewise, an understanding of the colonial discourses of the native 'Other' assists students to notice and read instances of them. Colonial binaries and their interchangeable oppositions often appear as natural givens of the colonial era – old ways of thinking that are now outdated. Understanding these binary opposites in their various expressions is fundamental to understanding the colonial framing of Aboriginal people. Many university students have not engaged these frameworks of the colonial imagination and therefore fail to recognise them in the text. As well, students often have no experience in recognising instances of romantic, anthropological and

racialised inscriptions of the savage. The descriptive language of the savage tends to be seen as literal descriptions, legitimate for the era being represented, rather than as examples of a particular form of textual and knowledge production which also rationalised the dispossession, destruction, and marginalisation of Aboriginal people.

Without this background knowledge, many students struggle to read Patrick White's attempt to disturb the black-white relations and their racialised sets of interchangeable oppositions let alone produce an alternative or critical reading. They are able to read Ellen's journey without unsettling their assumptions about Aboriginal people. Teachers, as mediators of the text, are left to consider, then, how students are to read and judge whether the line between civilised and savage is drawn successfully by the author as an expression of the duality within human character rather than reinforcement of the black-white dichotomy. That is, do the context and/or subtext provide a reading space that suggests syncretic possibilities for cross-cultural understanding? This is an important question when the representation of Aboriginal behaviour and society is included to provide the reader with both the conditions and the descriptions of what constitutes savage behaviour.

Summary

In this Chapter, attention has been placed on a field of meaning for understanding the positioning of the colonial Aboriginal subject. The aim has not been to produce an alternate Aboriginal reading or even to judge whether Patrick White has achieved what other analysts assert. The aim has been to explore the textual formation of the Aboriginal subject in the narrative to consider what opportunities are present in the text to broaden non-Aboriginal students' awareness of Aboriginal standpoints. The lesson learned here is that with more awareness of how authors condition text-reader relations students may find it easier to understand why they may experience disengagements

when faced with unfamiliar representations constructed by Aboriginal authors from their own quite different writing positions.

REMEMBERING BABYLON

BY DAVID MALOUF

David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* was written four decades after Patrick White initially began *A Fringe of Leaves* and more than six decades after Prichard's *Coonardoo*. It was seeded by the account of a white man, Gemmy Morrell or Morril, who was said to have entered a settlement in Queensland after living among 'Aborigines' for sixteen years (RB: 183). From the vantage point of the 1990s, Malouf constructs a fictional frontier scenario set in the mid 1800s twelve miles from the newly settled port of Bowen in the colony of Queensland. *Remembering Babylon* is a useful site for analysis for a number of reasons. Like Prichard and White before him Malouf is well known both nationally and internationally and his works are a staple in secondary and tertiary curricula. By writing from the context of the 1990s and arguably in the light of post-colonial theory, he provokes readers to look back in time through a lens that refracts frontier history in ways different from Prichard or White. In addition, Malouf produces a frontier narrative that at first glance is almost entirely devoid of Aboriginal subjects. He explains that in writing, the:

> ...most difficult part was getting what I wanted without being pretentious or to pretend to know something I don't. No white person here understands the aboriginal world enough to write about it. (cited in Berne 1993, p. 2)

Instead, Malouf creates as his central protagonist an already transformed identity, Gemmy (Morrell) Fairley, to represent an 'in-between' identity position namely, a 'white-indigene' who is still recognisably European but also at home and knowledgeable in the way Aboriginal people understand and relate to the landscape. Malouf wields Gemmy's character to establish the Aboriginal presence as the colonial 'savage' and to elicit diversity within settler

thinking, as symbols of internal conflict in the settler collective and individual pyches. The fragmentation of the responses of settler characters to Gemmy's presence – Gemmy's presence being the constant reminder of the Aboriginal presence – provides an allegory to suggest a re-orientation of the European physical and cultural standpoint in a different landscape.

Remembering Babylon provides further evidence of how non-Aboriginal authors continue to narrate the Aboriginal presence as subjects and objects of colonial discourse, even as the understandings of Aboriginal people change over time and as Aboriginal Australians engage the national consciousness on our own terms. This narrative is especially interesting as Malouf traverses the familiar to unfamiliar terrain between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal worlds in a much more explicit way. Revisiting some of the critical analysis of Malouf's writing will help also to draw out the elements of tension in narrating continuities and discontinuities with colonial discourses.

The context of change

The contemporary social and political contexts in which the narrative was written are significant to the themes and symbolism drawn through the novel and the framing of the Aboriginal subject. The context of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia continued to be shaped by Aboriginal contestation of history and place in the period leading up to publication of *Remembering Babylon*. Despite the reforms that had occurred following the 1967 Referendum, the late eighties in Australia saw a visible Aboriginal presence speaking out during and following the 1988 Bi-centennial celebrations. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody commenced in 1987 and reported in 1991. It drew attention to a history that contributed to the high rates of Aboriginal incarceration and deaths, and the effects that this wrought on Aboriginal individuals, families and society. Acting on a recommendation of the Report, the Australian Parliament established in 1991 the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to formalise

processes for achieving reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians in time for the Centenary of Federation in 2001. In 1992, the High Court Judgement on *Mabo vs Queensland (No. 2)* recognised the continuation in common law of the Meriam plaintiffs, to title over their land, debunking the myth of *Terra Nullius* which had hitherto legitimised the colonial project and the foundation of the nation. In the same year, the then Prime Minister, Paul Keating (1993) delivered his Redfern Park Speech, a watershed speech which linked the findings of the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report and the Reconciliation process to signal Australia's need to respond collectively to the historical injustice (Aboriginal Law Bulletin 1993, No. 9). The speech was delivered on the eve of the United Nations International Year of Indigenous People, a year which coincided with the publication of *Remembering Babylon* in 1993.

All these developments signalled a growing awareness, in at least mainstream sections of the Australian population, of the ongoing effects of the injustice of dispossession and the various government policies that controlled Aboriginal people all the way into the second half of the 20th Century. Also signalled was the ongoing failure of government policy to recognise inter-generational trauma, to address the needs of Aboriginal Australia, and the slow progress of real change in the decades following the 1967 Referendum. Significantly, the increasingly visible and audible presence of Aboriginal people signalled to the rest of the country that we would never disappear quietly from the national landscape. The national mood was being provoked towards change and it was being led from the highest offices in the nation. This was the emerging context for Malouf's *Remembering Babylon.*

Malouf's background and experience
Born in 1934, Malouf's father's family were Lebanese Christians who arrived in Australia in the 1880s. His mother's family was Jewish arriving from England in the early Twentieth Century. In Malouf's growing years in

Brisbane, Queensland, a primary social (and institutional) divide was between Catholics and Protestants. The self-conscious ethnic identifications of current times were not yet a feature of the Australian social landscape. Despite Malouf's inter-generational Australian roots, the migrant presence in an unfamiliar landscape permeates strongly through *Remembering Babylon* and the shaping of the Australian identity.

The making of Australian consciousness and identity is a focus of much of Malouf's work and was also the theme of his Boyer Lectures (Malouf, 1998). These Lectures provide insights that resonate in *Remembering Babylon*. In Lecture 2, for example, speaking of the making of non-Aboriginal Australian consciousness, he refers to "the paradoxical condition of having our lives simultaneously in two places, two hemispheres"[6]. In Lecture 4, he articulates this as non-Aboriginal Australia's 'complex fate', expressed in

> an endless worrying back and forth about how we were to ground ourselves and discover a basis for identity. Was this identity to be grounded in what we had brought to the place or in what we found when we got here? Was it cultural inheritance that was to define us, even in the radically changed form that being in a new place demanded, or the place itself?[7]

The effects of accommodating two worlds through a re-making towards a hybrid consciousness were also pondered in Lecture 2. He asserts that in coming to a different landscape, what can be observed or experienced in nature by the transplanted immigrant requires translation through the written word, into the consciousness and this represents;

> …that great process of culture, and also of acculturation, that creates a continuity at last between the life without and the life

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[6] See http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures/stories/1998/988462.htm

[7] See http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures/stories/1998/988467.htm

within. It is one of the ways - a necessary one - by which we come at last into full possession of a place.[8]

But Malouf is careful to articulate what he means by possession and reiterates his notion of 'white indigeneity', as being a form of resolution of the paradoxical condition of relating to two hemispheres.

> Not legally [in possession], and not just physically, but as Aboriginal people, for example, have always possessed the world we live in here: in the imagination. And I must just add that I am not suggesting this as yet another and deeper move in the long process of appropriating the continent and displacing its original owners, but as a move towards what is, in effect, a convergence of indigenous and non-indigenous understanding, a collective spiritual consciousness that will be the true form of reconciliation. That convergence will take place in the imagination, and imagination is essential to it.[9]

Malouf suggests that words and language are essential tools to develop and communicate the insights and symbolisms necessary to remake consciousness about 'who we are' 'where we are'. He points to the tensions between the natural environment and the inherited cultures that are translated across it by settler Australians and their descendants to reiterate the important place of words in this process of translation and re-making:

> Subtle adjustments may have to be made in the way we look at things before we can bring them within the range of our feelings and then, through words, give them a new life as consciousness.[10]

This re-making of consciousness relates to the culture-environment tension but one which also references the earlier presence of Aboriginal people. In Lecture 3, for example, he acknowledges the imprint of Aboriginal cultures

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[8] See http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures/stories/1998/988462.htm

[9] See http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures/stories/1998/988462.htm

[10] See http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures/stories/1998/988462.htm

on the landscape which he argues is still there and cannot be erased as long as it exists in consciousness:

> The land had received the imprint of culture long before we came to it. It had been shaped by use and humanised by knowledge that was both practical and sacred. It had also been taken deep into the consciousness of its users so that, through naming and storytelling and myth-making, all the features of the land took on a second life in the imagination and in the mouths of women and men.
>
> What we did when we came here was lay new knowledge, a new culture, a new consciousness over what already existed, the product of so many thousands of years of living in, and with the land. What we brought supplemented … but did not replace it, and cannot do so as long as any syllable of that earlier knowledge exists in the consciousness of even one woman or man.[11]

These views are evident in the themes of *Remembering Babylon* and are useful for revisiting their formation in the narrative.

Some critical responses to Malouf's attempt

While critical responses to *Remembering Babylon* invariably centre on Malouf's focus on Australian identity, there are some interesting responses that debate its success in adapting more positive representations of the Aboriginal presence. Ross for example lauds Malouf's skill in subverting the imaginary of colonialism through the ambiguous status of Gemmy, which

> suggests that colonialism, and discourse more generally, is not a coherent field, but rather a network of desire, displacement and repression which produces the 'others' that it seeks to dissipate. Malouf's identification of allegory as a self-differing mode in which the 'otherness' of the subaltern subject can begin to announce itself is subversive precisely because it draws for its own purposes upon one of the principal tropes (the perpetual battle between light and darkness) of colonial discourse. (1994, p. 6)

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[11] See http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures/stories/1998/988465.htm

Garry Kinnane (2001) disagrees. He sees the relegation of and silence of the Aboriginal presence at the margins of the colonial narrative as the reification of old myths that served to dispossess Aboriginal people. According to Byron, Kinnane "sees this diminished presence as a gloss over reality, an attempt to replace historical fact with a more positive take on indigenous-invader relations" (2005, p. 88).

Mark Byron acknowledges readings of the absence of violence against and the invisibility of the Aboriginal population but he also witnesses clever means for transporting settler consciousness from what they know to what they are afraid to know:

> The narrator enacts a paradox: to translate a worldview into another language or idiom is to diminish or to negate it, and so it must be imagined, imperfectly. The very registration of radical difference in worldview between indigenous and invader/settler groups illustrates the difficulty in bridging that difference, and brings into greater focus the way Gemmy embodies the paradox of living it. (2005, p. 88)

To Byron, Gemmy is "a paradox that threatens collapse of distinction per se" (2005, p. 86). He is marked by behaviours that position him "as a threat at the limits, and even a threat to the limits, of the knowable" (2005, p. 87) but also able to be understood "as a split subject, a multiplicity rather than essence: [Mr Frazer] calls him a 'forerunner… a true child of the place as it will one day be'" (2005, p. 87). Byron contends that "Malouf offers his readers a way to reconfigure objective identity into relational identity. How readers choose to respond will shape the meaning of the very texts themselves" (2005, p. 91). This highlights both the investment needed in the narrative for transiting unfamiliar terrains and the tentativeness of readers to leave behind what they are already familiar with.

Lee Spinks similarly sees the character Gemmy "as the site for a struggle for mastery between a range of identifying discourses" and his presence "puts

into question the binomial distinctions that underwrite settler identity" (1995, p. 3). To Spinks,

> Malouf…plays upon the inherent tension in *Remembering Babylon* between different indentifying positions to show how [Gemmy] Fairley's biography is reconstructed from both the objectifying idiom of taxonomic classification system and a fragile lyric discourse of self-revelation that continually asserts its difference from the culturally constructed oppositions of western ethnocentrism. (1995, p. 3)

Further to this, he suggests that this in-between position

> …between two incommensurable cultural narratives, also suggests that identity, 'Australian' or otherwise, may in fact be produced by the continual dialectical play between different versions of the self. (Spinks 1995, p. 4)

While Justyna Sempruch sees the narrative as "remembering the mixture of resistance and assimilation, remembering the failure of exchange as well as an attempt to move beyond that failure" (2005, p. 49), she also reminds us that:

> Malouf's narrative closes with this unacknowledged cultural loss, with Aboriginal otherness "that had been ridden down", "the remnants of the clan" chased away, "the bones of the victims" carried and disposed "in parcels in the forks of trees" (Malouf 196). Aboriginal "otherness" is the anonymity, which…stands completely outside the subject, denies access to itself, does not participate. Malouf's account returns here to the agency of failed translation in a reference here to Mr Frazer, the local philosopher. (2005, p. 49)

Sempruch notes that by the end of the novel,

> Gemmy's identity has been acknowledged for what it has always been: …a being thrown into the world of dichotomies in which he has to cope, one way or the other. (2005, p. 49)

Penelope Ingram reads the in-between space/identity constructed in *Remembering Babylon* as bringing "to a frightening conclusion" Malouf's idea

"that white Australians have an equal and valid claim to the land" (2001, p. 172):

> Indeed that the text disposes of Gemmy and yet at the same time continues to mark his presence and respect it, while it is no longer a threat, is exemplary of the new face of White Australia's approach to race. White culture here is saying to the ethnic/racial Other, "I respect your difference, your race and culture; now let me be free to develop my own understanding of my uniqueness, my particularity, my race, and culture, independent of you". Thus, as Taguieff explains "[f]rom a defense of oppressed minorities and their 'cultural rights', the 'right to be different' has been transformed into an instrument of legitimation for exacerbated calls to defend a 'threatened national identity'. (Ingram 2001, p. 172)

Suzanne Berne asserts Malouf's focus is a story of the conditions of (European) exile, and Gemmy as the representative of the transformed identity having had sixteen years under the influence of the unfamiliar, provides the settlers with a glimpse into their possible future status:

> Perhaps an exile's greatest fear is that by losing the world that has shaped him, he will somehow cease to be himself. Even for the voluntary exile – the pioneer or immigrant – everything that once seemed fixed is uprooted; everything known becomes strange. Most unsettling of all is the future, which an exile cannot predict, having left history behind. (1993, p. 1)

At the heart of this exile is Gemmy's loss of language and his inarticulateness. Robert Ross for example sees Gemmy as a linguistic exile that represents an attempt by Malouf "to dispel … the mist that engulfs understanding" (1994, p. 5). However for Sempruch, Gemmy's loss of language represents the risk of identity erasure:

> [e]merging in traces and fragments of memory, Gemmy's identity is traceable back to some origins and simultaneously put "under erasure". The in-between status, (his identity erasure) clearly challenges the settlers' obsession with naming and forces them to acknowledge their own provisional status in the colony: to

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concede that being neither them nor the other is a possibility. (2005, p. 45)

Ingram (2001) takes the notion of identity erasure in the space in-between further. The nothingness in this space is to her the invisibility of whiteness when surrounded by the conditions of unnamed unfamiliarity and unarticulated difference. Gemmy in this sense is the site of white invisibility struggling to be redefined away from its own locus for meaning – the Scottish landscape. Ingram disputes readings of *Remembering Babylon* that interpret Gemmy as the imagined creolised merging of white and Aboriginal identity. She argues that because Malouf eventually removes Gemmy from the narrative, he evokes an Australian identity that is

> ...not one that acknowledges the combined experiences of white and black Australia, but one that explores two versions of white Australianness: the invisible, alienated, settler white and the racialised indigenous white. (2001, p. 160)

Ingram takes the position that Malouf sought "to unproblematize [settlers'] always already mediated claim to belonging" (2001, p. 161). This longing for recognition, asserts Ingram, is a major pre-occupation of Australian artists and writers, and not Malouf's alone.

Peter Otto is similarly critical of Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* as "[t]he translation of the political into the aesthetic and psychological, and the accompanying metamorphosis of the colonial into the national" (1993, p. 546). He proposes that

> [o]n the one hand, this locale [the frontier] might stand for the point from which a properly Australian identity springs. On the other hand, it is the site of violent dispossession. How is Malouf to remember the different histories and cultures that collide at this point? (1993, p. 545)

Otto goes on to highlight the kinds of investments needed in the narrative to support the transition 'to be' in unfamiliar terrains, and the "magnitude of

what... [*Remembering Babylon*] has to forget in order to re-member, its transformation of a moment of violent dispossession into an anticipation of national unity" (1993, p. 556).

These growing intellectual engagements with the treatment of the Aboriginal presence in Malouf's narrative indicate a heightening of awareness of the position and positioning of the Aboriginal subject in the literary imagination at the turn of the Twenty-First Century. For Aboriginal people, the practice in literary narratives with the Aboriginal absence, erasure, and silence about dispossession being drawn out into the open is timely. However, how Malouf opens up textual spaces to produce ambiguous meanings in order to introduce strangeness is worth revisiting as his use of boundaries, edges and lines demonstrate use of further textual devices in transiting readers from the known/familiar to the unknown/unfamiliar.

Boundaries of continuities and discontinuities

In *Remembering Babylon*, boundaries and edges are central symbols that establish the lines of difference between Aboriginal and settler worlds. The reader is oriented to these and positioned to read through the discursive order they impose. The frontier settlement is located from the beginning through references to geographical location, lines, encirclements and fences. For example, phrases such as: "[to] the north, beginning with the last fenced paddock" (RB: 7); "the land to the south was also unknown" (RB: 7); "[t]he edges of it were part of the blacks' traditional hunting ground" (RB: 92) permeate the narrative.

Gemmy the non-settler character who has been living with Aborigines is also positioned in his difference from the settlers via the language of the boundary. For example, as Gemmy emerges from years of living among Aborigines he stammers: "Do not shoot. I am a B-b-British object" (RB: 3). He is first brought into the narrative "out of a world over there" (RB: 2), "leaping up onto the top rail of the fence" (RB: 3) from where "he overbalanced, began to

fall, and the next instance was on all fours on the other side" (RB: 30). The metaphor of boundaries in the narrative continues in settler attempts to understand Gemmy, for example, his lack of coherent English language was interpreted as if "he was halfway gone across a line." (RB: 35).

The Aboriginal presence is also brought into view via anxiety of the settler position, often invoked through the concept of edges, lines and divisions through the use of phrases such as "pacing the line and looking for signs of trespass" (RB: 65). The settler Jock McIvor's analysis of his inclusion of Gemmy on the settler side of the boundary was that

> [Gemmy] had brought them to the very edge of it; of a world where what was cleared and fenced and in Jock's terms reasonable …might not be enough against – against what? Some vulnerability to the world that could only be measured, was measured still, by the dread it evoked in them? (RB: 96)

These standpoints establish European reason on one side of the frontier and the unknown domain of 'the Aborigine' as the source of (emotional) fear on the other. These symbols are also used to represent internal division within the settler community, brought out through individual anxieties, such as "of finding them on one side and himself on the other" (RB: 67), or in the case of Barney Mason who "was being pressed from all sides" (RB: 94). These anxieties hint at the psychic turmoil at the frontier where anxiety might place you "on the edge of yourself" (RB: 39).

In deeper conceptual terms, Malouf uses the frontier as a symbol for the boundaries between a range of interchangeable binary opposites. Broadly, these are articulated through and woven across different sets of racial, physical, and psychic relations: between settlers and the absent Aborigines; between human and natural environments; and between understandings of self-other in individual and collective identity-making. As articulated in relation to racial difference, the oppositions drawn on either side of the frontier's boundaries reflect the foundations of colonial constructions of the

colonial 'Other' where black is always the negative of white, and savagery and superstition the alternative to order and reason. In his attempt to shift or transcend the boundaries between these oppositions, Malouf establishes their existence by acknowledging their presence, he goes on to position the Aboriginal world in primitive terms and, in doing so, re-establishes the whiteness, lightness and rightness of the colonial order in the process (Ingram, 2001).

Darkness as metaphor for the Aboriginal world

Through the eyes and minds of the settlers and for powerful effect, Malouf writes in the absent, unseen Aboriginal subject by weaving a central colonial construct – darkness/light – to signal inter-changeable oppositions into his narrative. The metaphor of darkness brackets all that stands on the other side of the frontier from the settlers - all that is unknown, strange and unfamiliar. Darkness in all its negative connotations represents the Aboriginal world. Through this textual device, the Aboriginal presence is relegated to the shadows, unseen, sometimes glimpsed but always sensed in its opposition to all that is light, white, familiar and known. As early as the second page, for example, the reader is brought to the edge of the frontier through the McIvor children's understanding of what lay beyond it:

> …a world over there, beyond the no-man's land swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark. (RB: 2)

Descriptions of the other side of the frontier emerge again in the early scene setting of *Remembering Babylon* when the white-indigene character Gemmy is contemplated by the settlers. This darkness is at once the Aboriginal world, the unknown, and the settlers' lack of knowledge and authority over this strange, unfamiliar land: "The country he had broken out of was all unknown to them. Even in full sunlight it was impenetrable dark" (RB: 7). The darkness

is so overwhelming it occludes the light—light struggles to illuminate this darkness.

Malouf's play on darkness and light attempts to hold open the possibility that darkness, as the 'unknown', also represents settler ignorance of the strange land and people they confront. Light represents the knowledge (of the environment) that they need to feel secure about, of their place in this new landscape. However, this country was not simply unknown and different from familiar Scottish country. It was menacing.

> Out here the very ground under their feet was strange. It had never been ploughed. You had to learn all over again how to deal with the weather…. And all around, before and behind, worse than the weather and the deepest night, natives, tribes of wandering myalls who, in their traipsing this way and that all over the map, were forever encroaching on boundaries that could be insisted on by daylight. (RB: 8)

The metaphor of darkness for all that is unknown is easily extended to encapsulate the settlers' fear of the unseen Aborigine.

> Even in broad daylight, to come face to face with one of them, stepping out of nowhere, out of the earth it might be, or a darkness they moved in always like a cloud, was a test of a man's capacity to stay firm on his own two feet when his heart was racing…. It brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back to treat as childish: The Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night. (RB: 38)

In using the metaphor of darkness to represent the Aborigine in the imagination of the settlers, Malouf constructs a specific reading of the colonial encounter. The colonial binary of self-other is starkly constructed through these plays on darkness and light. But they also provide the means, language and logic for domesticating the unknowns.

The hybrid white-indigene as Aboriginal subject

Although recognisably white in his strange difference from the settlers, Gemmy is characterised with the markers of Aboriginality as his ambiguous status is shaped by the presence of both identities. In the eyes of the settlers, Gemmy "had the half-starved look of a black…the smell of one too, like dead swamp-water" (RB: 3). Gemmy's eyes are also described "[l]ike one a' them. Muddy. Mistrustful" (RB: 88). "His very way of moving was a reminder" (RB: 37) to the settlers of how Aboriginal he was. Gemmy is also described as a non-human thing, an 'it':

> What you fix your gaze on is the little hard-backed flies that are crawling about in the corner of its bloodshot eyes and hopping down at intervals to drink the sweat of its lip. (RB: 39)

By describing Gemmy with the negative markers of Aboriginality, colonial discourses of the uncivilised in this narrative are universally inscribed on an invisible Aboriginal subject. The white subject who has been absorbed by and moves in the Aboriginal world also now becomes the de-facto Aboriginal presence in the narrative. Gemmy embodies the physical possibility for experimenting with 'talk' about the unknown.

Aboriginal subjects of settler imagination

Malouf makes indelible reference to the Aboriginal presence through the imagination of the settlers. What is said or thought by some of these key characters conforms to colonial discourses of the Other and in doing so reifies the stereotypical prejudices against 'the native'. For example Malouf's economy with direct descriptions of 'Aborigines' makes the educated school teacher George Abbott's internal musings, of "[t]hin-shanked, dusty, undignified, the life they lived was merely degenerate, so squalid and flea-ridden" (RB: 46), all the stronger in the image it conjures. This economy of words extends to the portrayal of 'the Aborigines' as threats. When the farmhand Andy describes the visit of Aborigines to Gemmy, he uses only expletives to describe "blacks", "myalls" and "coons", and asserts "they aren't

fucken harmless"(RB: 90); in fact "[if] it's two of them this time [that come onto settler land], next week it'll be twenty" (RB: 91).

Through all these references, Malouf manages to avoid forming and describing Aboriginal characters or actions except in a minimal way. However, in a textually economic way, he does reference the Aboriginal subject of the narrative: the familiar colonial one as understood by the settlers. All the colonial stereotypes of the 'native other' give representation to the unseen but 'known about' Aboriginal subject, without the need for sightings or engagements by settlers or the need for the author to develop or write in Aboriginal characters. In these ways, the white man's Aborigine is well-described and re-inscribed once again in a late Twentieth Century text as Malouf struggles to establish coherence within colonial meanings.

Opening up the in-between space: crossing the boundaries to engage the unfamiliar
Having delineated Aboriginal and settler domains, Malouf positions the ambiguous status of Gemmy as an 'in-between space' where strangeness and familiarity are brought into contact. From the outset, the difficulty of producing a consensus of meanings in the tensions between knowledge and ignorance – the difficulty of resolution of difference - is a continual point of emphasis in this ambiguous space. It is raised early in the narrative through the difficulty of categorising Gemmy as one or the other: "A crowd had gathered to see this specimen of – of what? What was he?" (RB: 4); "[h]e was a parody of a white man" (RB: 35) and "a mixture of monstrous strangeness and unlikeness" (RB: 34). Gemmy also has ambiguous status with the Aboriginal tribe, "and the separation he felt, his questionable status, kept alive in him what he might otherwise have let go" (RB: 25).

For the settlers, Gemmy's ambiguity of identity reflects the fragility of the settlers' identity in unfamiliar landscape. He is the embodiment of displacement, and "composed of deficiencies, silences and gaps. His locations of identity are the suspended and the beyond" (Sempruch 2005, p. 46). His

position gives expression to settler anxiety about the possible transformations that could occur through their physical re-location. "He had started out white. No question… But had he remained white?" (RB: 36). In this way, Malouf's boundaries and edges, although carefully established to demarcate 'the native', also represent the lines of possible transgression and/or transcendence of the culture-environment tension to accommodate the grounds for dual white-indigene consciousness and identity. Via his experience of the pressures of the tentative inter-cultural space, Gemmy is used as the primary symbol for transgression and the primary site for contemplating accommodation. He embodies the promise of learning the connections between language and landscape, and the lesson that

> there was no way of existing in this land or of making your way through it, unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked all the various parts of it and made them one. (RB: 58)

Throughout the narrative, the inadequacies of language and the significance of its function comes to identify the in-between space:

> If he could get the words inside him…the creature, or spirit or whatever it was, would come up to the surface of him and take them. It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognise him. (RB: 29)

Having lost much of his 'English' language, Gemmy comes to this space almost mute and inarticulate and the story gathered from him depends on interpretation of what he means, guessing on the part of the interpreters, and fabrication by the teacher George Abbott. This is analogous with the writing of the Aboriginal subject in the literary imagination. In Gemmy's minor utterances his ambiguous position of not one or the other also feeds anxieties about the future and the unknown:

> They looked at their children…chattering away, entirely at home in their tongue, then heard the mere half-dozen words of English this fellow could cough up…and you had to put to yourself a

harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language but it? It.
(RB: 36)

Dual consciousness as a means to approach the unfamiliar is represented here firstly as a disturbance to the familiar that invokes anxiety and strangeness. According to Otto, settler anxiety relates to "their inability to categorize him and their desire not to recognize him" (1993, p. 553) and their responses are as to the unknown. For settlers "[i]t was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them, since at any moment he could show either one face or the other" (RB: 39). In this familiar-unfamiliar contact sphere, the lack of a language of accommodation exacerbates anxiety. For example, "Gemmy, just by being there, opened a gate onto things that Barney couldn't specify, even to himself, and did not want to ask about, that worried the soulcase out of him" (RB: 90) and "[i]t was the fear that … what they were dealing with, in Gemmy, might be closer to them, to him, than he knew" (RB: 163). While Gemmy presents as a disturbance to the familiar order of things, he also represents self-division or the shuffling back and forth between the binaries of self-division. His presence signals the risk of dissolution and loss for settlers as they contemplate the edges of continuities and discontinuities:

> ….but that for him, as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips the last rags from your soul and leaves you so far out on the edge of yourself that your fear now is that you may never get back. (RB: 39)

This confrontation of the familiar and the unfamiliar, in the 'in-between' presence among the settlers, evidences in the narrative the fragile balance in the community and the assumptions underpinning their shared experiences as Scottish settlers. The distinctions drawn between settler responses brings to light multiple positions along the accommodation-exclusion tensions, as well as the slow awakening to the changes being produced in individuals in the

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constant negotiations between self-other in the new landscape. The lines from the known and familiar (continuity) to the strange but unknown (discontinuity) also demonstrate potential for new understandings. Jock McIvor, for example, in the eyes of his friends and through his accommodation of Gemmy "developed a mark of difference, or some deformity had emerged in him that they had failed till now to observe" (RB: 66). He was slowly forced to re-view his relations with his neighbours and fellow settlers and see both himself and them in a different light.

> The sense of distance between them was new, and it seemed to Jock to hold the possibility of a terrible desolation. None of the old assurances would cross it. (RB: 95)

> Was he changed? He saw now that he must be, since they were as they had always been and he could not agree with them. (RB: 96)

> It was if he had seen the world till now, not through his own eyes, out of some singular self, but through the eyes of a fellow who was always in company. (RB: 97)

> The things he had begun to be aware of, however fresh and innocent, lay outside what was common, or so he thought; certainly, since he could have no form in which to communicate them, outside words. (RB: 98)

A similar potential for change can be tracked in the school-teacher George Abbott. Initially repulsed by Gemmy and resentful of his position in the settlement, he was led to begin the process of writing the exterior into the interior self through his visits to Mrs Hutchence's house. Mrs Hutchence's views of a more open society and her way of listening allowed him to hear the silence, and so he "regarded Gemmy very differently now" (RB: 162) and "he would have liked to break through the silence that kept Gemmy apart from them" (RB: 163). Gemmy's in-between position thus also represents a site of settler discontinuity with self that can provide the conditions for the imperative to either accommodate or exclude. This tentative re-ordering of

self-other relations can be held open in opportunistic ways but it can also close again.

The different settler responses to Gemmy's presence propel the narrative towards its inevitable conclusion, which is Gemmy's erasure, symbolising the myriad other 'dispersals' in the following years. Gemmy leaves voluntarily but only after he is moved away from the settlement for his own protection from hostile settlers. The desire to re-establish the boundaries of normality represent settler choice to exclude rather than accommodate. This allegiance to the familiar order is expressed throughout the narrative. For example, after disturbed sleep, Mrs McIvor reflects that "after such nights, the way back to normality was through habit" (RB: 72) and her husband Jock McIvor "was trying hard to hold on to the normality of things" (RB: 103). To resolve settler anxiety, in a somewhat ironic anticipation of history, Malouf has Mrs Frazer express the sense of a return to order via a policy of protection by exclusion: "It would be best... if he were put where they can do him no harm. Where he wasn't quite so visible" (RB: 125).

That Gemmy also could not resolve his ambiguity in the in-between space but returned to the Aboriginal domain, only to suffer annihilation, points most strongly to the impossibility of full recognition and coping in the space between. Nevertheless, this in-between space is opened up for contemplation for possibilities through the focus on Gemmy. Malouf has set out to use Gemmy, via the settlers' engagements with him, as the agent for changing the consciousness of the settlers as Gemmy's thoughts revealed on his journey back to the tribe,

> ...there was no finality in it. He knew that. One life was burned
> up, hollowed out with flame, to crack the seeds from which new
> life would come; that was the law". (RB: 164)

This reference to tensions and transformation is continued at the end of the narrative. Despite Gemmy's leaving the community and his certain end as a

victim of massacre, his power as an agent of transformation is held open. The reflections of Janet McIvor and Lachlan Beattie fifty years later confirm that Gemmy's first appearance on the top rail of the fence "was the start of it, and so long as the image had life in its head, it was not ended" (RB: 181).

> He could afford to admit now that it had not ended. Something Gemmy had touched off in them was what they were still living, both, in their different ways. It would end only when they were ended, and maybe not even then. They would come back, as they had now, from the far points they had moved away to, and stand side by side looking up at the figure outlined there against a streaming sky. Still balanced. (RB: 179-180)

The narrative perhaps can be seen as a series of discursive fractures and dissolutions of the black-white binary relations but eventually with no resolution, just a return to the familiar order and to safety within what is known, now understood as colonial history. Malouf engages these settlers in a dialogue that discerns their internal differences and contradictions in logic and draws the allegory with colonialism. In the process, he writes a narrative about the frontier that renders silent the Aboriginal presence. The focus is on the settler story and after being used as the vehicle for developing settler insight, the Aborigine is dispensed with. Malouf opens up the space of contact to reconsider accepted relations for accommodating/excluding the unfamiliar but closes it to accord with historical reality. Like other frontier narratives, *Remembering Babylon* is not concerned with the Aboriginal presence or condition, only with what can be meant for non-Aboriginal Australians trying to find their place in Aboriginal country.

Possibilities for re-reading the Aboriginal presence at the cultural interface
In the in-between space, strangeness and familiarity are brought into contact in the hope of being brought into dialectical play or arguably to be reworked into unified relations of transcendence or co-existence rather than being left in disharmony or opposition. In Malouf's in-between space where multiple positions engage with difference in a quest to transcend the more singular

certainties of meaning, all characters are racialised, classed, and gendered and the reader is positioned to engage a much more complex discursive field of possible meanings. There is arguably space for non-Aboriginal readers to imagine other possibilities for their own basis for identity. But the 'other side' of the frontier experience remains present but outside of the field of consciousness.

Read from the Aboriginal side, the in-between space evidences the risks of appropriation and assimilation of the Aboriginal people, and Gemmy can be understood in his act of returning to the tribe and championed for his refusal of a settler culture which could not accept him. The space can also be read as a site for non-Aboriginal denial of the Aboriginal presence and of dispossession, as some of the critical responses evidence. But Gemmy's presence indicates the inter-cultural encounter as a powerful catalyst for 'unsettling' the settlers. And so Malouf's text can also be read as a site for bringing to light inter-relatedness across constructs of identity and incomplete understanding, and the possible site for generating new meanings from the confusion that emerges when boundaries are crossed.

Aspects of Gemmy's in-between identity position mirror Nakata's Cultural Interface (2007a, 2007b) notions of the endless call back to the origins and certainties of mutually-exclusive Indigenous and non-Indigenous domains in his theorising of the cultural interface. As he asserts, there is a lack of language to describe the Indigenous position at the cultural interface, and a reluctance to acknowledge the interface position as a beginning point for inquiry into more complex sets of relations. Instead, the interface is the site of struggle to reclaim and rename Indigenous in a reasserted and inverted position to non-Aboriginal people. As Sempruch similarly suggests in discussions of the futility of determining Gemmy's claims to authenticity in this space:

> How would this authenticity speak for itself; as one voice or as several competing voices, as a monolithic identity, or as an identity hyphenated by difference? ….Either way, his authenticity emerges as an investigation, an interference of different points of reference, and contradictory positions…. For rather than emphasise his return to the origin, it is much more a question of covering the space between him and the origin, of recovering the connection that would put the words back in his mouth, and catch the creature. (Sempruch 2005, p. 47)

Sempruch considers the space a failed contact zone and Mr Frazer's documentation as evidence of "failed translation" (2005, p. 49). However, the narrative provides opportunities to negotiate the Aboriginal presence in this space against the privileged settler position in the narrative but this arguably involves reading and shunting 'to and fro' across the various textual positions. For example, while Gemmy represented a threat and was erased from the narrative, he is also a source of ongoing revelation – a source of deeper settler insight into themselves and through this Malouf builds a reference point for multiple ways of seeing and being. Gemmy, as the embodiment of ambiguity, "resolutely resists… discursive enclosure" (Spinks 1995, pp. 2 & 7). After his attempt to engage as all that he is, he removes himself from the settler domain but his time there has affected the settlers to consider possibilities beyond the known.

Through his ambiguous identity, Gemmy provides access to expanded knowledge of Aboriginal people. At the same time as the negative markers of Aboriginality are clearly established, the author opens up the possibility for considering hitherto uncontemplated characteristics of Aboriginality. As a translator of the inter-cultural encounter, Gemmy also embodies to some degree Aboriginal knowledge of the land and environment *viz.*, knowledge with its roots in another system, which represents a different way of relating to the world. In this way, Malouf draws out more recent understandings of Aboriginal people as the bearers of ancient knowledge, language, and philosophy, even as these are framed through the colonial discourses available

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to the settler character, the Rev Frazer, who translates this knowledge. In this respect, Malouf complicates what could have been a singularly romantic positioning of Aboriginal knowledge or a complete blindness to it. While contemplating Aboriginal knowledge he does draw in romantic understandings of noble savages but he also reveals methods of Western appropriation and domestication of such knowledge and the Aboriginal subject as the object of Western knowledge. For example, Rev Frazer upholds the value of Aboriginal knowledge, albeit for the benefit of the colonial project.

> The children of this land were made for it…. We must humble ourselves and learn from them. The time will come when we too will be sustained…by what the land produces…so that what spreads in us is an intimate understanding of what it truly is, with all that is unknowable in it made familiar within. (RB: 119)

At the same time, Malouf also describes the dismissal of the value of this knowledge by the authorities in Brisbane when Frazer advocates agriculture based on native species. However, Malouf also articulates, via Gemmy, Aboriginal resistance to exploitation of knowledge through withholding techniques, and recognises Aboriginal angst at misuse and inappropriate distribution of Aboriginal knowledge. As much as Gemmy enjoys his excursions with Frazer "to botanise" (RB: 59) as an act of recognition, there are anxieties about both the partial and full translation of Aboriginal knowledge: "[t]o get a name wrong was comic but could also be blasphemous" (RB: 60). As well, Gemmy

> [w]as sensitive to this dealing between name and spirit. It was out of a kind of reverence, as well as concern for the danger he might put them in, that he concealed from Mr Frazer, who he knew would not notice, a good deal of what he himself could see, Things it was forbidden for them to touch, since they were in the care of men whose land they were crossing; others that only women could approach; others again that were a source of more power than he could control. They could have nothing to do with these things without creating a disturbance in the world that

would do him, Mr Frazer, and others too perhaps, irreparable injury. (RB: 60-61)

In this way, while Malouf represents Gemmy as the embodied potential of non-Aboriginal Australians embracing the landscape on its own 'indigenous' terms, the expeditions Gemmy takes into country with the Rev Frazer reveals a different double consciousness, from the Aboriginal side. This is Gemmy's ability to move across different relations to the landscape and interpret meanings not yet visible to settlers. That he withholds from Frazer critical aspects of the essence of Aboriginal understanding prompts the Twenty-first Century reader to consider of the difficulties of translation, the incommensurability of different systems for understanding relation to environment and different sources of authorities for knowledge. It also pre-empts Aboriginal resistance and insight into the difficulties of translation and representation. Its potential for students and literary studies is that it suggests the presence of Aboriginal standpoints.

Gemmy is used also to mediate the Aboriginal presence as less savage, more human. For example, although 'feared' Aboriginal men of the clan are not 'brought to light' at all until Gemmy is visited, in a scant description of the scene we learn about their concern for and gift to Gemmy and of the considerable distance covered to come to see him.

> This was what the blacks had brought him, in case he needed it. They were concerned that in coming here, among these ghostly white creatures, he might have slipped back into the thinner world of wraiths and demons that he had escaped, though never completely in his days with them. They had come to reclaim him; but lightly, bringing what would feed his spirit. (RB: 108)

Seen in juxtaposition with the settlers' responses to Gemmy, this lightness on the part of the Aboriginal men also provides a possible space for further reflection by students on cultural relativities.

In a similar way, Malouf's positioning of the darkness metaphor to stand for settler ignorance of the Aboriginal world as well as the Aboriginal world opens the space for a consciousness informed from both sides. Frazer's documentation of Aboriginal knowledge can be read as the non-Aboriginal attempt at cultural translation or the evidence of cultural appropriation and how it is at once both those things. That it failed to shift anyone except perhaps Gemmy's return to Aboriginal society enables the student to see the continued suspension of Aboriginal agency and the preservation of the subjugated Other who does not participate and who is at the end ridden down and erased. It also enables consideration of Aboriginal agency through Gemmy's withdrawal from an inter-cultural encounter which failed to recognise or understand him. Gemmy's loss of language and inability to make himself understood carries one important message for Aboriginal Australia, it is up to Aboriginal people to bring, as Malouf says, our thoughts and feeling into consciousness through the written word.

When able to be read from both sides of the in-between space, the cultural interface, the Aboriginal subject can potentially be rendered more visible, and as a subject always encircled and contained within the Western discourse about us, with all its historical traces of colonial thought and the confusions of myriad cross-cultural encounters. In this space, the Aboriginal position is most clearly revealed in its meaning, value and use to the non-Aboriginal appropriators of the 'now you must share with us' space. Here the Aboriginal imprint on the land can be acknowledged more readily than the Aboriginal descendants who still belong in this landscape. However, reading spaces are also opened up in the process that arguably enable some consideration of a submerged allegory for the contemporary Aboriginal position. This is that contemporary Aboriginal lives are positioned at this interface under similar conditions where knowledge, cultures, histories, meanings and identities are ambiguous, contradictory, contested and unresolved. As Nakata has shown in his work, these are the historical conditions embodied in Indigenous peoples'

lives being carried forward into the Twenty-first Century. Finding opportunities in these spaces opens up an important access point to Aboriginal standpoints. It encourages both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers to rediscover how the narrative already offers up possibilities for productive engagements with readings of the Aboriginal presence.

Teaching Implications

In all the frontier texts, discussed so far, a non-Aboriginal 'journey into consciousness' has been narrated using the Whiteman's Aborigine. Students access the meanings of these journeys for pioneers and settlers with little difficulty. *Remembering Babylon* provides many possibilities for this, and more. The challenges to settlers to come to terms with their re-location into the 'unknown', to some extent also encapsulate the challenges that Twenty-first Century students experience in coming to terms with the Aboriginal experience of colonial history. These are the challenges associated with letting go of the familiar, embedded, and taken for granted meanings long enough to see what other meanings lie beyond their grasp and imagination.

The invisibility and absence of the Aboriginal subjects in the narrative, Gemmy's lack of language, the misinterpretation and fabrication used to fill in the gaps produced through his inability to make himself understood, reflect the omission, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation of the Aboriginal experience still in evidence at the heart of Australian history, policy and public discourse, and textual practice. This reinforces the need for pedagogical techniques to enable students to take the journey across to the other side of the frontier and to engage a double reading of dispossession and settlement, to build a dual consciousness in relation to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. If students identify with settlers then what can be used to reveal how their own positions may be similarly stuck with no resolution but to keep the Aboriginal position from encroaching into their mind space?

In the world of readers and narratives there is no one reading. Accepting all accounts from students, regardless of their backgrounds, about the degree to which they are able to access a reading of dispossession can set not just the grounds for discussion but the points of entry for the teacher to illustrate where and how this might be read into or through the narrative. In this way the teaching space becomes a learning environment for engaging students' old or existing analyses, and particularly for widening the lens through which they read.

From this study, evidence is steadily emerging that suggests the teaching space cannot just be a site for imposing a different reading, or changing attitudes, or for singularly exposing students' inability to see or understand the Aboriginal reading. It is a pedagogical space filled with opportunities for exploring the possible meanings of any salient aspect of the narrative and its formation. Critical analysis and attention to the binary order of colonial standpoints, and discourses of romanticism, anthropology and other held positions need to be brought forward for attention. Similarly, students only have to read some of the critical literary analysis to see how texts can be interpreted through a range of theoretical/analytical frames to provide a particular lens or focus through which to engage meanings in the narrative and thus give emphasis to one set of meanings over another. Investigating the range of meanings, both through further reading of critical analysis and through acceptance of all student readings, reveals the unending possibilities for interpretation. Putting into the mix some focus on Aboriginal representations in frontier texts begins a process for firstly bringing students to an awareness of what shapes their reading, and thus the possibility of shifting the ground from which they read.

Whether students identify and embrace a particular reading over another matters less than the act of being exposed to other readings. The existence of other readings sits against their own reading and adds to the constellation of conditions that inform any future reading, as Jock McIvor found. For

example, if students can be brought to an awareness that a reading through feminist theory draws out different possible meanings than a reading through postcolonial identity theory, than a reading via psychoanalytic theory, and so forth, then they are more able to see that a reading from the Aboriginal standpoint will draw out something in addition but also something not complete. That is, from a teacher's perspective, no one frame for reading produces the 'true' meaning of a narrative, and meaning itself is produced in the act of reading, which always also includes the reader's particular social and political location.

Also important to assisting students to see the limits of any singular reading (including their own) is that which comes from understanding the context and background of the particular frontier moment/place being imagined and the context and background of the authors and his/her era of writing. In these are the seeds for understanding authors' choices for the discursive framing of Aboriginal and colonial representations, as well as insight into authors' development of themes and use of symbols, metaphor and allegory. Discussion of what authors may be trying to say and why they were motivated to write it through a fictional narrative and whether that was achieved, opens up a space for students to consider what they have or have not been able to access and what aspects of the textual technique that was problematic for them. In this discussion of authorial technique, available discourses, modes, registers, and language and the way these authorise particular meanings at the expense of others can be brought into play. Always, we should aim to predispose students to consider how the author positions them to read in a particular way – where some meanings are elevated, and others submerged and therefore more difficult to access.

Predisposing students to the possibility of many different readings, opens up the possibility that an Aboriginal reading, or a clearer reading of how the Aboriginal experience is positioned in a particular way, can be recognised as

being produced between the text and the reader. A range of associated strategies exist to bring these aspects of text-reader relations forward to fit a range of teaching styles: preparation before reading *viz.*, context, background, generalities of colonial representation in literature; reference to any Aboriginal accounts of the seeds of frontier stories, especially in *A Fringe of Leaves*; reference to the reliance by authors on colonial discourse and authors' lack of knowledge of Aboriginal experience; extra analytical readings to illustrate different theories for analysis of meaning; well thought out questions to lead students to think in extended ways; compare and contrast techniques that allow students a first unguided reading and an analytical reflection, followed by preparation for a reading of Aboriginal positions and a second reflection; technical exercises that focus on the evidence of discourses and language of representation of Aboriginal experiences; more active engagements in the form of role-playing and exchange of reading positions, and this is especially the case for *Remembering Babylon*. Face to face with each set of understandings, how would students mediate their reading position and their understanding of frontier experience? Would they be more likely to accept that excessive worrying about 'displaced' Australian immigrant identity displaces concern about what it has meant for those original occupants 'displaced' from their own land and way of life through violence that is not acknowledged but accepted as collateral damage to progress?

It would be wise not to measure student reading by a judgement of analysis that looks singularly at how close their reading comes to an Aboriginal reading. A more productive approach is to assess whether students understand better the relations between the text, the reader, and the reading that is possible at the juncture of those relations. This is a form of understanding that can raise awareness about how they come to read, and why their reading differs from another. In the process, they are led to awareness that the meanings that escape them indicate a space where they can

deep their analysis of the relations between their positions and that of others.

Aboriginal students relate to text in similar ways to non-Aboriginal students, through their allegiance and familiarity with the meanings attached to their own position. Reading frontier texts produces constant reminders of the initial injustice of dispossession, confirmation of ongoing colonialism through such textual reiterations and the responses of others to them, and an anti-settler reading. In shared classroom spaces of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students the potential for confrontation is always thus present. How to engage both sets of students in the same narrative in a way that produces awareness and constructive discussion of different readings is a challenge. An important part of this process is not to assume that an Aboriginal student has any responsibility to identify themselves or to educate a non-Aboriginal student, nor to assume that non-Aboriginal students should identify as a complicit agent of dispossession. A more productive approach may be one that focuses on the relations between the text and reader and the possible meanings produced, rather than on the meanings and intentions and consequences of the actions of forbears on both sides. Pedagogically this may require some de-personalising of the space which is political, contested and emotionally charged because of the investments of the readers in the 'truth' or 'facts' of their own historical journeys, or indeed of their indifference to these histories.

Sempruch (2005) argues that the in-between space does not necessarily present opportunities for the fusion of self-other but as much provides the site for return to an origin. As Nakata (2007b) contends, at the Cultural Interface there is always a tug back to the singular and more certain meanings of the opposing Indigenous-Western domains, when the reality of Indigenous experience is the confusion and uncertainty of meaning attached to the

understanding of this interface position. Sempruch agrees, and supports this with Derrida's notion that;

> …a meditation on the trace [back to origin] should undoubtedly teach us that there is no origin, that is to say simple origin: that the questions of origin carry with them a metaphysics of presence. (Derrida in Sempruch 2005, p. 46)

If this is the case, it signals, as Nakata argues, that the persistent urge to trace back to origin, reaffirms the challenges in languaging the middle ground where Gemmy was found to be mostly incoherent. Pedagogically, if we were to pose this as the space where it is still difficult to find a common language, a space where the language is still not yet a 'speech community' as such, and a space that is always about attempting to return to origins despite the complications of entangled meanings from the overlay of Western understanding onto the Aboriginal world, then this would require some rethinking about teaching strategies.

One strategy needed is how to lead both sets of students into this space to ask them to construct a language for understanding each other's positions, with some historical hindsight. To suggest to them that non-Aboriginal Australia has been successful in imprinting on top of the Aboriginal landscape *viz.*, a landscape still seen as Aboriginal to many Aboriginal Australians and still not yielded in spirit, despite the dislocations, and ask what does that mean for how current generations bring their histories together with greater understanding? Why cannot that be a pre-occupation of a different sort of narrative likely to emerge in Aboriginal writing?

A subsequent strategy is how to further develop this through Aboriginal writing, when the difficulty non-Aboriginal students have of identifying characters, plot and themes as authentic, believable or meaningful to them reinforces the notion of strangeness their ancestors felt when faced with the Aboriginal presence. It may be that students can be brought to the middle but

only so far and that the most productive strategy may be to encourage a play between different readings from each side of the frontier, informed by better understanding of the text and reader relations, as revealed in this analysis in order to recognise the incompleteness of their own singular readings. These are strategies yet to be tested in an empirical study of engagements in classrooms.

The journey to the 'other side' is difficult for all students but it is not impossible for students to move towards the double meanings of the dispossession-settlement duality. If non-Aboriginal students can be brought to understand that just as they read settlement and nation-building, an Aboriginal reader will read dispossession and cultural loss, a large part of the journey has been made. That a student will hold allegiance to the settlement narrative is not so much a sign of failure to move them to other standpoints but a sign that like the settlers, like an Aboriginal reader, and like Malouf, it is not easy to depart from the comfort zones of what is already known. But the relations between the known and what lies beyond it can be re-engaged if we make more explicit the kinds of investments needed to transit into unfamiliar terrains and the edges of continuities/discontinuities that provide discomfort for students in domesticating the unfamiliar.

Summary

Malouf's tentative engagements with the Aboriginal subject, via Gemmy, provide much opportunity for disturbing colonial imaginations of the Aboriginal presence in Australia. That there is revealed in the narrative an Aboriginal order of things that can itself be disturbed by settler encroachments, points to opportunities to know about a country and its landscape already made by others. The partial knowledge given to settlers, and through which knowledge about the Aborigine is formed, suggests opportunities for evidencing how narrative construction serves to make the unknown familiar at the cultural interface. Gemmy's own silent thoughts

convey particular understandings of Aboriginal practices to bring into play the notion that European knowledge is inadequate and makes explicit for students ways to address sensitivities in safety. Malouf's intent may have been to highlight the environment-culture tension for consideration by non-Aboriginal Australians, however, only one miniscule aspect of the inter-cultural encounter from the 'other' Aboriginal side is laid out for possible contemplation. Yet, as I have tried to show here, this provides ample grounds for considering the presence of alternate standpoints and a way to explore, mediate, and shunt back and forth, between possible meanings produced in these in-between spaces. Importantly, they provide for important lessons about moving about the cultural interface between the known/familiar and the unknown/unfamiliar, cognisant of the range of student sensitivities.

WILD CAT FALLING

COLIN JOHNSON

> As a society, the new nation constructed its own myths, its own ideological sense of itself. This excluded Aborigines so resolutely that when they began in the seventies, to demand inclusion into Australia, the act of having to rethink the notion of what a society could be - apart from the particular shapes that the legends and traditions of the last hundred years have built up into distinctive cultural forms - caused severe, quite genuine difficulties. (Healy 1978, p. xvii)

The following two chapters will examine narratives by two writers that foreground the Aboriginal voice and experience: Colin Johnson (aka Mudrooroo) (1965) and Sally Morgan (1987). These particular narratives emerge from the changing socio-political context of the sixties onwards – a period of increasing Aboriginal activism and presence on the national stage. In these narratives, the representation of the Aboriginal standpoint gives insight to the effects of colonial activity vis á vis Aboriginal people. The context of the writing moves on from the historical frontier, across the fringes, and blurred boundaries to locate Aboriginal subjects in urban metropolises. The changed sense of voice that these writers bring to the forefront in such narratives and the different standpoint that they present to readers of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters makes for new offerings about the colonial presence but also new challenges for students. Of particular interest are the tensions that emerge between continuities with what is known and already accepted in narratives and the hitherto unfamiliar representations of thinking, speaking, Aboriginal subjects with opinions. The disturbance of the imagined silent Aboriginal subject of the Western literary imagination by the appearance of Aboriginal subjects with their own views inevitably invokes questions of authenticity from non-Aboriginal students.

Less understood are the challenges for Aboriginal students when similarly confronted with these representations of Aboriginal experience. These new points of rupture provide further opportunities to consider how authors prepare *a priori* conditions at the Cultural Interface for text-reader relations and for navigating to unfamiliar terrains.

The context of change

Until the 1960s, the Aboriginal voice was rarely heard or expressed in print. Although there were some early writings by Aboriginal political activists during the 1920s and 30s who wrote, distributed, and published pamphlets. The most prolific was David Unaipon who wrote various articles between the 1920s and 50s. He was also well-known as an inventor and advocate for Aboriginal people. His 1924-25 English manuscript of *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* was published by Angus & Robertson in 1930 by the anthropologist Dr Ramsay Smith without acknowledgment to Unaipon. It was not until Muecke and Shoemaker undertook some major work to rectify its original status that acknowledgement came:

> Our aim in this volume is to restore Unaipon's work in two senses: to return it to a version that is as close as possible to the manuscript David Unaipon first produced and to restore it as intellectual property to the original owners, the Ngarrindjeri community of South Australia and Unaipon's descendants. (Unaipon 2006, p. xi)

Unaipon's *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigine* is a collection of Dreaming and Creation stories from mainly Ngarrindjeri communities in South Australia. Muecke and Shoemaker highlight that within Unaipon's work, Christian sermons and European fairytales are deployed within the framework of Aboriginal oral traditions. They observe "an anthropology-like, comparativist style that permeates his writings about his own people's way of life" (Unaipon 2006, p. xv). Until the 1980s many Aboriginal Dreaming stories were relegated to the genre of children's stories in libraries and school

curricula (Muecke 1992) even though Unaipon had not intended his tales to be fiction (Unaipon 2006).

At the time when Johnson published *Wild Cat Falling*, no fictional narratives which positioned an active Aboriginal voice had been published. Rather, the Aboriginal subject was used by non-Aboriginal authors largely for shifting non-Aboriginal consciousness, as the previous three chapters have highlighted. Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling* was published in 1965 under the patronage of Mary Durack, an established writer herself and member of the prominent pastoralist family, who knew Johnson well. It has been in print continually since its publication and from the 1990s was widely set on school and university curricula (Shoemaker 1993). Although Johnson's identity is now disputed, *Wild Cat Falling* was regarded at the time as the first novel published by an Aboriginal person in Australia (MacGregor 1993). This identity dispute notwithstanding, Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling* arguably still stands as a seminal attempt to disrupt Aboriginal characters in non-Aboriginal narratives, and has been read in the main as the first fictional narrative from an Aboriginal standpoint.

Johnson faced the difficult task of introducing into narratives for the first time Aboriginal characters with speaking, thinking and acting roles. MacGregor (1993) points out that the narrative sought to express Aboriginal concerns using non-Aboriginal ideas of textuality and literature. Knudsen (2004) categorises *Wild Cat Falling* in the genre of social realism because it employs the narration of life from the perspective of urban 'fringe dwellers'. Whichever way it is viewed as a literary genre, the representations within present a notable departure. Written at the time it was set, in 1960s Perth, the narrative moves the Aboriginal presence away from the margins and into the centre of the narrative. And for the first time audiences came to see Aboriginal characters develop in the narrative, evolve and engage in dialogue with voices, opinions and judgments about their presence in society.

Johnson's text is permeated with an Aboriginal standpoint and speaks to the political experiences of being dispossessed, colonised and marginalised.

Johnson's background and experience

Johnson was born in 1938 at East Cuballing in the Western Australian wheat-belt. This was the year in which white Australia celebrated one hundred and fifty years of British settlement. He was the youngest of a large family who were all systematically taken from their mother by the government authorities after the death of their father. He was sent to Clontarf Boys' Home in Perth where he spent seven years. In Clontarf, he developed an anti- authoritarian disposition (see Clark 2007 & Dutton 1985) and between 1956 and 1957 he spent a year in Fremantle jail. On his discharge he spent some time with author Mary Durack, who often cared for young men newly released from prison in her home. It was here that Johnson developed an interest in writing. He later moved to Victoria where he worked for the Victorian Public Service and studied for matriculation. During this time he continued to correspond with Mary Durack. In 1965, with Durack's help, he published *Wild Cat Falling.* Following the publication of this work, Johnson travelled through Thailand and India on his way to London. Between 1967 and 1974 he studied Tibetan Buddhism in Calcutta where he became a monk. He did not publish again until 1979 when *Long Live Sandawara* appeared (Mudrooroo 1979). Between 1980 and 2000 he published prolifically across the genres of historical fiction, poetry, literary criticism, history, cultural studies and magical realism. In 1996 he was awarded the *Ruth Adeney Koori Award* for his cultural study (1995), *Us Mob –History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia.*

For some thirty years Johnson claimed matrilineal heritage from the Bibbulmun people of southwest Western Australia and during this time changed his name to Mudrooroo Narogin, and later simply Mudrooroo. In 1996 Noongar Elders disputed his kinship claims and this dispute was made public by journalist Victoria Laurie in an article called *Identity Crisis* published

in *The Australian Magazine* (cited in Clark 2007). Public debate ensued and continued through 1996 to 2000, and at times became quite heated. Noongar activist Robert Eggington, for example, suggested in an interview with Sydney Morning Herald's journalist Debra Jopson (1997) that Johnson's work "be removed from all bookshelves and pulped" (p. 5). Johnson later resigned his position as Head of Aboriginal Studies at Murdoch University in Perth, and as the controversy over his identity continued he left Australia in 2001. He currently resides in Kathmandu.

My interest in *Wild Cat Falling* is not invested in the controversy over Johnson's identity. This thesis project seeks to engage the continuities and discontinuities between familiar and non-familiar Aboriginal elements in narratives. The aim is to explore possible points of transition for readers and, in turn, students who have difficulty moving beyond their established reading positions. Casting Aboriginal characters with opinions and judgments about their roles in society was new ground. Johnson's narrative is a useful site therefore to explicate the textual and inter-textual elements that enable the narrative to be received successfully or not by the reading audience.

Some critical responses to Johnson's attempt
Maureen Clark points out that commentators and critics of the day hailed *Wild Cat Falling* as a "triumph and a literary curiosity" (2007, p. 27), and that the publication of the novel and its appearance on mainstream bookshelves in the late 1960s marked a turning point in Australian literature, as it also marked a recognition of the creativity of writers from non-Anglo/European backgrounds. Clark however also qualifies the reception of Aboriginal writers at this time in their own right. She contends that the novel's publication and reception is a testimony to the political influence of the Durack family. Entry by non-whites into print culture at that time, she suggests, was at the discretion of sympathetic and powerful white patrons.

Durack, in the foreword to the *Wild Cat Falling*, stresses that Johnson has allowed himself "no sentimentality" and that his narrative is not attempting to "enlist the reader's sympathy for the 'mock-hero' who baffles all those concerned for his welfare" (WCF: xviii). Johnson's apparent lack of sentimentality emphasises the realism of the narrative to the non-Aboriginal reading public. Clark (2007) argues that there is no textual mediation in realist works of Western history and literature because society and history are simply there as pre-existing givens. She asserts that within the realist mode of writing authors work to 'normalise' the status quo according to those who hold the power of representation. If this is the case, non-Aboriginal readers will read Johnson's protagonist on one level as an individual who is part of a larger socio-political schema that does not require questioning. However, Durack's foreword is arguably a strong mediation of the text that connects with the prevailing thinking of the times. Her final words are a warning that the non-Aboriginal public will be challenged by people like the 'boy' in Johnson's narrative. The outspoken recidivist, 'part-Aboriginal', 'boy', is a rising social phenomena in Australian society "[n]one the less the story is an unconscious appeal and imperative challenge to the society that breed his kind" (WCF: xviii). Durack's lengthy foreword arguably positions readers to anticipate a narrative grounded in an immediate situation (an exceptional young Aboriginal man's release from jail) rather than, for instance, the political history and background that have positioned this youth and his creativity in the environment where the narrative opens. According to Halliday & Hasan (1985) fuller understanding of texts requires readers to understand both the context of situation (the immediate environment in which the text is set) and the context of culture (the cultural background and the whole cultural history behind the actions, dialogue and kinds of practices exhibited in such an environment). Durack obscures the latter by positioning Johnson, the author, as an Aboriginal who is not true to type. Rather than a representative of Aboriginality he is the exception to it. Clarke asserts that

> [n]either the author nor his stories can be separated from the conflicts and political discourses of representation that inscribe the historical problems and contradictions symptomatic of the troubling realities of race relations in post-colonial Australia. (Clark 2007, p. 13)

However, some of the initial responses to the narrative evidences that this was a difficult process to grasp at the time of release. Shoemaker reflects that Clark's reference to the "curiosity" (1993, p. 14) surrounding the publication and reception of the novel did not necessarily mean that it was well received, or always favourably reviewed. He points out that many critics debated the idiom of *Wild Cat Falling*. It was described for instance by David Martin of the *Bulletin* in May 1965 as "far too derivatively American" (cited in Shoemaker 1993, p. 19). Lyn Strahan of *Meanjin* criticised the language in the book for "failing to establish its own style" and the characters as "stereotypes built on inverted prejudice" (1965, p. 386). Writing from abroad, Australian literary critic, Bruce Beaver, described the novel as a "bore" that read like a "parodied detective fiction Hemingswayese" (1965, p. 371). Almost three decades later after its publication Leon Trainor lamented in the *Weekend Australian* that "it is a very badly written book" (1992, p. 7).

It is Shoemaker's important 1993 work, *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study*, that is most useful for exploring readings of Johnson's writings. Shoemaker discusses what he describes as a mixed and confused response to the narrative, and teases out readings of the text that separate Johnson's Aboriginality from central concerns of the narrative. To Shoemaker, one of the major barriers to reading the "all-important Black Australian elements of the novel" is that readers are tempted to consider the text as "fictionalised autobiography" (1993, p. 15). He cites as evidence that every published interview between 1965 and 1993 has included at least one question of the author to establish if the novel was autobiographical. Johnson was adamant that the protagonist of *Wild Cat Falling* was not himself. Shoemaker attributes reader confusion between the author and the protagonist he constructs to the

Durack's "opinionated foreword upon the biographical (and pseudo biological) aspects of Johnson's life" (1993, p. 16). Shoemaker contends that the novelty of the work at the time when the only Aboriginal voices in print were "second hand anthropological versions of personal histories" (1993, p. 15), accentuates readers tendency to regard Johnson as atypical and an exception to Aboriginality at the time (as Durack explicitly stated in the foreword). This confines his work within the individualistic genre of autobiography. Shoemaker questions: "[w]hat does this desire to personalise the plot symbolise for Black Australian writing as a whole?" (1993, p. 18).

Wild Cat Falling opens on the day the central protagonist of the narrative, a young Noongar man, is released from Fremantle jail. Dutton (1985) points out that the difference between this young man and the rest of the inmates he has served with is that he is highly intelligent. In prison he has read Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Camus and Satre. On his release he reads Samuel Beckett's famous play *Waiting for Godot*. For his non-Aboriginal readers Johnson's writing is a "rebuttal of prevailing stereotypes of Aborigines as feckless, lazy and untrustworthy" (Shoemaker 1993, p. 16) rather than a standpoint expressing an Aboriginal position conditioned in a broader colonial schema. That is, the narrative can be read against the main character's Aboriginality through the ways in which he does not conform to the familiar tropes of that state of being. Read in this way, Johnson does not represent for readers Aboriginal people. Such reading positions, rather than expand the possibilities for Aboriginal characters and experiences in literary productions, can serve to reinforce familiar stereotypes and limitations.

Shoemaker however does note that readings of Johnson's narrative have shifted post-1990s to ones where the "Aboriginal sensibility and challenge of the novel is what lifts it beyond being a pedestrian recitation of the snares of urban crime in the bodgie era" (1993, p. 14). In the foreword to the 1992 edition Muecke observes, "the cultural momentum of the book points

towards revival, a searching for roots, and the maintenance of links between contemporary Aboriginal Australia and traditional Aboriginal Australia" (1992, p. ix). Shoemaker accounts for this difference in reading, over time, to the changing socio-political context. With historical hindsight, the novel is now seen as the precursor of an entire suite of Aboriginal literature rather than a "form of solitary curiosity in the assimilation era" (Shoemaker 1993, p. 14). This further evidences the function of fiction for creating a space, or a secondary world, where new characters can be brought to the consciousness of the public for contemplation (see Berger & Luckmann 1966). Or as Gillian Beer puts it: "It (literature) makes the absent present and conjures the unforeseeable into the seen" (1978, p. 359).

While some contend the Aboriginality of Johnson's protagonist was a secondary concern by comparison to the broader concerns of the 1960s, Johnson has introduced an Aboriginal speaking subject at least to the edges of mainstream consciousness. That this speaking Aboriginal subject can still be positioned in the discursive web that produces limited readings, rather than be acknowledged as the evidence of an active Aboriginal agency, indicates the ground still to be uncovered in narrative productions.

Reproducing the familiar Aboriginal for a different purpose
Some of the most interesting criticisms of Johnson's representations of the Aboriginal subject illuminate similar points to those made about Prichard, White and Malouf's constructions of the familiar Aborigine in the previous Chapters. Just as Prichard, White and Malouf established the familiar Aboriginal presence firmly within colonial discourse in order to disturb reader consciousness through other turns in the narrative, so does Johnson. He has been criticised for reproducing these representation via his textual choices. The task here is not to succumb to criticisms of Johnson's literary techniques but to include and understand them as salient aspects of Johnson's positioning of the reader. Where Johnson's constructions produce these

criticisms there is an additional uncovering task indicated to understand his purpose in using familiar constructs and processes to position his audience. This is arguably a necessary first step to open up a space to reveal how he then re-positions his non-Aboriginal characters/audience through the actions, voice, logic, and reflections of his Aboriginal protagonist.

The points of contention about Johnson's success as a writer of the Aboriginal experience revolve around his use of the Western literary form, the English language, and his deployment of negative stereotypes of Aboriginals. These are certainly indisputable aspects of his writing technique. The narrative is structured in three parts 'Release', 'Freedom' and 'Return' suggesting a journey in process. Johnson does not break with the rules of grammar, plot-structure, themes and character development. The narrative is entirely in English and contains no local Aboriginal language and no Aboriginal English. One particular criticism of his language use was its derivativeness, especially in terms of American beatnik jargon and that of European existentialists. He also recruits some familiar images of Aboriginal subjects. His central protagonist, the 'boy', is still a nameless Aboriginal. The 'boy' is, as well, a familiar and negative stereotype of an urban mixed-race Aboriginal person – a surly, contrary, recidivist, and unapologetic, dispossessed Aboriginal youth - except that he is not unintelligent. In relation to women, he acts the misogynist, even if this is represented as a defensive stance. Reference and allusion to other Aboriginal stereotypes are evident in the text. For example, Johnson brings the reader's attention to the "abo" and "blackfella", "who get on the grog", and "never seem to stay long" as "they appear and disappear" (WCF: 9-10). However, except for the character of the 'boy', these Aboriginal representations are few.

Clark's disquiet (2003) at Johnson's use of the Western form reflects a particular reading by her of it. She asserts it has had the effect not only of maintaining the centrality of European literary practice but also of keeping the

identification of black writing 'in its place', on the fringes of society, both symbolically and actually. To Clark,

> [t]he style, form and conventional use of English in the discourses of the novel appear to have 'fallen' into the coloniser's conformity trap in an endeavour to please a readership anticipated to be predominantly white. (2003, p. 83)

Bhabha (1994) calls this colonial mimicry, a phenomenon where the colonised abandon their traditional practices to imitate their colonisers because that mode of doing things is privileged. Derrida (1985) refers to this also as a 'terrain' that poets/writers collapse into when attempting to express themselves in the language of their colonisers. At the surface level of his narrative, Johnson does appear to provide evidence of this process. For example, the mother of the 'boy' in Johnson's narrative has been married to a white man, who has since died. This marriage alienates her from the rest of the Noongar people of the area. She tries to 'act white' by living in a house, sending her son to school and attempting to keep him away from the other Noongar children. The Noongar community regard his mother as arrogant and 'stuck up'. The boy's mother is a fringe dweller herself and she sees her son's only chance of success in life is to 'live white and think white'. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, she has internalised a despised image of her Aboriginal self in order to survive. To this end in the narrative she continually warns her son to stay away from the Noongar community close by. The 'boy' meanwhile defends his mother against accusations of being white and stuck up:

> "So what," he comes back, "My mum went to some mission only she don't get stuck in some department house like a cocky in a cage"
>
> "She went to school and got educated". (WCF: 12)

Clark's (2003) reading that Johnson reproduces the sound of assimilation, defeatism and dependency can be considered along with others such as Justin

MacGregor's (1993) who was also critical of *Wild Cat Falling* for affirming the dominant discourses of the majority of society. Their argument ostensibly is that the colonial discourses in which the narrative is situated re-create centre/margin relations and reproduce a series of binary terms that serve to maintain Aboriginal characters in subordinate relations with non-Aboriginal characters. However, the limits of these readings arguably require further interrogation.

Reconsidering Johnson's positioning of the Aboriginal subject: continuities and discontinuities

While there is no denying that subordinate relations are to an extent being reproduced in the narrative, they are not the only elements resonating from the narrative. The mode in which Johnson writes establishes an important continuity with non-Aboriginal readers through prevailing discourses of the deviant Aborigine and part-Aborigine and other colonial stereotypes. Establishing a sense of familiarity, as we have seen in previous chapters, is an important first step to prepare the terrain for non-Aboriginal readers to transit to the elements or images that may be unfamiliar, and of course ahead of the subsequent disruption of those images. It is in these ways that Fairclough (1989) saw constraint as a necessary pre-condition of the unfamiliar being enabled in narratives. The containment of the protagonist in the familiar discourses of assimilation, dependency and despondency are beginning points for positioning the reader for entry into other engagements, and not simply an end point to demonstrate that the author is unaware of his positioning of the Aboriginal subject within hegemonic conditions. For example, when in jail thinking about his early life with some of the Noongar people, does the 'boy' reveal the internalisation of racial and cultural stereotypes or does he illuminate the ambiguities and fluidity around the harsh realities attached to race, colour, authenticity and identification when he reflects:

> Mum's always at me about the Noongar mob, though some of them seem to be related to us in a vague way. A few of them are

> as light coloured as herself, some even as near white as me but most of them are pretty dark skinned. None of them are real aboriginal, though sometimes a full blood relative will drift into the camp, stay for a bit, and get on the grog with them. This kind never seems to stay long though. They just appear and disappear, except the old rabbit trapper who sticks around and lives in a camp of his own. (WCF: 10)

Bhabha identifies stereotypes also as a major discursive strategy in colonial discourse. He suggests that the point of intervention can shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative to an understanding of the 'processes of subjectification' made possible and plausible through stereotypical discourse. To displace a stereotype, according to Bhabha, a reader must first engage with its "effectivity" (1994, p. 95) and consider the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence, compliance and appropriation, *viz.*, the broader discursive aspects that constructs colonial subjects of both coloniser and colonised.

Bhabha (1994) points out that stereotypes of 'Otherness' connect with entities and relations that have already been normalised in the minds of readers and they continue on to become accepted and commonplace in general intercourse as if such entities and relations have always been this way. Stereotype uses are also conscious ways of beginning with the already familiar. Literary characters like the 'boy' in *Wild Cat Falling* which conform to a familiar negative image of Aboriginality can therefore already be recognisable and acceptable. This accessibility draws the reader into an easier engagement with the text through characters that conform to 'understood' subjectivities and expectations. For example, Johnson draws the familiar stereotype of the less intelligent 'deviant' that make sense to non-Aboriginal audiences and then collapses the colonial binary that positions who is and who isn't. From this manoeuvre, 'the boy' gains entry to a dialogue with university students precisely because he contradicts one aspect of the prevailing stereotype by proving to be intelligent enough to move into their intellectual space and cancelling out to some degree his threat as a recidivist thief. While he

becomes 'interesting' and is still 'positioned' as the object of non-Aboriginal curiosity, Johnson imbues 'the boy' with a capacity to 'unsettle' the assumptions of those who interact with him and readers who follow his journey in the narrative.

Further to this, a stereotype can also be read as a double articulation. Bhabha (1994) reminds us that mimicry can also emerge as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. This disavowal can be read both ways: as a disavowal of his Aboriginality and a disavowal of the coloniser. On this deeper level the Aboriginal stereotype that Johnson begins his narrative with is a mirror in which to view the effects of colonialism, wich in turn has the potential to rupture 'normalised' understandings of the 'Other'. In these ways, Johnson constructs the 'boy' both as a familiar stereotype of an urban mixed-race-Aboriginal and also as an intelligent 'boy' looking back at his character as positioned by whites. The Aboriginal 'boy' can mimic the white middle-class folk and impress them with his knowledge and language. But the Aboriginal 'boy' is also conscious of his actions and his discontinuity: "I stand acting the big shot phoney" (WCF: 69).

Terry Goldie (1989) has argued that no construction of the Aboriginal character is possible in Western literature without recourse to what he terms the basic commodities of sex, violence, orality, mysticism and the pre-historic. Johnson produces a character that both conforms to and moves beyond these entities. The 'boy' in Johnson's narrative for instance does little to disrupt the misogynist violent image ascribed to Aboriginal men through Western literary canons, and in this narrative he bravely extends these characteristics of Aboriginal men against non-Aboriginal women. Reading such stereotypes is a challenge but this one is not incorporated in Johnson's narrative singularly for merely voyeuristic or 'shock value' purposes. Its presence in the narrative reflects changes in the situational (socio-political) context of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. The relationship between black men and white

women was shifting but not quite accepted by all at the time. To borrow Bhabha's (1994) description, acceptance by the broader community is at best 'ambivalent' and yet they signal the first steps for other possibilities. Johnson's main character 'the boy' is the evidence of what is possible—not the powerless, willing-to-please, Aboriginal boys of Prichard's (1929) cattle station who work for rations and live in awe of white bosses and white women. The 'boy' is at once a site of continuity and of discontinuity just as much as Gemmy was in *Remembering Babylon*. They are textual devices for transporting understandings across time and space to new understandings.

Said argues that the conditions of writing are such that any narrative is "[a] series of discursive events ruled not by a sovereign author but by a set of constraints imposed on the author by historical conditions" (1983, p. 213). Clark observes that Johnson

> perhaps unconsciously, … recreates the dominant discourses of power even as he recoils from them - an ambivalence for which the misogynist treatment of his female characters, black or white, is a constant measure. (2003, p. 94)

Shoemaker (1989) points out that sex can represent a set of oppositional binaries, such as owner and servant, rapist and victim, or prostitute and customer, which can mirror extant power relations—in the same way that Aboriginal novelists such as Johnson and later Weller (1981) for example describe excesses of violence and liquor and the degrading of sexual relations as a response to an untenable situation created by colonial circumstance. The utilisation of sociological standpoints helps to point the responsibility for deviant behaviour towards the effects of the colonial experience. Such tensions within the narrative serve to unsettle the certainty of singular readings thus constructing a space for considering inter-subjective understandings of the Aboriginal standpoint.

In a rebuttal of criticisms of Johnson's use of derivative language, Shoemaker describes the protagonist of *Wild Cat Falling* as one of the

> best listeners in Australian literature… [because] he parodies the speech of everyone from pretentious student artists to magistrates to existentialist writers to blues singers. (1993, p. 21)

In all these ways, Shoemaker sees the narrative as the most "eclectic combination of styles of communication in modern Australian writing" (1993, p. 21). For us this highlights the subversive activities on the part of the author that serve to uphold his choices as conscious and deliberate literary choices.

Critical readings of *Wild Cat Falling* concerned about the use of the English language and other literary devices not only read Johnson's narrative 'too literally'. Such readings deny and de-politicise the protagonist's position as a survivor of the destructive forces of colonial regimes that have led to his dislocated and marginalised status. In the light of such critique, Johnson's use of standard Anglo-European perspectives and literary conventions raises interesting points for consideration by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. It can be read that the colonial regime has been successful in asserting itself and assimilating and converting those within to the dominant modes of operation and that Johnson's text is an example of this process at work.

However, in the sense that Johnson's narrative is an attempt to represent Aboriginal experience from the standpoint of one who has insight into a particular experience of it, other critical questions cannot be avoided. Firstly, what language and what literary conventions does the protagonist/author have available to use, given the experience of colonisation and the oral mode of Aboriginal traditions? Secondly, if the textual representation of Aboriginality is intended to communicate with and connect to a non-Aboriginal audience what language and literary modes are the most efficacious for this purpose? Thirdly, what assumptions inform critique which negates

the possibility that an author with insight into Aboriginal experience or an Aboriginal protagonist for that matter can wield language and literary modes to speak and write against the colonial and literary order and that this cannot be done in a way that can unsettle the embedded meanings lodged in non-Aboriginal consciousness? After all, this capacity has been afforded to Prichard, White and Malouf who have all attempted to shift non-Aboriginal consciousness by beginning with established colonial images and attempting to unsettle them. The coloniser has taken the 'boy' away from his own cultural knowledge and resources and then condemns him for using the forms that were imposed as necessary to his future. To be preoccupied with use of derivative language is to miss opportunities for other readings that the levels of language use can offer to students. Put another way, and following Caribbean-American author Audre Lorde (1984), it is possible that we can read Johnson's text as an instance of using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

Opening up the textual space: the Aboriginal subject speaks back
Prichard (1929), White (1976) and Malouf's (1993) narratives demonstrate the production of non-Aboriginal consciousness of 'the Aborigine' through their fictional narratives. They are all told from the third person, omniscient narrator and there is no first person perspective from any Aboriginal subject within. Johnson's narrative conforms to a known space in so far as his work is realist fiction but within this space the tenor, the interpersonal and experiential relationships (following Halliday & Hasan 1985) centre on an Aboriginal voice. While the voice within the narrative does speak of marginalisation, the speaking position of the narrator has changed from observations 'about' Aborigines as an amorphous group of people in a static state of pre-historic existence to that of an Aboriginal standpoint of experience—of a particular inter-generational journey, in a particular place, in a particular social context, that informs his stance on the social world. Johnson's use of first person narrative is crucial in constructing this new

position or space for Aboriginal characters to exist in literary narratives. The Aboriginal subjects as the victim(s) of previous narratives (of the frontier and colonial regulation) move in and through Johnson's narrative as survivors, albeit at the fringes of mainstream society. Clark points out that

> Johnson's move to become the first Australian Aboriginal author was underpinned by a desire to seize and possess the power that comes with writing. The author's embrace of Aboriginality appears to have been fuelled by a wish to become a speaking black subject armed with a visible sign of dominant white culture, which potentially, could be exercised as a weapon of contestation. (2003, p. 292)

Johnson's technique enables direct access to an Aboriginal voice that is also appropriating the non-Aboriginal voice—an inversion of the Western form. The presence of this voice in the narrative is a basis for engaging an Aboriginal understanding of the ignorance of non-Aboriginal characters. For example, Johnson provides points in the narrative that illustrate how the 'boy' understands his positioning via the non-Aboriginal law that discriminates on the basis of race:

> "You haven't got a clue," I tell her. "They make the law so chaps like me can't help breaking it whatever we do, and the likes of you can hardly break it if you try". (WCF: 43)

Far from reproducing subordinating relations through the Western literary forms, Johnson provides many instances of using these conventions to connect with his non-Aboriginal audience. Through the Aboriginal voice, he introduces the unfamiliar by exposing the limits of his non-Aboriginal characters' analyses of the Aboriginal position. He pushes his Aboriginal protagonist into non-Aboriginal spaces and suspends him there long enough to introduce new and unfamiliar meanings.

In this way, the Aboriginal protagonist is an important agent of transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Rather than being the evidence of the author's so-called failure to write outside the coloniser's language, the

narrative provides an entry point for students to consider how the author constructs a disruptive protagonist to traverse across points of disjuncture in hitherto taken for granted meanings in ways that both introduce Aboriginal positions and disturb non-Aboriginal positions. He impresses a university crowd by quoting existentialism and "he is able to mimic the 'art jargon' after only a few minutes. He critiques Dorian's painting so effectively that the entire conversation stops to give him the floor" (Shoemaker 1993, p. 21).

There are numerous moments in the text that provide opportunities for students to shunt back and forth between these different representations of reality and to tread across the terrain between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Take for instance when a young university student introduces the protagonist to her university friends in a café. Their interest in him as some sort of inmate with knowledge of the 'inside' is not lost on him.

> "Frank and Bill are doing Social Anthropology" June says reading my mind. "I thought you might be able to give them some fresh slants."
>
> "Why?" I ask.
>
> "Oh, because you seem to have ideas and you're not afraid to express yourself."
>
> Frank is a thin, intense looking chap with a neat dark beard. Bill has a round smooth face with a stuck on smile. They look at me and I look back at them.
>
> "So what?" I say. "What do you want to know?"
>
> "We wondered for instance, whether you might have any personal views on the Austral Grove experiment? I mean, do you consider it a good idea- a sort of stepping-stone from camp life into the general community?"
>
> I listen to their bull-dust questions and I hear myself make the sort of answers they expect... Yes, I have been to the Grove a few times. It might work out. Some of them are really trying to make the grade. Drink a problem of course.

The other part of my mind mocks the phoney words.

A problem all right. Getting onto the stuff to start with. Can't trust anyone. Might be a police pimp laying a trap. Got to know a good sympathetic white to buy the grog and sell it back to you for double the price. If you can't find him, wood alcohol, metho and so forth will do. Doesn't taste as good, but gets you drunk quicker and costs less.

This Bill is still talking with his all's-right-with the-world smile. "It's obvious of course," he says, "that given ordinary decent conditions they would behave like ordinary decent citizens."

"I know". I agree, as though it is as simple as that. I don't even know how his "ordinary decent citizens" behave or whether they exist at all. (WCF: 73-74)

In this interaction with non-Aboriginal characters, 'the boy', as his mother before him, is cognisant of the conversational plays with the unstated despised image of Aboriginal communities (and how to fix them). He plays through their held-positions reserving his for opportunities elsewhere, and reminds us of the presence of boundaries in the functional aspects of the language or to use Halliday & Hasan's (1985) terms, the mode of discourse. Examples of this can be seen in the general description of the Grove as a squalid environment where the main ambitions of the Aboriginal inhabitants is to obtain and consume alcohol. But while the 'boy' is on the one hand entertaining negative images of his Aboriginality, he is also resistant to such images as 'natural' or 'normal'. The 'boy' for instance offers his perspective on the naivety of non-Aboriginal Australians for what they perceive to be the 'Aboriginal problem' by dismissing Bill's comment as 'simple'. We can also witness this in the narrative when he first meets with the university student on the beach and discussions about his plans for the future:

"That's inactivity," she says, "you should get yourself a pair of trunks, get into the sea and run along the sand, lie in the sun."

"And then," I say, "something new will happen for me? A volcano of fresh hope will erupt for me?"

"That's up to you," she says.

I feel the old bitter taste of resentment in my mouth. Nothing is ever up to them. Only up to us, the outcast relics in the outskirt camps. The lazy, ungrateful rubbish people, who refuse to co-operate or integrate or even play it up for the tourist trade. Fly-blown descendents of the dispossession erupting their hopelessness in petty crime. I glare at her with concentrated hate. I want to wither her glib white arrogance with biting scorn, but I can't find the words. (WCF: 44-45)

Johnson mentioned in correspondence to Durack, that his protagonist was not against the world but rather felt the world was against him (WCF: xiv). The protagonist's silent reflections, both in relation to conversations and in his recounting of earlier experiences, position non-Aboriginal characters and institutions as those who contribute to this feeling. Their ignorance of his position is implicated as part of the ongoing machinations of colonial regimes and opens up reasons for his attitude. Johnson, in such ways, holds up a mirror for the non-Aboriginal reader to see just what colonial Australia has produced and what Aboriginal Australia thinks of them.

Other important examples are present in the text for revealing the disruptions in Aboriginal meanings that contribute to his disconnectedness from Aboriginal society in his early life and which construct him as belonging nowhere, apart from institutions. Exposing these discontinuities are an important way to reveal to the non-Aboriginal student, the endless, everyday negotiations related to identity, place and belonging that occur in the Aboriginal domain as a consequence of colonial dispossession and regulation. A space to contemplate the inter-generational effects of colonisation is held open through the dialogue between Aboriginal subjects, specifically the 'boy' and his mother and the 'boy' and the Aboriginal rabbit trapper. These are representations of an Aboriginal reality outside of non-Aboriginal experience and hitherto inaccessible to most non-Aboriginal Australians until social realist narratives from Aboriginal authors appeared.

For example, the nameless Elder, who is the 'old full blood rabbit-trapper' that his mother warned him to stay away from, provides access to his Aboriginal heritage, his true beginnings, "[t]his country knows you all right, son" (WCF: 129); and re-affirms continuities with his submerged Aboriginal subjectivity. His bitter resentment is given some grounding beyond the consequences of his own actions and predicament but so is his sense of belonging restored. He can emerge at the narrative's end as unrepentant and more importantly not entirely disenfranchised or disconnected from his Aboriginality. As the narrative ends the Elder gives a sense of place and belonging to the anonymous protagonist and absolves him of the guilt of not having previously known his heritage.

> I known your mummie and your grandmummie. That old woman, she been my tribal sister you. She call me brother, only your mummie can't call me uncle any more. She got to forget all that in the mission school. (WCF: 123)

The old man's reference to the 'boy's reoccurring dream of a wild cat falling through the sky and plunging to the ground instils in him a sense of belonging that he has never known before. Muecke (1992) points out that the old man's interpretation of this dream connects the 'boy' with the heritage that has been denied to him.

> The old voice trails on, but now I have remembered the dream. It has been in some secret part of my mind to which he has given me the key. (WCF: 126-7)

This final encounter achieves what 'corrective' institutions could not. It sees him experience a sense of consequence for his anti-social actions that he has never experienced before. An internal metamorphosis occurs and the novel ends on an optimistic note even though the protagonist is being taken back to Fremantle jail. The tensions that emerge in the space between continuities and discontinuities are not resolved but are recognised and lead to a renewed

understanding of his position from a different standpoint that provides hope. Muecke points out that:

> ...if the 'wild cat' dream is to be related to the Aboriginal notion of 'dreaming' then this is only to the extent that there is a spiritual heritage in certain texts (songs and stories) which are unconsciously passed from one generation to another. In a double movement, the hero also links the dream with a fall he had as a child. The Western psychoanalytic reading tempts us to search for explanations located in traumatic childhood experience so that here, then, the 'truth' of Aboriginality is collapsed into the truth of the psyche. The formation of trauma and repression is a very familiar story, but here it is linked with Aboriginal political trauma, the forgetting of history. This key passage makes the novel one of the most economic and powerful statements in the history of Australian literature. (1992, pp. viii-ix)

Johnson has provided a useful stepping stone for straddling the familiar/unfamiliar tension. He has deployed the familiar stereotype and simultaneously broken type by constructing an Aboriginal character that is highly literate and urban. He inscribes the Aboriginal protagonist as almost indistinguishable from a non-Aboriginal delinquent and at the same time brings into visibility the not-so-familiar intelligent Aboriginal as an interlocutory with middle-class intellectuals. While this Aboriginal character may appear contradictory to the audience's prior acceptance of voiceless, mindless Aboriginal characters, Bhabha asserts the value of an overlap as an important point of transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivity and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining society itself. (Bhabha 1994, p. 2)

Bhabha cautions against reading too hastily the representation of difference as the reflection of pre-given or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of

'anthropological tradition'. From the perspective of a minority group the articulation of difference is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to "authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of cultural transformation" (Bhabha 1994, p. 3). Johnson's work emerges in one such moment of cultural transformation as the main character is always in the process of 'becoming' rather than 'being' of a fixed identity, in this case Aboriginal. As Bhabha points out, the right to represent from the periphery of authorised power does not depend upon the persistence of tradition. Such representation is resourced by the power of tradition and reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are a minority. For this reason the vacillation of Johnson's protagonist between familiar and well worn stereotypes of Aboriginality and one who breaks new ground through his intellect, ability to parody and satirise opens a new space from which Aboriginality can be read differently. Readers are forced to engage the 'boy' on unfamiliar terrain, the grounds that he speaks/thinks from, a space clearly not their own nor the usual place of the Aboriginal subject in narrative. Initial readings may estrange readers because they appear unfamiliar and contradictory but, as Bhabha points out, it is more than just "borderline engagements of cultural difference [that] may …challenge normative expectations of development and progress" (1994, p. 3). He argues that

> [i]t is in the emergence of interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (1994, p. 2)

To emphasise possibilities rather than prescriptions, and to draw forward the emergence of two or more interstices overlapping and forming an interface, points to new ground for both writer and reader to at least find a starting point for re-engaging the writer/text/reader relationship in new narratives.

Johnson's narrative contains elements of an Aboriginal coming-of-age-story. His use of English and clever deployment of other Anglo-European literary conventions to tell an Aboriginal story de-stabilises the familiar and the status quo. He constructs the main character with a personal style of narration to critique Australian society in the 1960s from an Aboriginal standpoint. The voice performed in *Wild Cat Falling* rises against the grain of the current oppressive social context and the inherent power relations. The tone of voice disrupts and destabilises familiarity of both Aboriginal representation in literature and representations of non-Aboriginal people. His narrative channels the nascent voice of an Aboriginal response to race-based privilege and inequality.

Teaching implications

There are many opportunities in *Wild Cat Falling* to accommodate non-Aboriginal students' allegiances to what is known and familiar and to provide a scaffold for them to tentatively engage other representations of Aboriginal characters. The environment and the context that Johnson constructs around his main character are important 'connection points' for non-Aboriginal readers. To a large extent these are negative forms (detention centres, jail, alcoholism, crime, etc.) but these are also familiar associations of Aboriginality which Johnson builds on to move to something unfamiliar, such as the possibility of Aboriginal characters as intelligent, articulate, capable of social commentary from a different standpoint and holding aspirations. He communicates this through the interpersonal exchanges within the narrative. He, through the voice of the 'boy', brings forward different experiences that go beyond the immediate situation of the narrative to the cultural context that gave rise to the present environment or situation. Conformity to certain negative images within the narrative is employed to mirror and reflect back learned behaviours from the position created by the coloniser for the colonised. The main story of the young man released from jail is interspersed with episodes from his past which progressively provide the background for

the current story. Put quite simply, Johnson describes a familiar environment but the character he constructs within says something different from an Aboriginal standpoint to non-Aboriginal readers.

To inject an Aboriginal standpoint, Johnson's main character is imbued with an emerging sense of voice that is more empowering and active than the hitherto non-Aboriginal constructions and imitations of Aboriginal experience and aspiration. The emerging sense of voice has two important elements. Firstly it shifts the image of Aboriginality from passive to reactionary. To react is to be active. It signals the author has afforded some agency to the character. Secondly the emerging tone of the narrative pre-empts for non-Aboriginal students that the protagonist is an emerging social phenomenon, the beginning of something unfamiliar but new that can disrupt the present social context. The enquiry into how the author manages to surmount the gap between what is known and what is becoming known is also prime territory for engaging students thinking in this area. Scaffolding students' dispositions to think beyond what they know, and to think laterally at deeper levels, builds a level of preparedness for all sorts of new engagements with multiple meanings in changing or contested terrains.

For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, there are opportunities for engaging with the dialectical play of the Aboriginal protagonist's voice and location, and the political and personal meanings of his responses to colonialism (discontinuities of self) and his onward journey to reconnect with his Aboriginal heritage (continuities of self). And for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students there are opportunities to understand how various standpoints emerge from the social and political location of characters and readers. Johnson makes a space that brings into play educated but 'unknowing' university students and also makes visible the (im)morality of 'right and wrong/black and white' principles that guided so-called protective and corrective institutions who have produced the deviant, part-Aboriginal.

The self-educated Aboriginal protagonist who thinks the world is against him comes to see how his perception of his reality has helped to shape his response to it, via the Aboriginal Elder who enables him to regain a sense of his belonging. In this sense the text is an Aboriginal coming of age narrative.

However, an important part of making social relations in the text explicit is to encourage awareness of the voice as more than an organic reactionary voice but a reflective voice that represents his journey as his process of 'becoming' himself. In this process, something of the coloniser is also reflected back at the descendants of the colonialists. The illumination of this subjectification process provides a way of opening up the broader Aboriginal position via the personal individual story. In a space where the Aboriginal protagonist engages Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal positions and where he 'deviates' from the norms of both, he begins to disentangle his suspension between them and finds his 'own ground' for resolving some of the tensions at this interface. He goes off to jail, feeling a new freedom as a result of the recovery of continuities with his Aboriginal heritage. The voice of the protagonist and the actions he takes opens up a wider reflection on the Aboriginal position. Making explicit the plays between the voice of 'the boy' and the larger narrative of his journey can assist students to be more disposed to engage the textual elements that both enable and constrain the voice of Aboriginal characters and understanding of their experiences as a resource for future reading. This may help provide more awareness of the textual and inter-textual relations that inform as well as limit what can be represented in the narrative, indeed whether characters can have a voice or not. In turn this may encourage the student to engage unfamiliar Aboriginal characters from a different standpoint (even if not an Aboriginal standpoint) rather than through the prism of earlier readings of the Aboriginal subject.

Nakata's (2007a) theorising of the Cultural Interface suggests these are potential points of entry to explore continuities and discontinuities of

meaning in the spaces between these oppositions. Students can better understand the tensions for Aboriginal subjects and non-Aboriginal subjects/readers at this locale if they can be assisted to firstly recognise them and secondly to read back and forth across them. This creates for students a view to textual spaces where ambiguity and contests of meaning are negotiated in the dialogue between oppositions as conditions of the engagement where the unfamiliar and familiar are brought into contact. This in turn exposes and explains the limited forms of narrative representations that can be produced and enacted by and about Aboriginal characters and experience when both sides are not allowed to be present as speakers and actors. However, the use of stereotypes as we have seen is also a necessary pre-condition for connecting with what is already familiar. This is the Aboriginal historical experience of colonial times that conditions the contemporary Aboriginal standpoint. There is potential for Johnson's thoughts and reflections, whatever language or form they are expressed in, to open up a space for reading the previously imagined 'Aborigine' differently and for considering other possibilities for Aboriginal characters..

Summary

Muecke reminds readers in his foreword to the 1992 edition of *Wild Cat Falling* of the social context in which the narrative was written:

> In the novelist's social context he had to assert this kind of story against the prevailing policy, and one can only imagine how difficult this must have been, and how it prefigured the radicalism which was to come later. (1992, p. ix)

Johnson's 'boy', the product of prevailing expectations by non-Aboriginal audiences that Aboriginal people forget their traditions and way of life in favour of assimilation and integration, is brought to light in his resistance—as an Aboriginal standpoint through his beginnings, through his anger and contempt for a society that detests his community, and through his

intellectual engagements to constitute what has not been witnessed before. To Shoemaker, Johnson's literary style

> …stuck in the critical craw of readers who reacted against its derivativeness, who did not see the strategic uses to which those derivations were being put. Mudrooroo has always been ahead of his time: part of the reason his work is so heralded in Western Europe and yet still excites the opprobrium of many Australian critics. (1993, p. 25)

Shoemaker identifies the last chapter of *Wild Cat Falling* as key to interpreting Johnson's text. Its open ending offers an opportunity for readers to return to its "themes, structures and theoretical underpinnings" and "catch up with the radical departure his fiction represented" (1993, p. 26). However, arguably to recognise the potential space opened up in the final chapter requires students to read not just against the grain of the 1960s but also against the understandings of the Aboriginal subject that have been produced by the narratives that represent an earlier context and which pre-dispose them to non-recognition of the unfamiliar, active, speaking Aboriginal subject.

Four decades after the book's initial release, *Wild Cat Falling* is still unsettling some Australian critics and academics and as Shoemaker suggests this continues to obscure the potential for some of the more critical and multiple readings the various layers of the narrative offer. This underlines the case emerging in this thesis that challenges exist for students when confronted by narratives in which the contemporary dynamics and social realities, of Aboriginal societies marginalised by the effects of colonialism, are revealed to them from within Aboriginal experience. Examining textual spaces that engage both the familiar and unfamiliar representations still appear to require explicit attention in classrooms to negotiate the possible transition points for gathering in new meanings.

MY PLACE

BY SALLY MORGAN

The final Aboriginal narrative to be examined is Sally Morgan's (1987) *My Place*. Morgan's account of her journey to discover her maternal family origins is not fiction. In a real life quest, she extracts, digs up, gathers in and gives order to her own questions, others' memories, and documented records that reveal her particular and submerged maternal family history. This particular family history represents a single iteration of many silent and inaccessible histories that constitute the stories of the dispossessed and colonised Aboriginal people in Australia.[12]

My Place is of interest to this thesis for particular reasons. Morgan's text resonates with non-Aboriginal audiences and provides easy accessibility to a legacy of colonial history that non-Aboriginal Australians rarely reflected upon at the time she wrote *viz.*, the inter-generational legacy of Aboriginal dispossession and cultural dislocation. Not only is the narrative accessible and a revelation for her non-Aboriginal readers, her narrative construction confronts the colonial legacy in a way that does not disengage the non-Aboriginal reader or invoke great contest from them. Indeed, *My Place* is extraordinarily successful, selling over half a million copies to date. It has attracted a significant non-Aboriginal readership and is still included in secondary and tertiary curricula. However, *My Place* was not so well received by Aboriginal authors and by some in non-Aboriginal academia. In some cases, Morgan elicited harsh and scathing analysis that attacked her claim and

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[12] According to Rowse (2004), *My Place* was one of the earliest autobiographies to appear by an Aboriginal woman.

her family's claim to a legitimate Aboriginal identity and which questioned the position from which she narrated Aboriginal experience. The emergence of these tensions between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal responses makes the text a useful site for inquiry: from her (dis)located position how does Morgan produce representations of Aboriginal identity, memory and historical experience that position different categories of readers in such stark contrast? While not fiction, *My Place* is a personal and individual account—a constructed and structured textual production in which an author positions her readers to witness her account of an Aboriginal family's experience and her claim to a legitimate place in the Aboriginal community. The aspects of her narrative that set the conditions for text-reader relations is of interest to this thesis in order to understand how students are positioned to read across such contested and complex positioning of Aboriginal subjects in narrative forms. The critical discourse that surrounds the content of *My Place* will also be recruited to evidence the positions possible.

Background and context of the narrative: the significance of the author's entry point

Sally Morgan was raised in Perth in the 1950s and 60s unaware of her Aboriginal heritage on her mother's side until she was fifteen. Her mother, Gladys, and grandmother, Daisy, had concealed the fact and explained the dark complexions in the family as Indian heritage. Morgan's failed attempts to breach their silence about the past led to a determined quest by her to uncover and tell the family story as *My Place*.

Morgan's background was of a working class suburban household where she was the eldest of five. The death of her non-Aboriginal father, a returned soldier, early in her life left the family as legatees. Her mother worked, her grandmother cared for the family. Although far from privileged, Sally's experience was not typical of the Aboriginal experience. The family was not marginalised or victimised in the way that many Aboriginal families were.

Morgan was encouraged by her mother to persist with her education and though resistant she eventually went on to university in the early 1970s. However, throughout her schooling years, Morgan was not only resistant to authority and regimentation; she was continually plagued with a feeling that she was different. These feelings of difference, while perhaps recognisably adolescent, also came to be connected to the older women in the family:

> 'There's no need for dramatics. You've got a good life, what's there for you to worry about?'

> How could I tell her it was me, and her and Nan. The sum total of all the things I didn't understand about them or myself. The very feeling that a vital part of me was missing and that I'd never belong anywhere. Never resolve anything. (MP: 106)

Growing up, Morgan notices some oddities in her mother and grandmother's behaviour. She finds the trouble that her grandmother, Daisy, goes to impress the rent man peculiar and unnecessary. She also finds her grandmother's view of the natural world deeply personal and different. Similarly, Daisy's attitude to strangers begins to stand out to Morgan as she approaches adolescence: "It was during my final year at primary school that I noticed that whenever we brought our friends home from school, Nan would disappear" (MP: 78). On reflection, her mother Gladys was strangely tolerant of the problem her daughter had with regimentation and authority and her feigning of illness to avoid school as a child and adolescent.

Morgan's quest for self-understanding was a significant motivation to delve into the past of her mother and grandmother. On one level, her narrative represents her journey to explore why she felt different and to account for what she saw as inadequacies or irregularities within herself that she connected to the silences in the older women. On another level the narrative represents both a larger inter-generational family history and an unpicking of the official historical narrative of settlement. In the process, the small, suburban 'non-Aboriginal' family Morgan grew up in expands as it

rediscovers, re-orients and reconnects with a large extended Aboriginal family still living in the Pilbara region of remote West Australia. For the author's generation, this is a story of becoming/finding their submerged Aboriginal identities. But it is also a story that explains why Morgan's mother's and grandmother's journeys were ones of losing/hiding/restoring their Aboriginal identity and connections.

Morgan's location in the non-Aboriginal community in her formative years and the perceived ease and benefits of her crossings of identity boundaries, which came with the success of *My Place* has called into question her legitimacy as the author of Aboriginal experience. However, these crossings are also the legacy of colonialism, in this case of Aboriginal women fathered by non-Aboriginal men. Her grandmother and mother are part-Aboriginal women who became the subjects of white men and paternal policy solutions. Apart from revealing a slice of colonial history, these stories of loss and renewal bring to light some of the conditions of inter-generational Aboriginal identity-making.

It is interesting to reflect that Johnson, under the name of Mudrooroo (1990), was openly scathing of Sally Morgan's *My Place* for being 'too tame' and 'not black enough'. Both authors narrate journeys of becoming/homecoming and describe particular contexts of belonging and not belonging. But they write of the part-Aboriginal experience from quite different positions: fiction as opposed to non-fiction; male as opposed to female; part-Aboriginal as opposed to 'passing' as non-Aboriginal; formally educated as opposed to street-smart and self/prison educated; drifter as opposed to suburbanite and so on. Both positions represent different legacies of a common Aboriginal experience of displacement and dislocation. My focus on these texts which emerge from within the experience of being Aboriginal is to explore the relations between the context of the writer's positions, what this means for the way they shape and construct their texts, and how this produces particular

readings by particular audiences. In Morgan's case, what are the signals in her narrative that resonate so loudly with her non-Aboriginal audiences but leave others at best ambivalent and at worst dismissive? Is the space that she opens up a useful one to expand students' understanding of how different Aboriginal subjectivities are constructed in narratives – even non-fictional ones - as a way to understand how they are positioned to engage Aboriginal representations?

Positioning the reader: Morgan's literary and textual devices

It is not difficult to determine why Sally Morgan's *My Place* is so accessible to non-Aboriginal audiences. Morgan employs a range of genres and techniques that draw in readers and keep them engaged until the end.

A layered narrative is woven under the over-arching genre of autobiography: "[a]n autobiography is, of course, a kind of history, and *My Place* offers the guarantee of the factual value of its accounts" (Ommundsen 1992, p. 253). This genre positions the reader ahead of the narrative. The unbelievable or inauthentic factor that can interrupt a reader's acceptance of fictional Aboriginal characters or experience is largely eliminated for non-Aboriginal readers. Indeed, it is significant that those who have delivered harsh criticism of Morgan's writing are either Aboriginal people or scholars of Aboriginal Studies who have considerable knowledge of Aboriginal Australia and experience. *My Place* was better received by those for whom it was a revelation of a history not previously contemplated.

Gilmore (2001), in her work *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, contends that an autobiography offers its narrator the opportunity to emerge through writing as an agent of self-representation, and while such a figure may be textual they are also substantial and can claim, "I was there" or "I am here". In *My Place*, Morgan does emerge as an agent of self-representation. Even though, as in the case of Morgan, she is telling the story of others as well as her own, it is ostensibly the story of self in relation to others.

The autobiographical form gives Morgan authority and control as narrator of her journey to uncover family history and to recover Aboriginal identities. To fill in gaps or confirm some aspects of the family story, Morgan also makes use of the Battye Library at the University of Western Australia to search through historical documents. This use of the historical research method adds a further level of legitimacy to the narrative as a faithful attempt to present the 'truth'. Even though the full truth is not documented and remains elusive, Morgan's attempts to substantiate and/or probe deeper than family memory increase its legitimacy as an historical account for her reading audience.

However, Morgan's text is not impartial, dispassionate or disinvested of self interest. Despite the appeal to fact in the autobiographical and archival research forms, Gilmore (2001) and Attwood (1992) both draw attention to the individualistic nature of the genre. Attwood argues Morgan's text exhibits characteristics of both romantic and individualistic discourses. In addition to the first person narrative, Morgan also uses the fiction genres of the mystery and detective story to reveal the lengths required to get to a covered up truth. According to Attwood, readers are presented with a mystery about individual identity, obstacles, and false clues that hamper the detective in search for the truth behind these mysteries, and an ending in which all the loose ends are tied up and all the disturbing questions answered. Morgan's search is for lost fathers and this takes the reader on her journey to ferret out the truth of the 'real' story and introduces an element of suspense as the reader is drawn in to consider the clues, what they might mean, and where Morgan might go next. Brady (1996) contends that this detective mystery form may, to an extent, explain the wide readership which the narrative continues to attract.

Because Morgan is less threatened by the oppressive policies that haunted her mother and grandmother, she convinces her mother first and later her more reluctant grandmother that 'things have changed' and that now there is nothing to fear from telling the truth. The comparison between the

oppression of the past and the relative freedom of the future creates a space for her reading audience to distance themselves from past oppression and embrace the more liberal present which allows the story to be told.

Morgan's probing, however, places pressure on her grandmother, in particular, to talk about a painful past she would rather not revisit. Thus Morgan documents not just her own inner thoughts on her psychic journey to self discovery but the nature of her negotiations with her family as she pursues her quest for the truth. These aspects of her quest form a narrative layer written in an intimate conversational style that reveals the basis of her motivation, her unfolding emotions, her logic and rationalising, and her disposition to embrace a therapeutic discourse of identity recovery. This intimate conversation is reported in detail to her readers as she prises open the stories of her family:

> 'I'm not talking about the past, Gladdie. It makes me sick to talk about the past.'
>
> Mum persisted, in spite of this protest, and said, 'I'm only going to ask you one question. Then you can do whatever you like, all right?
>
> Nan sat still. 'Now you know Sally's trying to write a book about the family?'
>
> 'Yes. I don't know why she wants to tell everyone our business.'
>
> 'Why shouldn't she write a book?' Mum said firmly. 'There's been nothing written about people like us, all the history books are about the white man. There's nothing about Aboriginal people and what they've been through.'
>
> 'All right,' she muttered, 'what do you want to ask?'
>
> 'Well you know when you write a book, it has to be the truth. You can't put lies in a book. You know that, don't you Nan?'
>
> 'I know that Glad', Nan nodded.

'Good. Now, what I want to know is who you think your father was. I know Judy says it was Maltese Sam and Arthur says it was Howden. Well, I'm not interested in what they say. I want to know what you say. Can you tell me, Nan, who do you think he really was?'

Nan was quiet for a few seconds and then pressing her lips together, she said very slowly, 'I.... think...my father was Howden-Drake Brockman.'

It was a small victory, but an important one. Not so much for knowledge, but for the fact that Nan has finally found it possible to trust her family with a piece of information that was important to her. (MP: 162)

As the 'trustee' of family memory, the author Morgan is not only an agent of self-representation; she also assumes representational agency on behalf of her mother Gladys, her great uncle Arthur Corunna, and to a greater extent her illiterate grandmother, Daisy. These biographies of other members of her family are an important part of understanding the family story but not her stories to narrate, even though she is the primary interrogator and catalyst for their telling. The three stories of Gladys, Daisy and Daisy's brother, Arthur Corruna stand on their own in the second half of the book as verbatim representations of their oral stories. These oral accounts introduce an Aboriginal form of story-telling and an alternative insight to official accounts (or the lack thereof) of the Aboriginal experience of colonial impact. Through this textual process, an inter-generational family history is revealed that exposes an unacknowledged part of non-Aboriginal Australia's history from the voices of those affected.

A large part of the first autobiographical section is the engaging sub-narrative of Morgan's journey and how she feels as she searches for answers. She shares this journey with her readers as if they were her confidants. The reader is drawn into the household and family dynamics. The following exchange between Morgan and her mother illustrates the way the author involves the

reader in the narrative as if she were talking to them directly and on occasions appealing to them for empathy:

> 'You want to make something of yourself,' Mum said to me one night when she was going on about wanting me to do well in my Leaving. She had sensed that there was more chance of me failing than passing.
>
> I was fed up with hearing that phrase. Mum and Nan were always harping on about how us kids must make something of ourselves.
>
> 'I've got no ambitions,' I replied hopelessly. 'I can't see myself doing anything.'
>
> 'You've got plenty of talents, you just haven't discovered them yet?'
>
> 'Talents? God, Mum, there are more things than what talents you've got. I feel pressured by everything else.' (MP: 106)

Thus, as Ommundsen (1992) and Bettle (1995) point out, Morgan's narrative has many characteristics of an oral story. Morgan's self-confessional tactic of positioning the reader as if they were a confidant, even when the information being given by some of her relatives is meant to be secret or confidential, forms the oral layer of the narrative. Daisy in particular has a tendency to lower her voice, and on occasions even instructs Morgan to not tell anyone. In this textual manoeuvre Morgan invites the reader to listen in on these family secrets and this fosters a position of trust between narrator and reader and allows the reader to become invested in the incidents being revealed and related. To Ommundsen,

> [t]he audience of an oral narrative interacts with the narrator, develops a relationship with him or her which affects the telling of the story. In *My Place* the reader cannot be present at the story telling scene, but s/he has a substitute, Sally herself, who plays the role of interactive audience to her relatives' narratives. The reader is thus invited to join Sally in the intimate relationship of confidence, emotional involvement and identification. The white reader in this respect becomes, for the time of the story an

honorary black, viewing black experience as within. As the readers of a written book, however, we are allowed greater detachment, both cultural and personal. (1992, p. 255)

Ommundsen's analysis highlights the space that Morgan creates for her readers. On one hand she allows them to experience emotions of trust, pity and triumph as the narrative unfolds from her own perspective and that of her mother, grandmother, and great-uncle Arthur. The reader can feel privileged about being permitted to be a first-hand listener as Arthur Corunna reveals an alternative or counter history that he is so keen to tell. Or they can listen to Daisy's silences as Sally relentlessly questions her about her own and her daughter's parentage, and make inferences about what the answers to these painful questions really are. On other occasions Morgan's audience can separate and make distinctions between themselves and the ugly, violent, aggressive behaviour of Bill Milroy, or the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by Howden Drake-Brockman. Through this positioning, Morgan draws the reader into her mind to see the world from her position and to understand why she is driven on this personal quest and why she needs to complete it, even if her grandmother is reluctant. The reader is positioned to empathise on a very personal level with Morgan for wanting the truth. Even though she exerts pressure on family members who are initially ambivalent or reluctant to reveal it, the quest to bring secrets to light emerges as a type of family therapy, positioning the reader to see the benefits of Morgan's process. As Morgan notes in her preface: "How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were" (MP: Foreword). The inference is that the non-Aboriginal reader denied access to the secrets of this family would similarly have been deprived of an important but undisclosed aspect of Australia's history—a part of their own history. Morgan constructs a narrative form that invites investments of non-Aboriginal consciousness of the Aboriginal position on personal levels in preparation for traversing into unfamiliar terrains.

This empathetic identification of the reader is also positioned through the social realism of the 'Aussie battler' storyline and its projection through a strong female voice. Morgan's mother's experience as a legacy widow, and her ambitions for her children to complete school and obtain a tertiary education, are experiences and aspirations shared with many Australian women of those generations. Located in the familiar domestic context of a suburban household run by women, the different personalities of family characters and family dynamics connect with the experience of women in particular. At the surface level, Morgan constructs a narrative with the appearance of normalcy. The co-operation and at times genuine affection between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects in the story all contribute to disrupt previous images of Aboriginality as divided and separate from non-Aboriginal Australia. The elements of social realism give weight to her account as real and factual. But also, by positioning readers to identify with what is a largely shared female experience, her female audience is further positioned to align with the Corruna family story rather than defend past colonial actions, which can be viewed as historical and/or the province of male officialdom.

Thus the autobiographical form, usually a reflective account of a life achieved, makes use of an array of story-telling techniques to investigate, draw out, and link up past lives and announce them in the present. Mystery, the first-person female voice, internal reflection, direct questions and speech, casual and focussed conversations, oral story-telling, and particular textual manoeuvres are recruited to scaffold approaches to unfamiliar terrains. All these aspects of Morgan's narrative provide an easy accessibility to her largely female non-Aboriginal audience. As Newman points out:

> *My Place* is not a majestic narrative on a grand canvas, nor is it a work of intellectual brilliance or dazzlingly experimental. Indeed, its narrative expressive patterns are the reverse of these-colloquial and traditional, personal and accessible, domestic and familiar. (1992, p. 66)

It is however undeniable that Morgan successfully uses her command of the English language, her familiarity with Western literary conventions and her knowledge of the non-Aboriginal community to present her grandmother's and mother's eccentricities, particularities and peculiarities in ways that are not offensive, demeaning or threatening but rather quaint, endearing, amusing and entirely understandable for her largely non-Aboriginal readership. Ommundsen agrees. *My Place*

> is engaging and accessible, and while some unorthodoxies of spelling and grammar are retained to create a sense of oralcy in the written narrative, there are few examples of specifically Aboriginal speech patterns which have alienated readers unfamiliar with them. (1992, p. 252)

The mystery, confessional, and oral aspects imbue the text with an acceptable tenor that enhances reader receptivity. For example, the interpersonal relationships and exchanges within the narrative between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are not the angry, vengeful, threatening, patronising, antagonistic exchanges that Johnson (1965) describes. On the contrary, Morgan's narrative is charitable to non-Aboriginal people. A review by John Mulvaney evidences the sensitivities of non-Aboriginal Australia to other public Aboriginal voices at the time:

> Her (Morgan's) constructive approach contrasts with the negative, strident outpourings of those media activists who claim to speak for their people, but whose intolerance and ignorance is as anti-social as the white evils which they denounce. (Mulvaney 1988, p. 92)

Indeed, Morgan is not in a position to offer a challenging Aboriginal standpoint that might grate on her non-Aboriginal readers. She is focused singularly on the truth and mostly as perplexed as they are about the historical circumstances of the mystery she is attempting to solve. Morgan's images thus are presented to non-Aboriginal readers in a very non-confronting and step by step unfolding way. As one reader commented in an interview with

Victoria Laurie "it could have happened to anyone. An ordinary family that has been lied to" (1999, p. 1). The non-Aboriginal audience is left to contemplate how many other ordinary families living in suburbs across Australia have similar stories to uncover or tell. In this sense the larger historical silence is opened up and a space provided for similar histories to emerge. On the other hand, the non-Aboriginal audience does not have to blame themselves for their ignorance either, for if Morgan did not know her own family secrets how could they know this as a larger aspect of their history. And while they may feel uncomfortable with an implied complicity in past policy, they can also witness victims who pushed through and remade their lives. Morgan's achievement therefore is not just a practical one that enabled her family to reconnect. It is also a literary achievement in that her reading audience embraces and celebrates this successful return, precisely because she managed to position them as readers to walk her journey in her shoes.

Compared to Johnson's narratives *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) and *Long Live Sandawara* (Mudrooroo 1979), *My Place* (1987) is a gentle narrative. There are no detention centres, jails, recidivists, obscene language, explicit sex scenes, and after the death of Bill Milroy early in the narrative there is no conspicuous consumption of alcohol or violence in the immediate environment. Although as Morgan probes deeper into the past lives of her mother and grandmother emotional violence, exploitation and abuse are explored, this is done through the secondary perspective of Morgan as the voice and are understated and sometimes unspoken. However, while Morgan's intimate, oral and non-confrontational style makes it more accessible to her non-Aboriginal readers, on a deeper level this does not prevent the author from also producing statements by and exchanges between people that can be read by some as counter or alternative history. In this way, the reader is not just reading about a sequence of family events and judging the choices made but also listening to what was at stake and what was possible or not under the conditions.

The success of *My Place* is undoubtedly its accessible form and language and its ability to position the reader to believe and empathise with Morgan and her family. It is a 'tell all' that lets the reader in on the family secrets. For non-Aboriginal readers, Morgan appears as the champion of the inarticulate and illiterate, bringing to light forgotten lives, and humanising the Aboriginal experience of colonisation as an ongoing experience rather than an historical period that is over with and past.

Different reading positions

There is a range of critical analyses of Morgan's *My Place* (e.g., Grossman 2006). The discussions in the critical literature are useful for examining the possible readings that *My Place* produces and what these readings say about how differently located readers come to the narrative. The aim is not to agree or disagree with these contested readings but to evidence the relevance of the reader's social and political location in forming a particular reading position. Within this literature, critical contest centres on the nature and value of individualised narratives, the sensitive interface between history and literature, the constructions and images of Aboriginality, the domestic and the familiar settings where the narrative unfolds, the lack of overt criticism and judgement of European colonialism and its aggressive policies of racial discrimination and segregation towards Aboriginal Australians, and the various layers on which the story can be read and interpreted. It is tempting to cleave the contest in the literature along Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lines but this would be an overly simplistic representation. However, it is possible to assert that a minority of Aboriginal people and scholars of Aboriginal Studies have generally questioned Morgan's text more severely on the grounds of its assumptions and meanings for Aboriginal identity-making.

For example, Aboriginal author and academic, Jackie Huggins (1993), in her article *Always Was Always Will Be* was strident that she could not relate to Morgan's narrative. The title itself provokes a challenge to those who

compromise loyalties to their Aboriginal beginnings. Both Huggins and Johnson (Mudrooroo 1990) single out Morgan's lack of awareness of the importance of identification with, and recognition by the broader Aboriginal community as an indicator of membership and identity. For these authors, Morgan retained an individuality that negated her claims to being an Aboriginal writer.

Johnson (Mudrooroo 1990), for example, argues that Aboriginal writers sift the truth to arrive at a valid community document that is not an individualist manifesto of individual emancipation. The narratives at the back of the book by Arthur, Daisy and Gladys Corunna do give the work a semblance of community but they are documents/narratives that have been transcribed and edited by Morgan before publication and they function within the narrative to validate the successful outcome of Morgan's individual quest for truths. He further suggests that it is her individuality that makes her acceptable to the reading public:

> Sally Morgan's book is a milepost in Aboriginal literature in that it marks a stage when it is considered O.K. to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black. It is an individualised story and yes the concerns of the Aboriginal community are of secondary importance. (Mudrooroo 1990, p. 149)

Huggins also questions Morgan's assumption of an Aboriginal identity:

> Yes Morgan has benefited well since *My Place* and has been given the status by whites as an 'Aboriginal writer'. But what has she given back in return to 'her' people? Has she set up any enterprises that might advance our causes for example a writer's trust fund, charities, encouraged and promoted other Black artists etc? Or has she distanced herself and individualised her own gain? This is the criticism many Aboriginal people have made of her new found identity. (1993, pp. 462-3)

The colonial historian, Attwood (1992), also has problems with Morgan's construction of her Aboriginal identity. His brief summary of Morgan's life and the plot structure of *My Place* pinpoint certain situations and exchanges as

being liberal, alternative and contemporary rather than Aboriginal, and is unconvinced by Morgan's hybrid state which encompasses all of these facets of identity. Attwood argues that by comparison to most other Aboriginal writers, Morgan's Aboriginality is forged through the creation of the narrative, which allows her to announce it to the European culture to which she has thus far belonged. He questions the basis of her Aboriginality on the grounds it is influenced by liberalism and the counter-culture movement and by the fact she has studied behavioural psychology at university. He locates her as a writer in the pluralist 1960s and 1970s influenced by the trend to counter-cultural alternative lifestyles. As well, by locating Morgan and her family as having endured a less persecuted experience than other Aboriginal people, he considers her therefore less authentic and less convincing in the western catalogue/register of Aboriginality.

Attwood is exposing here his own assumptions of what should constitute Aboriginality. He puts forward the view that "for a stable identity to be achieved one needs the confirmation of others" (1992, p. 304). Huggins suggests that the Aboriginal readership of *My Place* is minuscule, and that Morgan's accolades and confirmation have come from whites because she offers a white-washed, simplistic construction of Aboriginality:

> Precisely what irks me about *My Place* is its proposition that Aboriginality can be understood by all non-Aboriginals. Aboriginality is not like that. Attwood states that 'like most other Aboriginal life histories it requires little if any translation.' To me that is *My Place's* greatest weakness - requiring little translation (to a white audience), therefore it reeks of whitewashing in the ultimate sense.... This is something Black writers fight against all the time - white control, white editors, and white inference of our stories. (Huggins 1993, p. 460)

Huggin's analysis of *My Place* is critical of actions within the narrative that she believes white reading audiences would naively skim over and which Aboriginal readers may find problematic. For example, Daisy and Gladys Corunna's decision to hide their Aboriginality from the children is read by

sympathetic whites as an act of survival and sacrifice. However, Huggins describes the "act of passing" as a "horrendous crime in Aboriginal circles and places of knowing" and that "most people would never cede their identity no matter how destructive, painful or bad the situation was" (1993, p. 460). Huggins is scathing of Morgan's easy appropriation of Aboriginality, and the way in which she embraces a community consciousness without participating in the lived experience of the Aboriginal community.

> Their jumping on the bandwagon trips are questioned and usually not accepted by their staunchest critics whom they presume should be their firmest allies and 'family'. Instant coffee doesn't mix easily with pure spring water. (1993, p. 464)

Huggins reading position thus leads her to see *My Place* as a "maze of anglofied hyperbole"(1993, p. 462), and Morgan herself as naive to the fact that there are Aboriginal ways of knowing even if you are brought up in a white family that indicate that you are different and 'other' and more succinctly Aboriginal. By placing the narratives of Daisy Corunna, Arthur Corunna and Gladys Milroy at the back of the narrative after Morgan as principal narrator is, Huggins proposes, an act of "control and subjugation over incredibly beautiful narratives" (1993, p. 461). At the crux, Huggins sees Morgan and other members of her family as complicit in 'the crime' of Australia's inequitable race relations. In this sense, she aligns herself with Attwood:

> Her (Morgan's) forbears have not been oppressed as much as most Aborigines were. By and large they have not acted as she expects or wants them to have acted: while they now resist, they previously did not do so consistently: their relationship to the colonisers was more one of cooperation than of conflict: they exercised a degree of choice in denying their Aboriginality. (1993, pp. 460-1)

Against readings (see for example Birch 1992, Rowse 1992, Tarrago 1992, Cooper 1995) that clearly dispute Morgan's claims to call herself Aboriginal are a host of readings that position Morgan and her family as victims of

colonisation and mediate analysis of her narrative accordingly. For example, Broun (1992), De Groen (1992), Newman, (1992), Robertson (1992), Trees (1991, 1992), Ommundsen (1992) and Bettle (1995) are critical of racist, oppressive and interventionist government policies that made Daisy and Gladys's 'choices' necessary and empathise with the compromise and burden that deception imposes. Broun, for example, writes:

> It is little wonder then that Nan and Glad chose to disguise their Aboriginal heritage, as it had been a source of pain, heartbreak and ill-treatment. They lived in fear of the government taking away the children because of their Aboriginality, and believed that nothing had changed in respect to white domination of Aboriginal lives. From an examination of the policies and laws which controlled Aboriginal lives up until the 1960s it is easy to identify their reasons for this behaviour. What should be wondered at is the turnaround from this point back to a pride in their Aboriginality, which can only serve to heighten respect for the Aboriginal will to survive adversity. (1992, p. 30)

Much of the analysis from this position seeks to draw analysis on Morgan's writing position rather than her loyalties. Newman (1992) is dismissive that 'pluralism' detracts from the text and is critical of academics such as Eric Michaels who believe that Morgan's lack of acknowledgement of her white cultural influences weakens the narrative and "causes the text to be caught in the trap of conventionalised denial of European influences" (1988, p. 46). Michaels' position is that autobiographies constructed by those of mixed race are pervaded by European influences not only through use of English but through systems of belief. Newman, in contrast, asks:

> How could it be otherwise? Contemporary Aboriginal writers are not locked in a time warp, unaffected by the culture in which they live. But Michaels regrets that Morgan ignores the problematic of claiming a distinctive Aboriginal identity within the language and modes of European culture. (1992, p. 72)

While Michaels questions whether or not modern European conventions such as autobiography are an appropriate way to package Aboriginal

narratives or whether "they finally do damage to the very subjects they seek to describe" (1988, p. 46), Newman's reading of *My Place* identified its implied purpose as a way to redress the violence already done to Aboriginal people by white definitions of Aboriginality and to find a place or a position from which Aboriginal subjects can speak. This space, argues Newman, "must inevitably be a negotiation between traditional and contemporary, oral and written, mythic and historical" (1992, p. 70). These spheres of influence identified by Newman are interfaces (following Nakata 2007a), or 'third spaces' to paraphrase Bhabha (1994) where the relationships between colonisers and colonised are no longer confined to strict binaries of Black/White or Master/Slave. The identities of both coloniser and colonised are continually made and remade in such negotiated spaces. Marcia Langton suggested that "Aboriginality is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation" (1993, p. 33). Morgan's narrative constructs a field or environment of intersubjectivity that allows a dialogue between reader and subject(s) to emerge. It is this dialogue and opportunity to make and re-make, assess and re-assess the history and identity of self and other that are valued by non-Aboriginal readers. Newman points out that

> ...it would be wrong to deny the importance of *My Place* in introducing many white readers for the first time to the actualities of Aboriginal experience, the exploitation of Aboriginal women by white settlers, the cruel and misguided thinking that led to the separation of children from their families. Or, if this knowledge is not new to the reader, it 'brings it home' that is, it renders it close, familiar and personal, and thereby brings into question many stereotypical suppositions which so often govern the thinking of whites who have habitually simply defined Aboriginality in terms of skin colour or by mathematical equations of blood. The narrative may well encourage readers to examine their past assumptions and prejudices. (1992, p. 73)

Broun (1992) sees Morgan's disclosure and the disclosures of Gladys, Daisy and Arthur as creating a path or passage through which non-Aboriginal

Australians can pass to achieve a greater understanding of Aboriginal Australians. The Aboriginal past that Broun refers to can co-exist beside the official colonial past. One does not cancel out the other and this should not be underestimated in explaining the widespread appeal *My Place* has enjoyed with non-Aboriginal readers.

Through the stories of Nan, Glad and Arthur, whose lives were controlled by a white government and employers, the long term effects of this oppression and intervention are apparent. By disclosing this past perhaps white Australians may understand better the bitterness held by Aboriginal people for Australians and governments and the welfare mentality this control has bred (Broun 1992).

Katherine Trees (1992) explores the sensitive interface between history and literature in her reading of *My Place*. She argues that the interface between literature and history is an important site for developing an understanding of imperialism and the colonised-coloniser relationship in Australia, and it is only through examination of this interface that it is possible to gain knowledge to 'undervalued, little known Aboriginal knowledge'. Trees identifies Morgan's use of the Battye Library and other non-Aboriginal sources to inform the construction of *My Place* as a re-reading of coloniser history by the colonised.

> By pointing her readers to her use of the Battye Library, Morgan clearly shows that she relies on official white historical records to inform the counter history of *My Place*. It is the history of the oppressors being re-read by the colonised. This powerful bid for legitimacy in white terms demonstrates that official histories can themselves be tools for minority groups, such as Aborigines, to employ a means of intervention. (Trees 1992, p. 60)

Trees (1991) in another article puts forward the idea that a more equitable account of post 1788 Australian history is possible if official history is mediated by a reading of 'Aboriginal' literature as history. To read literature written by Aboriginal people as history it is necessary to take account of the

ways in which the dominant white Australian discourse makes distinctions between historical and literary texts. These assumptions are often that history is factual and literature is fictitious. Accounts of Aboriginal/white history written by Aboriginal authors demonstrate the interconnectedness and disjunctions of Aboriginal oral history, official Australian history and literature written by Aboriginal authors. Trees contends that this history, produced in the form of literature, serves what Foucault (1977) would call a 'counter memory' of violence and deculturation to which Aboriginal people have been subjected, but which has been omitted from official white Australian histories. Trees' reading of *My Place* observes that Morgan's text represents an instance of Aboriginal people moving from being anthropology subjects to creators of our own history.

Analysis of Morgan's text from these more supportive positions also mediates Huggins' and other Aboriginal readings such as author and critic Anita Heiss, who propose that *My Place's* success was due mainly to "the fact that it was non-confrontational to the white mainstream way of perceiving Aboriginality" (2003, p. 102). For example, Newman counters that

> ... the book's wide popular reception since its publication in 1987 not only indicates an enthusiasm for the homegrown and readable, but may also demonstrate a shift in critical perspective, a re-evaluation of certain literary events, and even a renewed questioning of the meaning of identity in Australia, especially those grounded on race. (1992, p. 72)

Similarly, Broun (1992) mediates Johnson's criticism of Morgan's use of the Aussie battler storyline. Johnson (Mudrooroo 1990) condemns the battler genre as a common form in non-Aboriginal writing and argues that it elevates the concerns of the individual over concern for the community. Broun, a non-Aboriginal critic, argues in contrast that the battler layer is superficial and that while Morgan does describe certain ways her family have had to 'battle' to survive a tensioned environment, she describes political action through small events such as her grandmother's 'buttering-up' of the rent-man or her

own truancy from school because she has an unexplainable problem with authority and regimentation. Newman concurs with Broun's reading pointing out that *My Place* can be interpreted as:

> …the genre of the oppressed, which is the best medium by which personal testimony to injustice may be made, but to read the narrative exclusively in these terms is to disguise the constructed nature of autobiographical expression, with all its ideological implications. (1992, p. 69)

Similarly, Jo Robertson sees *My Place* filling the important space in the Australian literary landscape of "allowing the silenced to speak" and having the "power to unsettle and displace white readers/critics making it necessary for them to rewrite their own history" (1992, p. 52).

The severe contest in the critical conversation around Morgan's construction of her Aboriginality and her recruitment of the Western literary conventions and discourses to convey her narrative arguably reflects deeper contests around the authorisation and authenticity of Aboriginal identity. Huggins most clearly enunciates Morgan as not-Aboriginal and unaware of what is required to be recognised as such. She cannot see in Morgan's account any markers of Aboriginality that coincide with her own experience beyond Morgan's claim to genetic lineage and questions the success of the text with the Aboriginal readership.

However, this contest aside, other critics suggest that the success of *My Place* with the non-Aboriginal readership is forged precisely because non-Aboriginal Australians can begin from the familiar, shared context of suburban working class Australia and take the same journey as Morgan into a secret and previously unrevealed history that suggests a much greater silence in the broader Australian historical accounts. The non-Aboriginal reader is introduced to an Aboriginal Australia through the eyes of a person wanting to embrace and belong in it. Morgan's success is that she opens eyes and minds to the reality of one family history that may be one of many and does it so

that the injustice that produced this history is inescapably felt by her readers. Morgan in essence handcuffs the non-Aboriginal reader to herself to bear witness to her family history. That some Aboriginal readers cannot begin where Morgan starts and do not recognise her experiences as ones of being Aboriginal is wholly understandable. However, this does not negate the fact that other Aboriginal families do share similar experiences and stories to the Milroy's, as came to light a decade later with the handing down of the *Bringing Them Home Report* (Wilson 1997). Morgan created and traversed the 'in-between' space and moved from not-Aboriginal/not belonging to Aboriginal/to belonging and was able to take her readers with her. In this narrative, the move from familiar to unfamiliar was the course of the narrative itself, with few spaces for resistance by those who could identify with her need to find and know that unfamiliar, unrecognised part of self, Aboriginal experience and Australian history.

Moving the Aboriginal subject(s) from passive to active in literary production changes the voice and is a crucial factor in constructing the literature of resistance. The speaking position of the narrator changes from the subject being spoken about to the subject speaking. Johnson's first narrative, *Wild Cat Falling* constructed a speaking subject who was Aboriginal. The 'boy' in *Wild Cat Falling* spoke with an emerging sense of voice and offered a first-person account of this state of being that was resistant to the mainstream. Morgan's first person account centralises an Aboriginal speaking subject and offers an alternative perspective on Australian society that is more restrained and palatable but also stoic and resilient. The very act of Morgan writing as a way of explaining and exploring what later emerges as 'inter-generational cultural trauma' says loudly and clearly: I have survived to tell this story; my Aboriginal family still exists, and we are continuing on together again.

Revisiting the elements at the Cultural Interface

Leigh Gilmore (2001) points out that the western confessional style of self-representation brings together an official and a spiritual discourse in a way that conflates a boundary between the public and the private. In her study of autobiography as a testimony of and a response to trauma, Gilmore suggests that the major legacy of confession for autobiography is the extent to which autobiography has reproduced the confession's double nature *viz.*, its official and secret languages merge in self-representation such that any self-representational act is fully burdened by its public charge to disclose private truth. *My Place* in this sense comes across as public testimonial which conveys the private truths of Morgan's family members that are read as representative thus allowing the reading public to re-assess their own official history from a distance through the medium of the narrative.

Despite autobiography's association with and participation in discourses which reproduce dominant constructions of the individual and the nation some post-colonial scholars identify it as a strategic mode in which to represent oneself as a speaking subject (Gilmore 2001). For example, Gayatri Spivak (1998) defines autobiography as the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other. Nelson (1988) explains that this preponderance of autobiographical narratives which occurs in most black literary traditions is a result of the subtle connections between political powerlessness and autobiographical impulse. The solidarity of a group's experience can be reinforced by individual stories which draw up a composite picture of a people's history and identity. *My Place* certainly fits this description and the subordinate's or Other's testimony told from their perspective and the perspectives of others in the same cultural background is what gives rise to the agency, the action, that Morgan's work is imbued with and that is missing from non-Aboriginal constructions of Aboriginality.

Spivak (1998) goes on to point out that this kind of testimony is born of tension within the colonial relationship where both the colonised and the coloniser have impacted on each other. Muecke (1992) notes this too when he suggests that while the colonised are acutely aware of the way in which their identity has been shaped by their oppressors, colonisers are far less aware of the way their identities have been shaped by those they have colonised and by their role as the dominant, oppressive and privileged group. While Morgan tells her own personal journey of the discovery of a new identity previously denied to her, she simultaneously creates the opportunity for non-Aboriginal readers to re-assess and re-create their own identities in relation to what they have just 'discovered' through her journey of discovery.

In constructing her own autobiography, Morgan, according to one sector of the intellectual discourse, is acting out what Bhabha calls colonial mimicry. For example, in Johnson's (1965) narrative *Wild Cat Falling,* colonial mimicry on one level took the form of drunkenness, violence, crime against private property and misogyny. However, at a deeper level of engagement in the narrative with non-Aboriginal people, Johnson's ability to write of the cultural context that gave rise to such behaviour can be interpreted as a direct challenge to such forms of mimicry and a double articulation.

In *My Place* the family's cordial and friendly relationships with non-Aboriginal people, their suburban home and the standards they adhere to within, their attitudes to work and education and Sally's Christianity, all of which Morgan makes public through the narrative, register with non-Aboriginal readers as examples of positive emulation of 'white European' standards, aspirations and behaviour. But they are not just mirror images of dominant practices. Not to have attempted appropriation as a means of representation at all would leave white literary authority intact. These practices rather are presented as a layer in Morgan's narrative that is exterior, a type of protection in a sense that enables the narrative and its various speakers to exist and communicate in ways that

are also other than the dominant modes. Examples of this can be seen in the visionary capacity that Morgan claims as a common way of seeing and knowing for Aboriginal people, and the alternative perspectives and other dimensions on Australian history and culture that the narrative puts forward for non-Aboriginal readers. This is the private space of *My Place* that Morgan opens up as a site of new consciousness for non-Aboriginal readers.

Gilmore (2001) sees memory as a site from which counter-discourse can emerge. She argues that memory is at least partially unassimilable and that acts of remembering the past differently, through rogue confessions, scandalous memoirs and unofficial archives of protest offer a different construction of the present. Morgan draws on memories to construct narratives within *My Place* that do not conform to the familiar view of Australia's colonial history and therefore de-stabilise the present. Beyond the exterior layer of assimilated behaviour, Morgan's work refuses to take part in the national narratives that perpetuate myths such as 'Australia is a nation founded in peace' or a 'working man's paradise' or a 'free country'. A 'national narrative' that produces and reproduces a nation's public history is nothing more than the sum total of individuals who perpetuate these as common assumptions through language and literature as everyday 'common-sense'. If then as critics and academics such as Brady (1996), Ommundsen (1992), Bettle (1995), Trees (1991, 1992) and Broun (1992) have argued that Morgan's work gives non-Aboriginal Australians an opportunity to re-assess their consciousness in relation to this then, to paraphrase Chambers (1984), the desires of the reading subject have been changed. Changing a readerships' position on a literary subject can change the perceptions, attitudes, assumptions and expectations of how Aboriginal narratives can be read in future and thus disrupt and re-write 'national narratives'.

Morgan uses inter-textual devices that trigger registers for non-Aboriginal readers throughout *My Place*. Her use of imagery is not only visual and

evocative, it also provides an important background to the public and private spaces Morgan's narrative connects. The hospital where Morgan spends so much time as a child visiting her war damaged father, and the school where the confinement, regimentation and repetition are almost overbearing, stand in stark contrast to Sally's experiences in the backyard with Daisy listening to bird calls or being shown the different animal tracks in the dust. The metaphors Morgan constructs are strong and often related to animals which feature prominently in the narrative.

De Groen (1992) points out that the central characters in *My Place*, Sally, Gladys, Daisy, Arthur and to a lesser extent Bill Milroy are all examined in the narrative in terms of their progress towards or away from psychic wholeness and spiritual awareness. The settings too are represented as either "wholesome or unhealthy, sacred or profane" (1992, p. 35). De Groen makes this particularly evident when she contrasts the alienating, unhealthy environment of the hospital to the natural settings of the swamp and Corunna Downs that offer a healing serenity and spiritual peace. Her analysis examines images of wholeness, health, alienation and fragmentation and advances the view that;

> A close consideration of the chain of images associated with the motif of healing suggests that the structure turns upon a pattern of contrast between, on the one hand, wholeness, health, holiness and Aboriginal/Christian spirituality, and on the other lack of wholeness (loss, dispersal, fragmentation)' disease or impairment, a secular or profane approach to life and Western rationalism. These contrasts can be aligned with the central structural contrast between speech and silence.... As the narrative unfolds we see that silence and secrecy are associated with dis-ease, disharmony and oppression. Speech and openness lead to wholeness of being (physical and psychic health) and personal freedom. (1992, p. 35)

Morgan is so intent on placing herself and tracing her family history that she does not concern herself too much with delving into the motives of non-Aboriginal characters within the narrative, such as the Drake-Brockmans.

Many revelations within the narrative are followed by silence from the characters within. For example, Daisy's admission that Drake Brockman was her father was followed by the silence of resolution by Gladys and later Sally as is Daisy's later secret that she has had another child apart from Gladys who was taken away from her. While Aboriginal writers and critics such as Mudrooroo (1990), Huggins (1993), Tarrago (1993), Langton (1994) and Heiss (2003) are critical of this as a non-confrontational approach, these silences and the spaces they create within the narrative do not go unnoticed by non-Aboriginal readers and encourage further interpretation and consideration of the context that made silence necessary. De Groen (1992) cites John Colmer's discussion of *My Place* in pointing out that the underlying structural principle of Morgan's narrative is the contrast between silence and speech. As the narrator, Morgan speaks for herself and other members of her Aboriginal family but she does not expend too much time judging or documenting the motives or history of non-Aboriginal characters. She appears to gloss over Alice Drake Brockman's comment on her treatment of Aboriginal girls by saying it would be unfair of her to judge Alice by different standards. Morgan focuses instead on the consequences of Alice's actions for her grandmother Daisy and her mother and their decision to hide their Aboriginal heritage. De Groen (1992) puts forward the view that the book's redemptive power lies in its ability to make the experience of the characters psychic healing available to the reader.

> We are forced to confront the suffering and redemption of the Aboriginal characters from their own point of view. For those of us who are not Aboriginal this is an ambivalent experience. As human beings we identify with Arthur, Gladys and Daisy and feel the injustice and cruelty of their suffering. But at the same time we realise that through our history we are implicated in the root cause of that suffering: the imposition of our white civilisation on their land and culture. We stand accused to see Australian history, and hence contemporary Australian society, in a more critical way. *My Place* may not demand land rights in a noisy and vehement way. Nevertheless, through the critique of white justice and inhumanity implicit in the life stories of its central characters,

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it forces white readers to see the vital importance of making reparations to heal wounds of the past. (1992, p. 34)

Robertson (1992) draws on the work of Goldie who suggests that for critics and readers who belong to the majority culture, "the only possibility in response to black literary production is a very loud silence which analyses the silencing and which provides opportunities, not to speak for the silenced but for the silenced to speak" (p. 49). Robertson goes on to conclude that

> …the self-conscious stance of allowing the silenced to speak becomes unnecessary when a story like Sally Morgan's *My Place* reveals a rich mine of historical tactics relative to circumstances with the power to unsettle and displace white readers/critics, making it necessary for them to rewrite their own history. (1992, p. 53)

Perhaps the most significant feature of Morgan's autobiographical narrative is that it can be read by non-Aboriginal readers as the personal journey of one woman that is an act of resistance. At the core of this resistance is a search for an Aboriginal identity and history that causes the white reader to question their own identity and history in relation to this. The rupture it poses to the familiar view of Australian history has been described by some non-Aboriginal critics and academics as healing. Bettle for example puts forward the view that

> [t]o tell the story of a past that has been obscured, concealed or forgotten is in itself to effect change in the present. It is also true that opening up a festering wound may help an essential stage of the healing process. (1995, p. 163)

My Place the narrative, Morgan the person, the Aboriginal identity politics, and the non-Aboriginal celebration of its publication speaks of an interface where continuities and discontinuities with what is known and what is right about taking political sides converge to condition what can be known of oneself and in turn how to communicate that when known. Identifying these discursive elements in the ways they come together to inform the intellectual discourse

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about the formation of the narrative evidences a contested terrain that needs to be crossed for moving between the known and the unknown.

Teaching Implications: recognising the writing/reading positions and the production of text-reader relations

My Place and *Wild Cat Falling* are two quite different narrative forms that narrate aspects of the (part) Aboriginal experience in the first person. Both authors have used Western forms and conventions and both have narrated journeys of homecoming. Both have had their Aboriginality questioned by the Aboriginal community and others. However, audience receptions have been quite different. Johnson's text, while acclaimed, challenges non-Aboriginal students who do not access it easily as a recognisable instance of Aboriginal experience. The 'boy' is unlikeable to many and elicits little empathy and chances for identification. Aboriginal readers read resistance and familiar experiences *vis a vis* the non-Aboriginal society. Morgan's narrative is popularly acclaimed, if not critically, as one of the most successful Aboriginal narratives with non-Aboriginal audiences. It has been argued to be non-confrontational and yet non-Aboriginal audiences seemingly accept without contest the dark side of Australian colonial history that it reveals and also accept Morgan's re-absorption of an Aboriginal identity. Both Johnson and Morgan are writing of contexts of belonging and not belonging, of continuities and discontinuities, of loss and restoration, of silence and speaking back.

Arguably Morgan's success in positioning her readers is that at the beginning of her journey she is largely undifferentiated from the reader. Morgan is an insider to the non-Aboriginal world, who could be living next door, or a fellow student. Johnson's central protagonist is an outsider and his behaviour invokes little admiration or empathy until perhaps the end, if at all. Morgan's family is seen as a victim of injustice; the 'boy' as a perpetrator. And yet the

'boys' mother's experience bears some similarities to the women in Morgan's family.

The position from which the writer narrates is clearly a significant element of positioning the reader. But the reader's own social and cultural location is just as significant as a condition of access. Both these are implicated in the level of familiarity offered to readers via the literary form and conventions, the situational context, and the central and supporting characters. Also implicated is the importance of the social context of the times and often the historical context that has shaped it. One of Morgan's achievements was that by the end of the narrative, the historical context that conditioned her family's experience had been made explicit to an extent. That Morgan herself did not know this history but had to search it out allays, to some degree, the non-Aboriginal reader's guilt for also not knowing of this unspoken history. By the end of the narrative, the non-Aboriginal reader understands why they did not know, as much as what they did not know, and have the possibility of alleviating guilt by looking to the future as Morgan and her family have done by documenting history and celebrating reconnections and renewals of identity. Aboriginal readers like Huggins, who have lived this history in more difficult circumstances, are as angered by Morgan's ignorance as they are of non-Aboriginal Australia's of the impact of colonisation. In contrast, in *Wild Cat Falling*, the historical context which gave rise to the social circumstances of the protagonist was less enunciated and more difficult to discern from the text itself as the conditions of contemporary Aboriginality. This explains why Aboriginal readers - who understand this history because the experiences and meanings within being familiar ones - understand and identify with the character's position more easily.

All this suggests that a number of elements require explicit attention in classroom interactions: understanding the background of the author, the motivation or intent of the author, the social and historical contexts which

inform the setting of the narrative, the literary conventions and techniques, the critical readings of literary analysis, and the social location of the reader. How a reader is prepared and brought to the narrative is significant to the reading of the narrative and suggests that any classroom will produce multiple readings of any one narrative. Through closer attention to the conditions and methods of textual construction of Aboriginal representations and subjectivities, the reading of the narrative can begin to be seen as a negotiation between writer, reader and text, and more than a contest around the literal meaning contained within words and sentences.

Where Aboriginal authors speak with their own voices, of their own experiences, the representations of Aboriginal subjects should be expected to fracture and disintegrate the familiar, more unitary colonial subjects of non-Aboriginal narratives. The representations that present, along with the published responses from individuals, should be steered toward understandings of the inner workings of the narrative as textual economies for shifting minds and not singularly as a 'sell out' of Aboriginal values. All students require some explicit manoeuvring to move into these textual spaces and especially guidance to recognise the full range of possibilities that exist there. A focus on how authors position readers to produce multiple readings works to open up access points for students who are challenged in their attempts to move beyond literal and surface meanings. In these circumstances, it would be productive to see that the presence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers/students and their multiple reading positions that present in classroom enriches the possibilities for engaging and understanding any textual production of Aboriginal subjects. The task for educators would be how to manage this environment to produce expanded insights rather than the frequently divisive and personalised contests that make classrooms uncomfortable zones for learning. A useful guiding principle would suggest treatment of multiple reading positions as entry points rather than as end points. A curriculum can then lay down pathways for critical

engagements with the authors' success in navigating the in-between spaces. And the lesson's objective must be about developing capacities in students to engage thinking at deeper levels as their first approach to all narrative constructions. This will require no less a learning environment that is safe for all students, and a focus on narrative constructions in the ways they work for particular purposes.

Summary

Social realism by Aboriginal writers, especially that which narrates the Aboriginal urban life experience, does not necessarily provide easy 'lead ins' to multiple contemporary forms of Aboriginality, as if these require an explanation or a justification. This can leave non-Aboriginal readers searching for 'clues' or 'registers' that they have previously associated with Aboriginality that do not materialise, as often happens in student readings of *Wild Cat Falling*. Social realism narratives do not always represent the familiar representations that non-Aboriginal readers associate with the pristine form of timeless Aboriginality that is familiar and non-threatening and reproduced over and over in historical fiction by Aboriginal authors. Instead, non-Aboriginal readers are confronted with and by the dynamic and contemporary expressions of Aboriginality that can question the nature of authentic Aboriginal subjects and the nature of authority, using writing as a cultural weapon. These more unfamiliar representations are available to be discovered in the textual forms of narratives to be signalled to readers; however they may require explicit attention to be discerned and seen for what they are designed to do. The analysis of the narratives of Aboriginal authors discussed in this thesis does reveal that these authors establish their own signals, registers and other literary techniques to announce themselves, and their colonial pasts, into the reader's present. The strongest device is the personal voice that authorises Aboriginal experience. The different reader receptions to Johnson's and Morgan's narratives reflect their different beginning points for speaking out and the different social positions they conveyed to readers. This highlights

that the techniques used to wield Western literary conventions to position, to speak back, to position the non-Aboriginal reader as complicit in historical silence or as part of the problem of the marginalised requires teasing out and contemplation as Aboriginal appropriation of those forms rather than evidence of assimilation.

Chapter Eight

NARRATIVES AND STANDPOINTS

Five narratives have so far been examined in this thesis. Three were from non-Aboriginal authors who wrote of non-Aboriginal experiences of the frontier from different points in time. Exploration of these non-Aboriginal narratives has uncovered more than the nature or language of representations of Aboriginal subjects. Also revealed is the way that authors re-deploy already familiar meanings that are continuous with what their assumed non-Aboriginal audiences already know and understand of the context in which the narrative is situated. This situational context is conditioned by the much larger cultural context of shared knowledge. Thus the colonial, primitive, sub-human, romantic, noble, threatening savage as understood in the situational context of the narrative is recruited from the much wider European cultural standpoint. This assumes as understood the challenges that settlers face in the particular historical moment of confronting new, unfamiliar and hostile environments. The state of arrival/departure from familiar social moorings produces tensions for settlers that non-Aboriginal readers understand. From this established and familiar position an author can disturb the consciousness of non-Aboriginal readers by expanding or disturbing these already assumed Aboriginal characteristics to propel their chosen narrative themes and symbols. In these ways, all three authors attempt in particular historical moments to extend understandings of the Aboriginal subject in some way. The fit between the assumed knowledge of the reader, the situational context and the representations of Aboriginal positions within the narrative enables it to makes sense to non-Aboriginal readers.

However, my examination has also revealed how this process also produces large silences at the sub-textual level. Firstly, the assumptions underlying and informing these familiar Aboriginal representations are not evident at the surface level of text, precisely because they can be assumed. Secondly, the continuous lack of contemplation around Aboriginal agency and experience of the same contact situations/contexts is not evident either. These silences point up how the Aboriginal subject is rendered discontinuous with Aboriginal understandings and perceptions of reality, in order to be re-named, related, and re-defined to be made continuous with non-Aboriginal understandings.

The last two narratives examined were written from early Aboriginal standpoints of the inter-generational legacy for urbanised Aboriginal people as a result of dispossession and dislocation. Colin Johnson's 1965 novel *Wild Cat Falling* was the first recognised fictional account and Sally Morgan's 1987 family historical account, *My Place*, was the first to break through into the wider non-Aboriginal readership. An examination of these narratives highlighted the similarities and differences in the textual signals that made Morgan's account accessible and acceptable and Johnson's much lesser so. Morgan recruited her readers and took them on her journey to witness the unfolding of a confronting aspect of Aboriginal experience, which then was less able to be resisted or refuted by the reader. Johnson's protagonist began as already discontinuous with non-Aboriginal Australian law, moral and social codes and sensibilities and finally re-established his continuity with Aboriginal sensibilities of social relations. His voice challenged non-Aboriginal sensibilities. To go empathetically with Johnson's protagonist requires non-Aboriginal readers to read against the more familiar deviant Aboriginal they are used to. This approach makes it a more unpalatable read with more spaces for resistance and refusal. Aboriginal students, however, understand the protagonist more easily and engage the various continuities and discontinuities with more ease and satisfaction. The common textual feature

of both narratives was the use of a strong personal authorial voice which centred the narrative around the Aboriginal subjects.

However, there is a very important point that requires further consideration. In both narratives, the authors had to build the broader context of Aboriginal experience and history as they went along. Johnson's protagonist does this retrospectively as he tries to makes sense of his life journey. Morgan builds this context bit by bit as she discovers what had happened to her mother, grandmother and great-uncle. The importance of situational context opens up a larger question that has implications for assisting students to engage the unfamiliar meanings in Aboriginal writing. In the context of Aboriginal knowledge, experience and standpoints, what can be assumed by readers and by non-Aboriginal readers in particular?

The author's standpoint in all of the above narratives underlines how dependent a reader is on the assumed (as already understood) meanings within narratives. These meanings are embedded in the broader cultural contexts beyond the narrative's situational context that inform/limit the specificities of an individual author's narrative choices. These 'already understood' standpoints and meanings cohere around a shared commonsense of particular cultural groups that writer's belong to. These help to inform and shape the context as well as the narratives.

For example, the non-Aboriginal authors who, at the time of writing, largely assumed non-Aboriginal audiences also largely assume the broader context of shared meanings through which it will be read. There are two significant trajectories of knowledge to consider. The first are the shared and culturally embedded understandings, projected from the Western (European-Australian) domain, that organise and assemble the 'common' sense of place, identity and collective purpose of societal progress. The second is the more immediate project that locates the Aboriginal subject, or the Aboriginal 'question' or 'problem', within the colonial project of settlement, nation

building, and what it means to be as Australian of European extraction. They inform a particular standpoint from which the Whiteman's Aborigine can be placed within proximity of the known and familiar. Expanding or moving this subject within the range of consciousness of readers is thus also about unsettling already taken for granted meanings.

However, when Aboriginal authors attempt to represent Aboriginal knowledge, experiences or meanings from within our own historical and cultural domains, there has been no such surrounding fields of representation available to the non-Aboriginal public to act as 'the assumed to be already understood'. Firstly, there is little understanding of Aboriginal knowledge and worldviews and oral narrations which organise our historical and contemporary worlds. Secondly, in the absence of these and through our historical exclusion from non-Aboriginal society, there is no inter-textual field of representation to provide the context of our standpoints on our colonial experience and contemporary condition. Thus the broader contexts for connecting to the possible new Aboriginal meanings are not available for non-Aboriginal readers to draw on for shifting their understanding of Aboriginal subjects. This 'Aboriginal' space is arguably not yet one of common or shared understanding. Thus in the writing/reading/teaching space, which is now assumed to be one where both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writer/readers are all present, the silence, referred to above, becomes a large contextual void for the non-Aboriginal reader. The large contextual void becomes the space for not connecting to the Aboriginal meanings in the narrative and therefore the space for resistance or dismissal by non-Aboriginal students.

However, it has to be emphasised that Aboriginal authors do not write from a void. They imaginatively draw on their own experiences, knowledge, contexts, and shared oral narratives that together signify important continuities between past and present. These continuities produce discontinuities or ruptures in the familiar representational resource bases of non-Aboriginal readers. So the

questions of context-building and textual mediation are an interesting site that arguably requires further consideration for classroom teaching. If an aim is to open up a shared space so that Aboriginal meanings are more accessible for non-Aboriginal audiences, how is this large contextual void to be overcome, without requiring Aboriginal authors to come to the act of writing explaining and justifying the meaning and expressions of their contemporary presence? In one sense, within the genre of social realism, Johnson and Morgan were distinct prototypes for how to uncover and recover a tiny slice of this void. Morgan explained, substantiated, justified and appealed as she peeled the covers back. Johnson unapologetically ripped the covers off and held them in the readers face, so to speak. Nevertheless, they both filled in a slice of the missing context.

Representations from the Aboriginal side of these silences are a relatively recent phenomenon in Australian literature. As Shoemaker has pointed out, Johnson's 1965 novel is now seen not as "a form of solitary curiosity" (1993, p. 14) but the precursor to an entire field of Aboriginal writing. In the more than two decades since Morgan published *My Place*, Aboriginal writing has flowered and expanded. Not only has the diversity of Aboriginal writing evolved but the field of publication, readership, and intellectual discourse along with it. At the same time, different histories of Australian settlement have begun to be written. Understanding the contexts and standpoints expressed in Aboriginal writing firstly depends to some degree on understanding the presence of Aboriginal standpoints on Australian history. It is from our historical experience/exclusion/erasure that Aboriginal representation is always positioned in a field of politics.

The wider political context since My Place
In the two decades since the publication of Sally Morgan's *My Place*, Aboriginal activism has continued to draw attention to historical and ongoing injustice and the need for redress on the stage of national affairs. While

different governments have responded in partisan and at times retrograde ways, there has been a general movement towards social justice and reconciliation agendas that have at times garnered widespread public support from non-Aboriginal Australia. This support was stimulated by a series of major public inquiries into past practices in Aboriginal Affairs, by legal challenges, and by the emergence of historical accounts from the Aboriginal standpoint.

For example, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was instigated by the Hawke Government in 1987 and brought down its final report in 1991. In addition to investigating individual deaths in custody, the Commission investigated the wider historical, social and economic factors underlying the rates of Aboriginal incarceration and deaths. As a result, the Recommendations went beyond police, justice and custody matters to make recommendations in a range of areas, such as the importance of self-determination principles in health, education, housing, and the importance of infrastructure, service and funding provisions, and economic opportunity and land. As well, attention was also placed on the role of media and the importance of cultural awareness training for non-Aboriginal people in relevant workplaces. Reconciliation between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australia was considered to be essential and an outcome of this recommendation was the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991 which undertook a decade long program. The culmination of this decade of activity were the 2000 Corroboree and its series of Bridge Walks around the nation, which saw hundreds of thousands of non-Aboriginal Australians walk in support of Aboriginal people.

In 1990, the Hawke Government also established the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission (ATSIC) which, until its disbandment in 2005 by the Howard Government, brought the Aboriginal standpoint into greater prominence in the non-Aboriginal media. Although heavily criticised on a

range of fronts, this Aboriginal-elected representative body provided a national Aboriginal voice at the highest level for a decade and a half, providing regular commentary on Aboriginal issues.

In 1992 the High Court of Australia ruled in *Mabo v Queensland (No. 2)* that the common law of Australia recognised Native Title to land and in 1993 *The Native Title Act* was established. Despite the ongoing struggle over Native Title played out in the ensuing years via the *Wik Peoples v Queensland 1996* case and the Howard Government's *Native Title Amendment Act 1998 (Cth)*, ordinary non-Aboriginal Australians indicated support through Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR). This organisation provided public education to promote support for co-existence with Native Title, beginning in 1997 with its Citizens Statement on Native Title petitions followed by The Sea of Hands promotions which drew hundreds of thousands of signatures from non-Aboriginal Australians[13].

Since 1996, when seven Palm Islanders won a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) case against the Queensland government over the underpayment of wages, attention has been on the broader issue of 'stolen' Indigenous wages during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders wages were underpaid, access to wages controlled and/or to varying degrees percentages paid into single funds and withheld from them. Following reparation schemes developed in Queensland in 2002 and in New South Wales in 2004, a concerted effort by Indigenous groups, some political parties, and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation culminated in a Senate Inquiry (Commonwealth of Australia 2006), opening up the issue in other States. Although, not producing a pan non-Aboriginal mobilisation, these inquiries have led to substantial uncovering of the facts of racial discrimination in

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[13] See http://www.antar.org.au/sea_of_hands

Australia and various publication of reports and historical accounts (see Kidd 2006). In 1997, the tabling of the *Bringing them home: Report on the National inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families* (Wilson, 1997), highlighted the large silence in Australian history that had left non-Aboriginal Australians unaware of the substance and the effects of past government policy over Aboriginal lives. The report made fifty-four recommendations including the importance of including the history of the stolen generations in the school curricula of all Australian students.

All these major events, and many minor local ones not cited here, broadened understanding and knowledge of Aboriginal experience across at least some sections of the Australian public, drawing attention to the strong continuing Indigenous presence and the traumatic effects of colonial and ongoing policies and practices. Of particular significance, the various inquiries and legal challenges took submissions and oral testimony from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of these laws and policies, opening up a legitimate space for silenced standpoints to be heard. Oral testimony was not always public however due to the sensitive nature of revelations and concerns for privacy. Nevertheless, the voices of Aboriginal people did move into the shared spaces of Reconciliation groups, classrooms, and the media, shifting national consciousness in the process.

Re-writing the context of Aboriginal historical experience
In the same period, much broader grounds for understanding Aboriginal standpoints on our historical experience became available in the academic, literary and artistic corpora. This reflected the changing position of Aboriginal people in a range of public and shared spaces and provided another level of context building for understanding contemporary expressions of Aboriginal identities and the erasures and exclusions of Aboriginal historical experience from the national history, imagination and consciousness. These shared spaces became important sites for renegotiating the meanings of the past in

contemporary productions. For example, in academia in 1981 when the non-Aboriginal historian Henry Reynolds published *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*, his account was such a departure from traditional frontier history he could not get a publisher to take it. It was initially published and sold by post by the history department at James Cook University of North Queensland and only after its early success did Penguin begin publishing it a year later. Although Reynolds makes use of the documented archive, he also acknowledges the influence of listening to oral history in the North Queensland region for the direction he took in his prolific career as historian. Apart from his relationships with people in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait community, in the introduction to the 2006 edition of *The Other Side of the Frontier*, he relates being struck by the account of an old man on Murray Island in the Torres Strait as he told of his ancestors scrutinising the Europeans on board a sailing ship, who were similarly looking at the Islanders through a telescope and suggests this was an important moment in shaping his approach, which at the time was an innovative departure (Reynolds 2006).

Since then, it is not uncommon practice to include the Aboriginal voice and memory in attempts to write more inclusive histories. Indeed, there has been a proliferation of such inclusive histories (e.g. Thompson 1989, Hall, 1989, Rose 1991, Sharp 1993, Osborne 1997, Nugent 2005, 2009). The growing corpus of such histories unpicks the myths of settlement and expands historical accounts by reconsidering the content of archives and the oral memory of Indigenous peoples. Importantly, this builds a broader context of Aboriginal experience through which to understand the standpoint from which contemporary Aboriginal authors write. Also adding to this corpus are Aboriginal historical accounts such as Steve Kinnane (2003) and John Maynard (2003, 2007) which centre Aboriginal perspectives and histories that were previously unknown to non-Aboriginal readers. Such works open up a context that begins to provide the conditions of a space of understanding that

accommodates Aboriginal standpoints. These are supplemented by numerous local histories and life stories of Aboriginal people and place (e.g. Kennedy 1990, Huggins & Huggins 1996, Pilkington (Garimara) 1996, Keefe 2003, Muir 2004, Henty-Gebert 2005, Cruse et al 2009, McGee-Sippel 2009). Indeed, the emergence of Aboriginal accounts and standpoints in oral testimony and renewed interest in cultural and knowledge maintenance, have seen the proliferation of new forms of Aboriginal representations in the visual and performing arts as well.

This gradual unfolding of the substance of historical injustice and its effects has brought to light for public consumption the previously subverted, silenced or invisible Aboriginal standpoints. Many of these challenge the national myths of peaceful settlement and 'protection' of passive Indigenous peoples. The relations between history and the emerging field of Aboriginal fictional literature are strong, if not fundamental, as Trees (1991 & 1992) has pointed out. The historical and social context for understanding Aboriginal fiction and narratives has arguably been building as a result. A question remains, however, whether these shifts are sufficient for building the necessary contexts for non-Aboriginal students to access contemporary Aboriginal narratives.

Contemporary Aboriginal writing
Heiss and Minter (2008, p. 2) have noted that "[f]rom the early days, writing became a tool of negotiation in which Aboriginal voices could be heard in a form that was recognisable to British authority". It is not incidental that as the continuing assertion of our politics of self-determination and historical experience from the Aboriginal standpoint infiltrates and re-shapes national consciousness, Aboriginal writing gives expression to the many facets of this historical and contemporary Aboriginal experience and presence, including in the scholarly domain across the range of relevant disciplines of the academy. It is not surprising, then, that within the narrower field of imaginative literary

expression, which is the focus of this thesis, the last two decades has seen an expansion of a field "grounded in the shared experiences of contemporary Aboriginal men and women" (Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 7).

Apart from the expansion of Aboriginal autobiographical histories outlined above, the field of fiction has seen a proliferation of Aboriginal work across the genres of poetry, social realism narrative prose, young adult fiction, plays, historical fiction, neo-traditionalism, magical realism and popular female literature genres. For example, there are now a range of Aboriginal writers publishing poetry, including Lionel Fogarty (1995, 2004 & 2007), Lisa Bellear (1996), Yvette Holt (2008), Elizabeth Hodgson (2008), Kerry Reed-Gilbert (1996, 2000 & 2002), Barbara Nicholson (2000) Jennifer Martiniello (1999, 2000 2002) and Ali Coby Eckermann (2009). There is a growing field of narrative prose in social realism represented by such authors as, for example, John Muk-Muk Burke (1994), Kim Scott (1993, 1999 & 2010), Melissa Lucashenko (1997, 1998 & 2002), Vivien Cleven (2001), Larissa Behrendt (2002, 2009), Marie Munkara (2009). Jared Thomas (2005) and Tara-June Winch (2006) have made a mark in the Young Adult fiction category.

The written genre of plays is another staging ground that builds the larger context of Aboriginal experience from our standpoints. Contemporary examples in this category include Ernie Blackmore (1999), Wesley Enoch (2007) and Leah Purcell (2002). Historical fiction is another important vehicle for representing Aboriginal standpoints and Eric Wilmot (1987) and Bruce Pascoe (1986, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 & 2007) are well-known. The Murri, Sam Watson (1990), has gained recognition for his crafting of the neo-traditionalist narrative form, and Alexis Wright (2006) similarly so for her narrative of magical realism. Anita Heiss (2007, 2008 & 2010) has explored the popular female genre in more recent times. These authors represent only some of the more well-known and recognised Aboriginal authors who are constructing the growing field of Aboriginal literature. The plots and

characters in their various productions give creative expression to a range of themes and realities emerging from within Aboriginal experience. These include generational stories of exile and longing, identity stories of becoming and home-coming, stories of urban life, mission life, small town prejudice, racial intolerance, broken lives and survival. But they also cross themes of Aboriginal dreams and aspirations, of Aboriginal success and of participation in non-Aboriginal society on Aboriginal terms.

In these forms, Aboriginal writers draw on and express the diversity, multiplicity and complexity of historical and contemporary experiences as well as individual creative urge and talent. So like non-Aboriginal authors, Aboriginal writers assume particular writing positions that emerge from the political and social context of their times and their backgrounds or experiences or interests. These shape the forms, themes and purposes for writing. Although, Aboriginal writers write from the context of their own shared Aboriginal experience, care has to be taken when considering for whom Aboriginal authors write. However, whoever Aboriginal writers purport to write for, their increasing publication and recognition as serious writers brings increased non-Aboriginal readership.

Aboriginal textual devices as signals for continuities and discontinuities
Following the analysis in this thesis, an argument can be mounted for considering the broader issue of how contemporary Aboriginal authors' various textual constructions connect or disconnect students to the meanings and representations within them, especially as some attempt to expand the means for constructing more complex representation of contemporary Aboriginality and experience. The aim here is to explore a little further whether developing meta-awareness of the ongoing presence of points of continuity and discontinuity in Aboriginal narratives, could be a useful element in a broader frame for explicit mediation of Aboriginal narratives when the wider context of Aboriginal meaning is not evident in the text.

Against the background of non-Aboriginal Australians' more recently informed understanding of the Aboriginal historical experience over the last two decades, it is easy to assume that contemporary Aboriginal writers produce their narratives in a much larger space of shared understanding between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians. While this may be so, the larger point is that contemporary writing of the Aboriginal experience is still continuous with past Aboriginal experience, even where this experience has been one of disruption. Further to this, contemporary Aboriginal experience still arguably engages a distinctly different perception of and experience in the world. On the other hand, it also cannot be assumed that non-Aboriginal students do have a more informed understanding of Aboriginal historical experience or are now more attuned to the presence of Aboriginal standpoints in Australian history, literature and the arts. Many still remain unaware of recent revelations of Aboriginal historical experience and are unengaged with the broad field of the Aboriginal arts, which include a wide range of visual, performing and literary arts. Some Aboriginal narratives will therefore be more accessible than others. Considering an additional analytical lens for application to Aboriginal narratives may be useful for widening the access points to the meanings within when the gap between assumed knowledge and the situational context and Aboriginal characterisation produces disengagement by readers.

Building meta-awareness of the different ways that Aboriginal authors provide sufficient or insufficient context for readers to transit the gap between familiar and unfamiliar representations may enable readers to be more alert to the ways all authors assume and construct meanings that are continuous or discontinuous with readers' different member resources for making sense of a narrative. For example, in Anita Heiss's novels, *Not Meeting Mr Right*, (2007), *Avoiding Mr Right* (2008) and *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010), it is not difficult to discern what makes these an 'easy read'. Heiss targets a female audience and her novels build a context easily recognised by both the

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readership. She builds the situational context around work, travel, romance and falling in and out of love. These familiar themes draw her reading audience into the life of her central protagonist, Lauren Lucas, who is a young urban Aboriginal woman. Many readers can relate to the dilemmas and trials that Lauren has with dating, with work, with travel and friends. This then opens up the space within Heiss's narratives for Lauren to make social and political statements from an Aboriginal standpoint, which readers may not be familiar with. Because readers are already disposed to empathise with Lauren, such statements become more palatable and less resisted. Thus the familiar situational context of work, family and romantic relations, the familiar discursive modes associated with assertive, smart, 'chic lit' writing and the tenor of communication, which manages to remain light-hearted while engaging more serious elements of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contemporary relations, provides enough points of continuity with non-Aboriginal women to provide access to the standpoint of a young Aboriginal woman. The young Aboriginal woman is the connection point to wider and deeper meanings of Aboriginal experience and relations that inform contemporary relations, which she provides. For the same reasons, Heiss's work connects with the experiences of other urban educated Aboriginal women who can identify with the contradictions present in the contemporary urban Aboriginal lived space. The space for making a 'common' sense of the narrative is sufficient continuity with familiar meanings within the situational context in order to consider new meanings. Awareness of what enables an 'easy read' may alert readers to the role that assumed knowledge plays in their own reading. This in turn raises awareness of the significance of the differences in techniques of Aboriginal authors, as well as member resources, for the way readers relate to a narrative.

Larissa Behrendt's more serious narrative *Home* (2004) which won the David Unaipon Award in 2002 was directed at a mixed audience. Indeed, Behrendt (2010) has reported that the Howard Government's treatment of the Stolen

Generations, post 1997, prompted her to write her fictionalised narrative, which expresses one family's inter-generational experience of the removal of children. Once again, this is an accessible narrative written from the Aboriginal standpoint. Her central character Candice embodies both points of continuity and discontinuity between the familiar and unfamiliar representations of Aboriginality and the known and unknown of Aboriginal historical experience. Her non-Aboriginal readers connect with her as she returns from study abroad and as the face of the young upwardly mobile urban Aboriginal professional. When the narrative unfolds and moves away from the metropolis as she takes a journey with her father back to her ancestral country, readers take the journey with Candice who is attempting to reconcile her present with the history of her family, in particular the removal of her grandmother. Readers are positioned to empathise with Candice's feelings of incompleteness and her desire to re-connect with her extended family and her past. Like Morgan's narrative, the journey is a literary device which eases the reader into the world of less familiar experience and meaning. What may be less clear to non-Aboriginal reading audiences is the broken style of the narrative which is deliberate and is representative of the broken links with the past as a result of colonisation. Drawing attention to such a device deepens reader's understanding of structural ways Aboriginal authors symbolise the discontinuities in our own worlds wrought by colonial disruption.

In contrast, Kim Scott's narratives are examples that are much more challenging for readers. *Benang From the Heart* (1999) also retraces a family history and ancestry that has been denied to Harley, the central character. The narrator tells a story through a series of circular narratives that intertwine. The narrative is not chronological. Rather, it is structured in spatial not temporal terms. The spatial way of telling the story relates to notions of Aboriginality that non-Aboriginal audiences are not familiar with. The narrator of *Benang* tells the story from a hovering or floating perspective. From an Aboriginal

standpoint, the hovering or floating is also an important metaphor for Harley's lack of connection with his Aboriginal ancestry. Other aspects of Scott's style make the narrative challenging. Alongside official histories and documents in the colonial archive, Scott positions the stories of the cultural oppression of his Noongar ancestors. He deliberately deploys the use of understatement to do this and in the process, Aboriginal meanings are more difficult for non-Aboriginal readers to access if the context of Aboriginal historical experience and culture is not understood. Understatement within the text is an intended metaphor for subversion and silencing of his people, but this is not necessarily obvious to non-Aboriginal readers who are unaware of this silencing and the textual evidence of it. Understatement also represents the quiet resilience of Aboriginal people within the narrative. More importantly, the telling of stories in a guarded and secretive fashion is a survival technique for Aboriginal people that Scott is centralising. The telling of stories of his ancestors may appear broken and incoherent but this too is a metaphor for the lived experience of his Aboriginal ancestors. That is, Scott creates gaps in the narrative, which appear sometimes as unfinished or broken stories and this too is symbolic of the broken lives and unfinished stories of the people he describes. To appreciate the nuanced meanings in Scott's narrative, considerable explication of Aboriginal meanings and the textual forms that support them, are required to assist readers.

Despite his use of textual forms which give support to meanings that can be assumed in the Aboriginal domain, predictably, Scott's use of the colonial archive has received attention from the critics. Lisa Slater for example, noted that:

> Despite Scott's intention of retrieving Indigenous identity from colonial writing he has spoken of grounding himself in the colonial archives during the process of writing *Benang*. Paradoxically, that which he is attempting to disclaim acts as a 'strange guide'. (2008, p. 1)

Scott himself states that his purpose in writing the narrative was "in part about reclamation from the printed page" (1999, p. 507). On the surface it might appear ironic that he is using the printed/written word to re-possess a heritage denied to him. However, Scott provides another example of using the master's tools to dismantle the mater's house (Lorde, 1984). Non-Aboriginal readers in particular, are positioned to contemplate colonial histories and representations of Aboriginal people and to question their own beliefs and attitudes that have been informed thus far by colonial history. Included in the narrative as well are confronting representations of white male sexuality constructed as racist and misogynist. All these aspects of this particular narrative signal important points that impede access and comprehension of the meanings within. Scott builds in no context for his readers, it just happens and the text stands on its own terms. However, the text is layered and rich and deserves persistence. How and what contextual and textual mediation needs to be brought to its reading therefore requires considerable thought.

A decade later, Scott's latest novel *That Dead Man Dance* (2010) was released. The narrative charts the early years of white settlement in Western Australia and is told through multiple voices such as convicts, settlers, soldiers and children, but the central voice is that of the Noongar people. Once again the novel is challenging to readers. For example, The *Canberra Times* reviewer, Diane Stubbings reported in an early review of the narrative that she was challenged by the narrative "that re-examines our (meaning non-Aboriginal) receptiveness to 'the words, songs and stories' of Aboriginal people" (2010, p. 23). Contemplating the source of her difficulties in initially embracing the novel, Stubbings reports:

> I wondered whether it wasn't because of the language's recurrent drift into cadences and constructions of Aboriginal English - here, the English language as filtered through the consciousness of the Nyoongar people of Western Australia that I was finding the novel so difficult so difficult to embrace. (2010, p. 23)

Stubbings also noted that underpinning Scott's narrative was a "delineation of stories told by 'tongue' and those told by 'paper'" (2010, p. 23). She makes the point that as a non-Aboriginal reader this "telling reinforces my own deficiencies as a reader" (2010, p. 23). Although Stubbings acknowledged that "[i]n telling this story, Scott composed some wonderful set pieces" (2010, p. 23), at the end of the review she points out that:

> ...there is a tendency for the language to get caught up in itself and scenes where more than a number of characters are present often become confusing in their telling. And it is these minor distractions of wayward language and grammar, narration and focus that, in the end undermine what is otherwise a fine novel. (2010, p. 23)

It needs to be noted that one possible achievement of the field of Aboriginal writing has been to establish its departure from non-Aboriginal writing and render this critic aware of the limits of her reading position. But what also needs to be noted is that what are 'minor distractions' for Stubbings, as a non-Aboriginal reader, are integral to the telling of this story from an Aboriginal standpoint. Kress (1985) pointed out that the appearance of certain texts can change the way other texts are read in the future. That this text does not conform to reader expectation enables it to be less compromised from its own cultural standpoint. Scott launches his readers into a Noongar context, which is valid and necessary for the story to unfold and re-write history. The narrative is challenging because the Aboriginal meanings within it are assumed rather than provided. Without any context, Scott's meanings, representations and symbols are at the very least likely to remain elusive and at the most could inspire resistance in some because they cannot relate to the language and characterisation from this particular Aboriginal standpoint. Awareness of the textual forms and devices that signal continuities and discontinuities of meaning provides important points for readers to understand the challenges and important signals for mediators to provide sufficient context.

In 2006, Alexis Wright's second novel, *Carpentaria* appeared in the genre of magical realism. Wright's choice of this genre to tell an Aboriginal story is significant and needs to be explored to develop meta-awareness of author's dispositions to provide or not provide access to shared contexts of understanding. Use of mythology is a central feature of magical realism. Wright blends elements of the mythological and magical into a realist setting and presents it as being straightforward or 'normal'. What Wright is doing here is situating Aboriginality outside of and beyond conventional European definitions and explanations of Aboriginal peoples and culture and her work challenges non-Aboriginal readers to consider the knowledge encoded in traditional beliefs and oral narratives. The novel alternates from realism to the magical and has a contemporary setting in a small town in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Carpentaria exposes an Aboriginal standpoint on a number of issues, which are not new, such as Aboriginal deaths in custody, race-based violence, substance abuse, poverty and exclusion. However, the perspective Wright centralises is not necessarily familiar to non-Aboriginal readers. For example, one of the central characters, Big Mozzie, describes the Biblical stories brought by the missionaries as "lived in someone else's desert" (C: 61) and exposes Aboriginal spirituality and connectedness that is tied to a sense of place (i.e. the town of Desperence in the Gulf of Carpentaria) as an equally valid, vibrant and lived body of knowledge. Wright narrates the story from an 'insider Aboriginal perspective' which makes the situational and cultural context of the story less accessible to non-Aboriginal reading audiences. Similarly neo-traditionalist narratives (e.g. Watson 1990) employ forms and meanings that reach back into cultural knowledge systems. These also require mediation to tease out the assumed knowledge that underpins the Aboriginal standpoint within. Awareness of assumed knowledge underpinning textual forms, symbols and situational content and characterisation extends ways of reading Aboriginal narratives.

In these recent narratives by Aboriginal writers, Aboriginality emerges at the end of all with an agency, resilience and connectedness to places and people. While all deal in some form or other with colonial damage, they all send a clear message that Aboriginality is a continuing state of existence in urban, regional and remote settings which now demands a voice in contemporary colonial times. These are positive aspects of narratives that re-write Aboriginal representations of earlier times contained within the non-Aboriginal literary imagination. These examples also begin to reveal how readers are differently positioned to access the possible meanings within them. The more an author's situational context and themes provide shared spaces of experiential understanding and textual forms to connect non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal readers, the more accessible it is likely to be. However, in instances where Aboriginal authors depart from shared spaces of understanding or from conventional literary forms, the greater the challenge for non-Aboriginal readers. Building awareness of Aboriginal author's different approaches helps to develop meta-awareness of the significance of the assumed knowledge base of readers and how non-Aboriginal readers' member resources limits access to and interpretation of the deeper, more complex Aboriginal representations and standpoints in these narratives.

Summary

Aboriginal writers present the unfamiliar Aboriginal subject for particular and varying purposes. Accessing these unfamiliar representations is challenging when the context of Aboriginal knowledge and historical and contemporary experience from the Aboriginal standpoint is still not part of the shared commonsense or consciousness. Like all authors, many Aboriginal authors write from a standpoint that assumes their own locale or broader cultural and experiential context as already understood. The degree to which Aboriginal authors provide or do not provide sufficient 'context' to transit non-Aboriginal readers into the 'new fold of Aboriginal meaning' needs to be a focus when exploring Aboriginal narratives in classroom contexts. The

diverse expressions of Aboriginal standpoints which emerge from within Aboriginal authors' varying continuity with, or creative interest in, Aboriginal knowledge, histories, oral forms and particular experiences of colonialism or contemporary social location can be brought to the surface through a broader consideration of the field of contemporary Aboriginal writing and the various styles and departures employed.

The investigation of all the narratives in this thesis, whether colonial or contemporary or whether written by non-Aboriginal or Aboriginal authors, has evidenced that explicating the tacit assumptions that underpin representations of the Aboriginal position, is useful for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to understand the positioning of Aboriginal subjects that occurs in the relations between writers, their narratives and readers. The analytical frame applied to these narratives suggests that explication of the writer's assumed context/audience is an important element and that this can be brought to the surface by considering: the writing positions and purposes of writing that emerge from particular author's backgrounds, experiences and intentions; the particular moments in the historical trajectory they write in (the context of change); engagement of the wider critical and intellectual discourse that attempts to situate and interpret the meanings of Aboriginal representations; and the actual narrative textual formations and how they work to position readers and produce (or not produce) an expanded space for different text-reader relations.

This suggests that in thinking about the challenges of Aboriginal representations for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, educators need to reflect on their pedagogical techniques for drawing in two major contextual fields. The first is the larger historical context that has conditioned the Aboriginal experience. This was silenced in colonial literature and remains difficult for non-Aboriginal authors to represent (see, for example, Miley 2006). Silenced Aboriginal standpoints are now being drawn into the official

Australian history, academic and artistic corpora and slowly expanding the space of shared understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The second is the emergence of textual spaces in Aboriginal narratives where the meanings of Aboriginal experience can be contemplated. These textual spaces are expanding as reflected in the diverse range of situational contexts and styles of Aboriginal writing now being published. These macro and micro forms of analysis if worked in tandem can position educators in the shared teaching space to more confidently assist both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to a deeper engagement of Aboriginal representations in Australian literature through a meta-awareness of how texts/narratives are produced and how authors come to construct Aboriginal representations as the subject of their literary imagination.

THESIS REFLECTION

This thesis began with an interest in thinking more deeply about a problem encountered in my higher education teaching of Australian literature that includes representations of the Aboriginal subject. The problem emerged around the challenges for non-Aboriginal students when confronted with Aboriginal narratives that include unfamiliar representations of Aboriginal subjects and experience. My attempts to extend non-Aboriginal students' readings of such representations often result in resistance, refusal and sometimes distress, when counter-readings from the Aboriginal standpoint are brought into the discussion.

What I initially considered to be a related but separate problem also emerges in classrooms when Aboriginal students confront the representations of Aboriginal characters, societies and experiences by non-Aboriginal authors. These can cause anger and distress and rejection of what such literature has to offer Aboriginal students interested in fuller understanding of the historical context of contemporary Australian society that gives shape to the Aboriginal presence within the literary imagination. As an Aboriginal lecturer, this was for me a less frustrating and so less pressing issue at the commencement of this thesis. However, in the attempt to find ways to understand the challenges for non-Aboriginal students, I have also had to reflect more deeply on the ways that Aboriginal students come to read confronting textual representations of the Aboriginal subject and respond to non-Aboriginal readings of Aboriginal texts.

The theoretical frame and textual analysis applied in this thesis has allowed me to re-consider the classroom as a site for the mediation and negotiation of multiple readings of texts and narratives. It is these multiple readings by

differently located individuals that produce contests over the meaning of the Aboriginal presence in the literary imagination. These contests are increasingly evidenced and expressed in the schisms between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readings/writings both in classrooms and in the intellectual discourse to which Aboriginal academics and authors now contribute and which students are required to engage.

In classrooms where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are both present and are required to read literary Aboriginal representations by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal authors, students are often engaged in what are understood as larger narratives of Australian settlement, nation and identity. The contests which often emerge around different standpoints on colonial history and the contemporary Aboriginal condition can be divisive, produce unpleasant personal (rather than intellectual) arguments, or lead to the silent alienation of members of both cohorts. Often the outcome of these tensions is students' disengagement from particular narratives that cause discomfort or directly challenge students' worldviews. Such situations are counter-productive to the very purpose of studying Australian literature that includes representations of the Aboriginal subject. As Trees (1991) points out, Australian literature by Aboriginal authors who represent Aboriginal experience from their vantage point, emerge as counter-histories of Aboriginal subjection that have remained untold and outside the official national memory archive and the literary imagination of non-Aboriginal authors. On the other hand, my investigations have revealed that over periods of time representations of Aboriginal subjects by non-Aboriginal authors have often been crafted in well-intended efforts to disrupt non-Aboriginal consciousness of the meaning of the Aboriginal presence for the national narrative and the national imagination at the time of writing.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal experience should ideally be able to be considered by both cohorts of students in the

mutual spirit of gaining broader insight into the complex, contested, and layered history of contemporary Australian society, including what that means for the displaced but continuing Aboriginal presence. Classrooms are in one sense a microcosm of the wider society *viz.*, shared spaces where conflicting and unbalanced accounting for the past still impacts on relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. How these sorts of unbalanced situations are managed in higher education classrooms is critical to the task of extending students' access points to the unfamiliar meanings within and around narratives that include Aboriginal representations. Arguably, without this, the Aboriginal reality as experienced and expressed from our Aboriginal standpoint remains elusive and inaccessible to non-Aboriginal Australians.

If I could lay claim to one successful aspect of this thesis, it is that not only do I have a much more complex understanding of the possibilities present in a range of narrative texts to assist non-Aboriginal students to access and embrace the spirit of unfamiliar Aboriginal representations. I have also come to consider that this understanding is as potentially valuable for assisting Aboriginal students to engage, in thoughtful extended but less personally-invested ways, both the distressing aspects of representations of Aboriginal subjects of non-Aboriginal imagination and instances of non-Aboriginal students' refusal to accommodate Aboriginal standpoints. The approach I have taken has revealed the limits of all standpoints expressed in textual formations and the constraints on all readers to move beyond these limits and this provides me, as an Aboriginal teacher, with a more productive perspective for managing classroom contest.

This was a less expected outcome of the investigation and reflects the shift in my own thinking that is an outcome of this study. This shift has largely occurred in the way I can now re-conceptualise the space between familiar and unfamiliar meanings. When I began my exploration of suitable theory for my study, I saw this transition quite clearly as a one-way and quite linear

cognitive movement that I thought non-Aboriginal students needed to make in order to recognise the absence/presence of Aboriginal standpoints of our experience and to accept more unfamiliar ones. I still see this space as one concerned with transition and movement between the familiar and unfamiliar aspects of Aboriginal representation: there are barriers that impede non-Aboriginal students' access to unfamiliar representations. But now, at the end of this thesis, I would argue that the movement and transition process is a fluid and shifting one that suggests that to engage readers to consider unfamiliar meanings requires allowing them to move back and forth across contested terrains of meaning. While writers attempt to extend meaning into unfamiliar terrain, it remains for readers to interpret and re-construct their own meanings by responding to the signals in the text and drawing on their own knowledge and resources for meaning-making. In the narratives under investigation in this study, the contested terrain of meaning emerges as a condition of reading narratives that draw together non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal subjects into a common space. These conditions are able to be made explicit via a consideration of the possibilities presented in a single narrative (or across a selection of narratives) to produce multiple readings from varying analytical standpoints by multiple readers. That is, the literal meaning in the narrative is not immutable but is produced in infinite instances of interpretation through the ways that readers come to the text and are positioned by it to make sense of its meanings from their particular vantage point and social location.

The expressive-interpretive relations of writing-reading, then, become a significant point of interest that requires explicit attention in classrooms. While what is within the text of the narrative is the primary site of discussion, drawing out what is around the narrative or rendered invisible becomes part of the analytical task. This includes all those aspects illuminated in the investigations of the narratives in this thesis: historical and social contexts, authorial intentions and backgrounds, and the critical analysis of narratives

that signal to students' particular, various, and evolving ways of interpreting and analysing the narrative under investigation. This is in addition to explicit attention to the textual signals and forms used – narrative structure, genres, linguistic choices and use of descriptors and (stereo)types, availability and use of discourses of representation, voice (who is allowed to speak), narrative turns and character development and agency (who is allowed to be present and/or act or indeed survive), for example. All these aspects constitute in some way the conditions for readers and vary according to what emerges as significant to the production of a particular narrative.

The different sets of conditions in different narratives require an analytical approach that can reveal them and this implies that the aspects of textual formations that are significant to both the production of the narrative and the production of the reading need to be brought into classroom discussion. This underlines that the search is not for the 'true' meaning of any narrative, but what shapes the way readers find their own meanings. The presence in classrooms of students from diverse social locations, who bring their own member resources to the act of reading, highlights the significance of the reader to the interpretation of the meanings in the narrative. This provides the grounds for viewing and using 'contests' as a means to extend all students' capacities to locate continuities and discontinuities with familiar and unfamiliar representations as they consider the many possible meanings in the narrative.

However, there is an important specific element of this approach that I suggest is critical to my role as an Aboriginal teacher. My role becomes one oriented to drawing in and placing into the mix of interpretative frames that students variously draw on, additional Aboriginal analytical standpoints of the narrative in question. Or at the least, my role becomes one of designing strategic questioning of aspects of the narrative/text to unsettle assumed or established meanings. However, following my findings in this thesis,

developed through the analytical journey in my narrative investigations, the aim is to expand students' literary analysis but not to install mine or an alternative Aboriginal one as the only way or better way to read. That is, to impose or expect students to produce or subscribe to an 'Aboriginal' reading of a narrative is to attempt to contain and control their reading – an unrealistic quest that invites resistance, refusal, and disengagement. However, to ask leading questions of a narrative's textual form and situational and cultural context and to produce and/or introduce different, Aboriginal readings of the Aboriginal representations of authors is to expose and demonstrate the existence of other (and Aboriginal) 'member resources' or knowledge sets, interpretative frames, and hence critical skills. The objective is to expand students' ways of engaging with narratives by expanding their skills and resources for developing their own more informed analytical repertoires. In this way the unfamiliar can be brought into a space for recognition, as giving representation to something not previously contemplated. The unfamiliar becomes an aspect of the text that requires consideration in order to engage the fuller terrain of meaning produced and available through multiple readings. Thus students are encouraged to develop not just as isolated, individual literal readers of texts/narratives. They are encouraged as well to recognise themselves as readers/analysers of text, context and subtext, who are already predisposed to read with allegiances to particular analytical frames that represent their location in and orientation to the world. In the process, students are enabled as readers to become more attuned to the various interpretative frameworks applied in critical and literary analysis and why some appeal more than others. For narratives that include Aboriginal representations, these interpretive frames may be opened up to include Aboriginal analysis as against or aided by but distinct from, for example, ideological, feminist, or post-colonial analysis. In turn, this shift in approach produces another beneficial outcome, which is extension of the critical intellectual discourse around the representation of the Aboriginal subject in literature that students are required to engage in the course of their programs.

However, for me, the success of the analytical frame that has emerged in the approach taken to my study is the focus placed on writing/reading relations. By revealing why and how a narrative produces multiple readings arguably assists students to contemplate why they take up a particular reading position or relation to the text. They can understand their own reading as produced in their relation to the text or as a function of their relation to the text and therefore a very particular reading of the text, shaped by a range of textual and contextual factors both within and around the text. This allows an engagement of alternate readings without requiring students to abandon their own and in the process helps to depersonalise the contests over meaning because all students are positioned by narratives in different ways according to what Kress (1985) calls member resources. All students develop a sense of their own agency as readers and are pushed to identify their own reading position and provide the textual evidence in any analysis they put forward in discussion or assessment. Thus two-sided contests over the 'truth' of what an author literally means are displaced in favour of more informed understanding of how narratives work to produce readings which cohere with readers' allegiances to different analytical frames for 'reading' the world—frames that often fail to account for Aboriginal realities as experienced from within our own standpoints.

A large part of the shift in my own thinking over the course of this thesis was enabled through the approach I took to my investigation. I chose to concentrate on the relations between authors, narratives, and readers, with a focus on how a reader is positioned by the author's textual choices for presenting, situating and using the Aboriginal subject in the narrative. This allowed a focus on the actual textual formations and conditions that convey an unfolding narrative that, by its conclusion, has said what the author wants to say. Attention to the textual communication theorists in this area (for example, Halliday & Hasan 1985, Kress 1985, Fairclough 1989 and Muecke 1992) was extremely productive for my purposes, especially for the purpose

of probing below the surface level of narratives and their more literal meanings and for understanding writing and reading as social practice.

There has been a very positive aspect to this method, which I failed to fully appreciate at the outset. In an attempt to understand the reader's relation to the text, I chose to maintain the focus on what the text of each narrative does, rather than place a focus on the attitudes or characteristics of students and their cultural/social/educational/political locations, which might give shape to and explain their particular readings. The frustration that led me to undertake this thesis, did position me initially towards finding a way to achieve 'attitudinal change' in non-Aboriginal students. However, my method deliberately did not make students a site of investigation or the locus of attitudinal change to the presence/absence/construction of Aboriginal people in Australian literature. This helped me to reduce the temptation to 'enter the contest' and take sides. It also helped me to resist the urge to continually speculate about how the category of 'non-Aboriginal reader' might interpret the meanings of particular textual formations and choices in narratives and to avoid the inference that their readings of Aboriginal narratives are singular, lacking or in need of remedy. Rather, I focus on the features and conditions of the text that may limit and constrain the sorts of engagements with unfamiliar representations that any or all students are able to produce in their interactions with the narrative. The result has been a much better understanding on my part of all students and how they are positioned as readers. This has enabled the focus on students (and how they read) to be reconsidered primarily in terms of the role of the teacher/lecturer as a facilitator of learning about how texts work and as a mediator of the contested terrain of meanings available within and around the text/narrative relations and through the associated field of critical intellectual discourse.

It is in this way that I have been able to discuss in each Chapter some implications for teaching without straying so far as to situate these

implications within educational theory and practice. The learning focus for students as readers remains firmly centred on what sort of closer readings of the text might be useful to draw in the surrounding situational and cultural contexts and invisible sub-texts of narratives to assist discussions of the multiple readings produced in classrooms by a diversity of students. In this way, the method of investigation has emerged as a useful tool with implications for the teaching process. However, at the same time, these limited claims for teaching process do not prevent consideration of further research, particularly in relation to the efficacy of any strategies applied in classrooms, nor indeed for the development of a better theory for reading at the Cultural Interface where contests of meaning emerge and produce conflicts, ambiguity, ambivalence, and difficult to resolve tensions.

Apart from my theoretical approach to the textual and contextual analysis of narratives/texts, I was assisted in my methodological approach by two other areas of consideration that also require reflection in this concluding Chapter. The first was my consideration of Nakata's Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint theory (2007a, 2007b & Nakata et al 2008). These ways of theorising have been essential for a number of reasons. Theorising the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations constructed in narratives in these ways continually alerted me to the dichotomous construction/reading of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations in narratives that include Aboriginal representations. Analytically, there is a strong temptation to respond to these constructions by conceptualising the space between familiar and unfamiliar representations as a chasm or disjuncture that simply requires a one-way bridge to reposition non-Aboriginal students on the other 'Aboriginal' side of the 'gap'. Cultural Interface theory was useful to resist this deficit proposition and instead to conceptualise the 'gap' between familiar and unfamiliar as a space for recognition and contemplation of the complex relations and unresolved tensions that exist there. That is, the space itself became a site of exploration rather than something to jump my students over. This enabled

me to view my non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students as readers and interlocutors looking into the same space from different positions. Although perhaps subject to different enablers and constraints when reading familiar/unfamiliar Aboriginal representations, both cohorts of students can be similarly unaware of how narratives and texts work to position reading subjectivities.

This theorising also continually reminded me of the need to consider the complexities that are stitched over and denied in the process of constructing and reading from 'oppositions' of difference in narratives/texts. These complexities disappear within simplicities and silences – what is not said in what is said – and emerge as gaps in understanding and/or as sites of ignorance and misunderstanding that emerge finally in polarised contest. In the process, the points of continuity and discontinuity in meanings for both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal readers, that provide the grounds for uncovering and suspending the familiar and contemplating the unfamiliar are overlooked rather than engaged. The ambiguities and nuances of meaning that might be brought into play in cross-cultural encounters where many voices are present (but not all are allowed to speak) remain unexplored as a condition of reading past and ongoing cross-cultural encounters. Thus the ambiguities and the myriad minor contests of meaning that are essential to considering the uncertainty and complexity of meaning in shared spaces of inter-subjective production are lost and in the process the entry point for engaging with and incorporating the unfamiliar is closed off rather than opened up.

However, when the containment of familiar Aboriginal subjects within authors' choices, within discursive boundaries and via textual formations is revealed, some evidence emerges to understand that text-reader relations are produced in a space that also contains the possibility of disruption of these familiar discursive boundaries and the opening up of the containment of

meanings. By highlighting these disruptions or points of disjuncture, the evidence can be found of continuities and discontinuities with familiar meanings as new unfamiliar meanings are held open for contemplation. This requires drawing in critical readings from different standpoints, including, in the case of this study, Aboriginal standpoints.

However, the value of Nakata's theorising is that it opens up the possibilities for much more than a singular alternate Aboriginal reading as the 'truth' of any Aboriginal narrative, analysis or standpoint. His theorising insists on recognising the presence of, in the case of my study, multiple Aboriginal readings and writings, as the expression of diverse Indigenous experiences at the interface of Indigenous-Western domains. However, in Aboriginal writing and analysis can be discerned both common and cumulative themes that require drawing out (and naming and relating) to assist readers' recognition of myriad and diverse instances of a larger shared Aboriginal experience able to be read politically as the result of Aboriginal dispossession and displacement. Recognition of Aboriginal standpoints that emerge through an Aboriginal author's control over Aboriginal agency and voice in narratives provides an encompassing but not singular interpretative and analytical frame to consider previously uncontemplated terrains of meaning. This helps to scaffold for students new points of coherence as they engage and attempt to comprehend the unfamiliar. Applying this interpretive frame also guards against any claim to dismiss Aboriginal narrative as merely representing 'individual' experience or as individual interpretation of a social reality that is not representative of the larger reality of historical, contemporary (to the narrative) and ongoing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations.

This is helpful for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students because the task becomes one of recognising that standpoints and reading positions can emerge from outside their own frames for understanding and relating to the world. This may be enough to unsettle the singularities of meaning that give

coherence to their own readings and loyalties in literary and critical analysis of narratives. This unsettling of the singularising polarised positions arguably holds potential to predispose students to engage the possibility of a more complex terrain of meanings. For Aboriginal students, this approach is also valuable because they are able to understand what constrains or enables particular non-Aboriginal readings of the world and to reconsider how to navigate them more productively for their own benefit. This is an important aspect of enabling Aboriginal students to develop analysis that speaks back to the non-Aboriginal audience that often attempts to dismiss or diminish their readings as somehow unfair or unbalanced. Understanding the limits of their fellow students opens up the spaces that require explication and persuasive argumentation.

Nakata's theorising supports the notion of textual spaces that Muecke (1992) articulates. However, in my study, the application of Nakata's theorising has enabled a move beyond what this means for constructions of Aboriginality. It has brought forward the possibility of welcoming multiple readings to better reveal continuities and discontinuities between familiar and unfamiliar representations of the Aboriginal subject - both from the different vantage points of authors writing positions and the different vantage points of readers. This points up the value of understanding how readers are positioned by the text and how writers are also positioned by the available discourses and social contexts of their time and of the times which they give representation to through their narratives. Readers particularly are variously constrained or enabled to notice or not notice particular representations (and the absence of others). Similarly, readers are variously constrained or enabled to notice or not notice the discursive logic that binds them in an allegiance to a particular thread through a narrative - whether it be theme, plot, character development or whatever - that makes the text coherent through the meanings they make as readers. This promotes the potential for classrooms to welcome, rather than shut down, a more interactive and open-ended process of contemplating

the meanings and effects of Aboriginal representations in Australian narratives/texts.

Another aspect of the methodology that has been helpful to this inquiry was consideration of the intellectual critical discourse on Aboriginal representations in the Australian literature. In each textual study, I have explored some of the critical responses. This is useful to understand acceptance, rejection, and controversies that emerged around the selected texts. Each text was selected in part because they were considered to have moved the Aboriginal subject within non-Aboriginal consciousness. However, from an Aboriginal standpoint, discussion in the critical literature reveals something else: the limits of the critical discourse that excludes Aboriginal readings of the text. Thus the evolution of the intellectual discourse mirrors to some extent the evolution of how authors use the Aboriginal subject for their own purposes and how the presence of Aboriginal authors and academics infiltrates and expands both the field of representation and the intellectual discourse. A 1980s feminist analysis of *A Fringe of Leaves*, for example, can be expected to offer different insights and contests than a post-colonial one produced in the 2000s and different again from an Aboriginal one that is able to draw on descending oral memory of the Eliza Frazer event.

The presence of the intellectual discourse, then, is an important resource for students, which evidences the multiple interpretative frames through which a narrative can be analysed for its 'meaning'. At the same time, the intellectual discourse evidences the multiple readings produced by any one narrative and is a reminder to students about the limits of singular, individual reading positions that refuse mediation via other ways of reading. This highlights the conditional nature of reading, the way meaning is constructed in the interaction with the text, the multiplicities of meaning that any one text can

produce and the value in engaging with other readings to tease out one's own reading relation to the text.

However, there is a temptation to read the Aboriginal contribution to the intellectual discourse as representing a singular alternative analytical frame for interpretation and as always in opposition to the non-Aboriginal discourse. Explorations of the critical discourse undertaken in this thesis enable me to argue the intellectual discourse reveals no such clean lines and boundaries. Aboriginal critics contest the meaning of the work of Aboriginal authors, as much as non-Aboriginal critics variously support, defend and differ from Aboriginal critics. Historically, the critical discourse arguably assumes a non-Aboriginal reading audience and also maintains a certain authority in interpreting and analysing what a narrative/text means for Aboriginal subjects. The critical discourse of Aboriginal authors and academics is often constructed as counter-analysis. This counter-analysis is essential in shifting the critical discourse but arguably it also requires development on its own terms into a more positive thesis. As it stands, some Aboriginal counter-analysis, while essential to uncover another way of reading a text, does not necessarily expand insights into the complexities of Aboriginal subjectivities at the Cultural Interface where both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal positions are considered in relation to each other - ambiguities and contradictions of meaning, blurred boundaries, confusion, ambivalence, for example. Thus Aboriginal counter-analysis can position a singular reading as authoritative on behalf of the Aboriginal collective rather than working to enrich the field of possible meanings that can emerge from an Aboriginal interpretative frame. In particular, counter-analysis that lays claim to how non-Aboriginal people read Aboriginal representations attempts to invert but does not displace polarised simplistic stereotypical writing/readings that emerge from the black/white binaries. So, while counter-analysis is a critical form of contest that can open up extended analysis, the critical discourse may also have to recognise the challenges associated with both writing and reading more

complex representations that evidence diverse Aboriginal realities. In spaces where boundaries are blurred and unclear and continuities and discontinuities are brought to light, the critical discourse may also have to incorporate more complex analytical frames that recognise the complexities of Aboriginal experience *vis a vis* Australian society. This is arguably increasingly significant in university classrooms where new generations of Aboriginal students bring their own meanings formed around what it means to be Aboriginal in the Twenty-first Century into the frame of reading/interpretation. The agency of these readers needs recognition if they are to explore the meanings of historical Aboriginal experience in the spirit of extended inquiry rather than have these imposed via the community regimes of identity regulation that surround them. This is critical if Aboriginal academia is to assist the production of critical, reflective Aboriginal social inquirers and thinkers.

To sum up, the central revelations to emerge from my explorations in this thesis require me firstly to emphasise that how Aboriginal academics/educators assist all students in their reading of Aboriginal representations in historical and contemporary Australian literature is critical to extending students' engagement with unfamiliar interpretations and representations in non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal narratives. However, how Aboriginal academics as teachers go about this is critical also to the sorts of conversations and relations that can emerge between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the shared space of university classrooms. From an Aboriginal perspective, and to paraphrase Nakata's (1993) statement in the introduction to this thesis in a somewhat extended way, what all these readers/learners need most is an understanding of the political nature of the representation of the Aboriginal position (or absence) in narratives and texts. This requires more than the continual reiteration of the undisclosed Aboriginal 'side' that in itself assumes a particular situated reading of the world, and therefore of the narrative, that is already cognisant of the politics of the Aboriginal position. To grasp the politics that imbue the field of

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Aboriginal representation, all students need to be led to an understanding that as a condition of textual production no narratives are ever neutral and apolitical but express particular positions and investments by authors.

These authorial investments represent and elevate or privilege particular histories and socialities via the discursive contexts and practices drawn on to structure their creative imagination into narrative form. These positions and investments are not always evident at the surface level of textual formations but rather this surface level assumes the unspoken and unarticulated aspects of the familiar as understood and therefore accessible to the reader. A reader's social location predisposes some readers to not notice 'normalised' familiar constructions of Aboriginality nor the gaps and silences that leap out of the text for others who occupy different social locations. Where the familiar discursive constructions are not recognisable to readers, the underpinning assumptions and associations in meaning require explicit attention as the textual points that allow continuity in meanings to persist as seemingly normal and neutral. Where the unspoken and unarticulated unfamiliar cannot be accessed, because it is outside the experience of the reader, there is a textual point of incoherence or discontinuity in meaning that invites a reader's resistance or refusal. These points also need to be brought to light and recognised before new, unfamiliar meanings that are more easily accessible from the Aboriginal standpoint can be opened up, contemplated and interpreted. To become aware of these points of continuity/discontinuity as important signals of the familiar and unfamiliar, all students need to understand firstly how authors effect the positioning of them as readers by crafting in the signals and registers that make sense and are coherent with assumed audiences and particular ways of understanding and expressing the world of human experience. Secondly, all students need understanding of Aboriginal authors' positioning of them to engage unfamiliar Aboriginal representations and why these may be not so coherent with assumed meanings derivative of more familiar modes of Aboriginal representations. To

notice and draw out how a particular narrative assumes and positions Aboriginal subjects requires explicit development of language, methods and skills to expose the unfamiliar and invisible through an additional layer of analysis and this requires drawing in Aboriginal standpoints for consideration.

In these ways, all students come to share understanding of the assumptions that underpin discursive and textual practices, of the constraints and limits of authors who attempt to disrupt familiar meanings, of the constraints and enablers for individual writing and readings. More than this, all students are enabled to develop better language and resources through which to discern and language the evidence of the spaces of ambiguity and conflict and defend their own interpretations of the meanings in the narratives. In particular, Aboriginal students are given a process for defending and maintaining themselves and their reading of the world in the face of ignorance, denial or dismissal of their historical experience. This approach enables them to direct their analysis and arguments to the evidence in and around narratives/texts rather than via a continual return to their political and personal everyday position.

The defence of self and the continuing Aboriginal presence in Australia is at the heart of every Aboriginal reading of perceived Aboriginal misrepresentation and every refusal of Aboriginal representations of our experience. Aboriginal students deserve methods of inquiry that allow them to defend, preserve and maintain their sense of self as part of a larger Aboriginal collective and as part of the larger student collective without perpetually risking their sense of self. The development of intellectual processes that have emerged in this thesis through a focus on text-reader relations draws out the lines between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writing, reading and students and recognises them as the conditions of understanding in a shared space. In this space all insights that emerge from writers, texts and readers are a site for contemplation and consideration, and together they

construct and reflect the agency of all students to read Australian literature for wider and deeper meaning that recognises and embraces the continuing Aboriginal presence and voice.

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