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## **ABSTRACT**

Die vorliegende Dissertation beschäftigt sich mit der Analyse von Romanen, die von australischen Aboriginal Autoren verfasst wurden, und die Darstellung von Aboriginals und deren Situation in Australien am Ende des 20ten und Anfang des 21ten Jahrhundert. Diese Analyse hofft dadurch, auf die problematische und unfaire Situation aufmerksam zu machen, in der sich die indigene Bevölkerung Australiens befindet. Die Studie betrachtet politische Linien und deren Auswirkung auf die indigene Bevölkerung Australiens im historischen Kontext, in dem sie in den Werken vorkommen. Zu diesem Zweck wurden relevante politische Geschehnisse recherchiert und mit Bezug auf die Romane interpretiert. Es wurden Werke von erfolgreichen Aboriginal Autoren ausgewählt, die in ihren Romanen deutlich auf die problematische Situation ihrer Bevölkerungsgruppe hinweisen, und gleichzeitig eine bedeutende Rolle für die positive Identifizierung von Aboriginal Lesern mit den Charakteren in diesen Romanen spielen. Die Darstellung von positiven Vorbildern für die indigene Bevölkerung ist von großer Wichtigkeit, da das öffentliche Bild von Aboriginals größtenteils verzerrt ist, und daher wenig fördernd für ein positives Selbstbild der indigenen Bevölkerung ist. Alle ausgewählten Aboriginal Autoren haben einen Universitätsabschluss, und sind sich ihrer Verantwortung für ihre Gemeinschaft und für die Aufrechterhaltung ihrer Kultur bewusst. Die Romane wurden thematisch gruppiert, und deren Analyse fand unter Miteinbeziehung von politischen Gegebenheiten im Kontext statt. Diese Studie zeigt deutliche Missstände auf, die das Leben von australischen indigenen Bevölkerung erschweren. Weiters weist sie darauf hin, dass aufgrund von rassistischen Einstellungen der australischen Bevölkerung gegenüber ihren indigenen Mitbürgern großer Handlungsbedarf besteht, diese von Vorurteilen geprägten Einstellungen zu revidieren, um den Weg in eine gemeinsame Zukunft, die die Gleichstellung der indigenen Bevölkerung und gleichzeitig eine Anerkennung und Wertschätzung der Kultur der Aboriginals garantiert, zu ebnen.

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# 1. Introduction

Contemporary Indigenous Australian Literature is a tool for Indigenous writers to draw attention to the situation of Indigenous Australians in Australia today. This doctoral dissertation aims to analyse what matters are of concern for Indigenous writers and how political developments and historical aspects define the representation of contemporary Indigenous Australians and their place in contemporary Australian society. There is a general agreement that contemporary Indigenous fiction is primarily concerned with life writing and autobiographical narratives that are based on the shared experiences of Indigenous Australians. This paper, however, focuses on Indigenous Australian fiction written in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when for an increasing number of Aboriginal women writing was a means to assume cultural responsibility and express authorial independence. The Indigenous Australian writers discussed in this paper have achieved greater popularity, and their political messages are heard more often. Their messages and their stories have played a major role in my decision to select their novels for my paper. There has been no detailed study in which common, recurring themes and issues frequently tackled in contemporary Indigenous Australian fiction are analysed, issues which are the result of government policies and mainstream society's attitude. Therefore there are only a few studies connect the more general interpretations of the novels with the political situation in Australia which these novels are a reflection of. Hence, my research has been into government policies, government reports, and Indigenous academic writing that is concerned with equality and the recognition of Indigeneity.

This study of representations of Indigenous Australians in contemporary Indigenous Australian literature highlights the disadvantaged position of Indigenous Australians in mainstream society, and may, I hope, contribute to furthering the cause of the Indigenous Australian community by emphasizing the need for change and improvement. It also establishes a connection between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community as it draws attention to areas that non-Indigenous Australians may prefer to ignore and therefore support the cause of the Indigenous community.

In its first chapters, this thesis will look at the situation of Indigenous Australians in a historical context, and discuss changing government policies and Indigenous political movements that have occurred throughout the centuries. It will also give an overview of the development of Indigenous Australian literature in English as prior to colonization Indigenous communities had a tradition of oral story telling that will not be considered in this thesis. Before the analysis of the various literary works there will also be a discussion of Indigenous Australians' postulation that there is no post-colonial status quo in Australia, and therefore Indigenous Australian literature should not be considered as part of postcolonial literature. This position of Indigenous Australian writers is indicative of their determination to achieve a change in the minds of non-Indigenous Australians, who are often ignorant as to the plight of the Indigenous community. The writers want to raise awareness of their fellow Indigenous Australians' current situation and their struggles.

The selection of literature for this thesis was based on a common denominator with regard to the authors. All Indigenous Australian authors that are discussed in this thesis are university educated, and as a result have their voice heard with authority. They are aware of their special status in the Indigenous community, and their responsibility to their fellow Indigenous Australians. They write to give the Indigenous community a voice in a society which has little or no knowledge of the situation that most members of the Indigenous community are in. Their writing is essential in raising awareness about the inequality in Australian society. Moreover, their writing is important for the Indigenous community. They are role models and provide role models in their stories for an Indigenous community that is in need of such role models. I will deal with two novels each by Alexis Wright and Kim Scott for they are both winners of the Miles Franklin Award. Kim Scott was the first Indigenous author to win the award in 2000 for *Benang*, sharing it with Thea Astley, and Alexis Wright was the first Indigenous author to win the award outright in 2006 for *Carpentaria*. In addition, Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* and Kim Scott's *Benang* are partly set in the early twentieth century when assimilationist and removal policies were in place.

The grouping of the novels into chapters was determined by a thematic approach. Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997) and Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999) will be

discussed in Chapter 5 as they both focus on highlighting the fact that despite past atrocities and harsh government policies the Indigenous community is here to stay. Their novels express a sense of hope that there is a way to a future in which Indigenous self-determination is a reality. The authors present historical events from an Aboriginal perspective, and by doing so, instigate a dialogue between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community that is based on a shared knowledge of the past and the truth of what happened. This chapter will show that these novels evoke empathy for the suffering of Aboriginals, while demonstrating the role that non-Indigenous Australians played in the plight of Aboriginals, and the effects their policies had on the Indigenous community. It will also argue that self-determination of Indigenous Australians is the logical next step in the reconciliation process.

Chapter 6 will analyse Kim Scott's *True Country* (1993) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006). Both novels are set in remote areas in Australia, and present the situation of Indigenous Australians living in these remote communities. This chapter will show that remote communities struggle with various social issues, such as housing problems, conflicts with mining companies, and inadequate education that result in living conditions that can be considered on the opposite side of the spectrum from non-Indigenous Australians. It will also show that these communities are disregarded in Australia despite the fact that they are essential to Indigenous people as they allow them to remain connected to their ancestors' land.

Chapter 7 will deal with Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* (1997) and Anita Heiss's *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007). These novels depict Indigenous Australians in an urban setting, albeit at different times – there are ten years between the publication of Melissa Lucashenko's novel and Anita Heiss's novel. They depict the challenges of fairer-skinned Indigenous protagonists that have dissimilar educational and familial backgrounds. Nevertheless, this chapter will show that living in the city comes with challenges and pressures that have their root in non-Indigenous Australians preconceived ideas about Indigenous Australians. Moreover, the chapter will place emphasis on the difficult position of female Indigenous Australians in contemporary society and their struggle to lead a happy life. This chapter will show that despite different backgrounds there are many similarities between Indigenous



and non-Indigenous women which could be employed to overcome the gap between the two.

Finally, chapter 8 will look at Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* (2006) and Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song* (2005). Both novels depict their protagonists' search for identity and a place in society. This chapter will show that because of government policies that failed to take into consideration the Aboriginal connection to land and kinship, there is a generation of Indigenous people who are disconnected from their Aboriginal roots and are suffering a crisis of identity. This chapter will show that these novels are meant to give hope to other Indigenous people in a similar position while drawing attention to the inequality and racist attitudes that are still prevalent in Australian society.

This paper hopes to raise non-Indigenous Australians' awareness of the difficult situation Indigenous Australians still find themselves in at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It hopes to do so in a respectful manner.

## 2. Centuries of Struggle

After several weeks of travelling around the Australian outback in 2000 travel writer made a Bill Bryson mention of a peculiar phenomenon:

What is perhaps oddest to the outsider is that Aborigines just aren't there. You don't see them performing on TV; you don't find them assisting you in shops [...] you would expect to see them sometimes – working in a bank, delivering mail, writing parking tickets, fixing a telephone line, participating in some productive capacity in the normal workaday world. I never have; not once. Clearly some connection is not being made [...] I didn't have the faintest idea what the solution to all this was; what was required to spread the fruits of general Australian prosperity to those who seemed so signally unable to find their way to it. (Bryson 283).

Similarly, Anita Heiss argued in her essay “On Being Invisible” that “Aboriginal people are generally not on the Australian identity radar. We are invisible“(Heiss, Invisible 256). To outsiders, it seems that this failure to embrace Indigenous Australians and include them in a society that takes pride in being considered egalitarian and cosmopolitan indicates the existence of an open wound in this society. For centuries, Indigenous Australians have been fighting to be recognised and accepted in a country they inhabited first. What is more, it is mainly due to their resilience that they have survived as a people despite having been displaced, dispossessed and dramatically reduced in numbers<sup>1</sup>. On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd took the first step towards real reconciliation. He introduced the Motion of Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in Parliament, which was a recommendation of the Bringing Them Home<sup>2</sup> report, and was passed unanimously by the House of Representatives. The apology was made on behalf of the Australian government and was considered a sign of hope for a possible embarkation on a journey towards mutual acceptance, respect and understanding of two communities whose values and goals differ in so many respects, yet if embraced, might open a door to a fuller and more wholesome way of living.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Flood 96-132.

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed discussion of the Apology will be offered in 2.3.

## 2.1. Changing Policies

When Captain James Cook landed in Botany Bay on the southeast coast of Australia, he had been issued with the instructions to “take possession of convenient situations in the country in the name of the King of Britain or, if [he finds] the country uninhabited, take possession for his Majesty” (qtd. in Flood 16). All this was to be done with the consent of the Indigenous people living there. As the English considered the Indigenous people as uncivilised due to their life style and lack of cultivation of the land, the only logical decision at the time was that the newly found continent was to be regarded as *terra nullius*, and therefore considered uninhabited. As Roberta Flood states,

Cook’s decision not to negotiate a treaty but to claim the land for the British Crown under the right of *terra nullius* was therefore not illegal by the terms of the day, or ‘Captain Cook’s mistake’, as one school textbook labels it. As leading historian Alan Frost says, ‘had the British not seen New South Wales to be *terra nullius*, then I believe they *would* have negotiated for the right to settle the Botany Bay area. (Flood 19)

Yet, the repercussions of this decision have been felt by Indigenous Australians for hundreds of years. Being displaced and robbed of their country is detrimental for Indigenous Australians as “Aboriginal peoples around the globe recognise [themselves] primarily by the landscape [they] call home. [...] It is taken for granted that the landscape that has fed and nurtured [their] ancestors has shaped [them] in deep unspoken ways” (Lucashenko, “Not Quite” 17). Therefore it was a watershed when in 1992 Australia’s High Court overturned the notion of *terra nullius* and ruled that Eddie Mabo and two other Torres Strait Islanders should be given “Native Title” to Murray Islands (see Flood 245). It was also important in the struggle for land rights. According to Neville T. Bonner A.O., in his opening address at the symposium “*Aratjara: Literature of the First Australians*” in Düsseldorf in 1993,

Land ownership, particularly to our tribal brothers, is something which defies adequate definition. Perhaps land ownership to us can best be described as a continuing dynamic notion, not bounded by geographical limits of a government surveyor. It is a living, breathing entity, made up of earth, sky, clouds, river, trees, rocks, and the spirits which created all these

things. It is the place wherein the spirits of our forefathers roam, the place wherein our spirits will reside in the great dreamtime. It is an extension of our very souls; it is our everything. (*Aratjara* 7)

But it was not only the issue of land rights that was the reason for the plight of Indigenous Australians throughout the centuries. Many government policies have been introduced in an attempt to find the best way to deal with Australia's Indigenous people. Government policies concerning Indigenous people can roughly be divided into three phases which were marked by the position the respective governments assumed with regard to Indigenous people – protection, assimilation and integration (see Flood 201-264). A fourth phase can be marked by an additional aim – the goal of self-determination – which gave Indigenous people the right to “decide within the broader context of Australian society the priorities and directions of their own lives, and to freely determine their own affairs” (Flood 234).

Protection policy is to be understood as an attempt to protect Aboriginals from the negative influences of the colonisers and was carried out by missionaries. They believed that only by providing refuge from the harmful side effects of colonisation (alcohol, violence, disease etc.) would they be able to help the Aboriginals survive. The first mission was founded in 1824 in an area that is known as Newcastle today (north of Sydney). However, the founder of this mission, Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, had to admit defeat when the mission was closed in 1841 due to the fact that his “congregation” (Flood 202) had disappeared. The main reasons for the disappearance of Aboriginals were “disease, conflict and voluntary movement to towns for white men's goods” (Flood 202). What is more, the nomadic nature of Aboriginals was conducive to their unwillingness and inability to settle in one place. Still, in 1838 the Aborigines Protection Society was founded in London (see Flood 202) and it was decided that “no expenditure should be withheld which can be incurred judiciously for the maintenance of missionaries, who should be employed to instruct the tribes, and of protectors, whose duty it should be to protect them” (Flood 202). Eventually, traditional culture of Aboriginals was undermined and this resulted in their being forced to occupy the no-man's land in between two cultures. In other words, they were partly disconnected from their roots but did not fit into white society. While the missions provided protection, land, food, health care, work,

houses, schools, law and order - in short, a European way of life with Christian values – they undermined the Aboriginal men’s authorities and left them devoid of status and self-respect (Flood 203). But it was more than the loss of tribal culture that Aboriginals were faced with. In 1837 Bishop Broughton remarked that the Aboriginals “disappear [...] gradually to decay; they diminish in numbers; [...] within a very limited period [...] they will be extinct” (qtd. in Flood 205). In 1885, the effect of colonisation on the Aborigines was highlighted when the editor of the *Melbourne Age* invited his readers to “smooth the pillow of a dying race” (qtd. in Flood 205).

In the 1830s, the “concept of protective segregation” (Flood 221) gave rise to criticism by humanitarians who dismissed it for its apparent “paternalistic” (Flood 221) attitude and implication of the inferior status of Aborigines. Eventually, the demand for integration rather than segregation became so urgent that government policies were adjusted accordingly. The Victorian Aborigines Act of 1886 “laid down that only ‘half-castes’ aged over 34 years and ‘full-bloods’ were entitled to live on reserves and receive government aid; the rest were pushed into white society to fend for themselves” (Flood 222). By 1901, the time of the Federation, Australian governments introduced the White Australian Policy, which constituted that “‘mixed-blood’ Aborigines, too, should be absorbed into the white population, that, further, non-Europeans should be excluded and that suitable white colonists should be encouraged to settle” (Flood 223). With regard to Aboriginals this meant that ‘full-bloods’ fell under protection and were given land to pursue their traditional life but ‘half-castes’ were to be educated in the white Australian way in institutions. “This policy of segregation/absorption was endorsed at the 1937 Native Welfare Conference to try and cope with the rapidly increasing mixed-race population” (Flood 223).

At the Native Welfare Conference in 1951, the Commonwealth Minister for Territories Paul Hasluck declared a necessary emphasis on assimilation and reported that “in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of [A]boriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like other white Australians do [...] Assimilation does not mean the suppression of the [A]boriginal culture but rather that, for generation after generation, cultural adjustment will take place” (qtd. in Flood 224).

This policy of assimilation resulted in the forced removal and institutionalisation of mixed-race Aboriginals and an ensuing loss of cultural identity.<sup>3</sup>

Gradually, the policy of assimilation was phased out and integration became a major goal (see Flood 234). The policy of integration provided Aboriginals with the right to not only maintain their cultural identity but also to pursue “equality of living standards and opportunity” (Flood 234). In the 1970s the goal of self-determination was added and after 1975 a policy of self-management “was established to assist [I]ndigenous people and communities to be self-managing in all aspects of their lives” (Flood 234).

After the abandonment of the White Australia Policy in 1969, the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 was passed, which “banned discrimination on grounds of race, colour or ethnic origin in matters of employment, access to housing or public places and provision of goods and services” (Flood 240). The year after, the government passed the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act in 1976 and established the first land rights legislation in Australia (see Reconciliation Australia, History of Reconciliation).

In the last 30 years, the support for disadvantaged Indigenous people has become a major concern for Australians and reconciliation is the goal both non-Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Australians are working towards. Reconciliation “involves building mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and other Australians that allow us to work together to solve problems and generate success that is in everyone’s best interest (see Reconciliation Australia, What is reconciliation). After hundreds of years, aided also by the Prime Minister’s official apology, the process of recognition and mutual understanding is under way and racist policies should belong to the past.

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<sup>3</sup> The issue of the Stolen Generations will be discussed in chapter 2.3.

## ***2.2. Gaining Momentum***

According to Adam Shoemaker, it was only in the late 1970s that “Australian researchers [began] to try to consider Aboriginal history from the black viewpoint” (Shoemaker 23). Hence, emphasis was placed on Aboriginal reaction and responses to the treatment they received by the white settlers.

The first most important Aboriginal protest group was the Aborigines’ Progressive Association (APA), formed in 1934, which demanded equality for Aboriginal people. However, from today’s point of view the Association’s conclusion would fail to be supported by Indigenous Australian activists as it claimed that “blacks deserved both citizenship and equality via complete absorption into White Australian society” (Shoemaker 23). Nevertheless, it was a first step towards an organised political movement. On Australia Day, 26 January, in 1938, the Aboriginal Progressive Association declared a Day of Mourning and held its first Aborigines Conference only a short distance away from the Sesquicentenary celebrations (see Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). The outcome of this conference was an appeal to grant Indigenous Australians full citizenship rights. It was only ten years later, in 1948, that the Commonwealth Citizenship and Nationality Act gave all Australians, including Aboriginals, the category of Australian Citizenship (see Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). Adam Shoemaker argues that historians consider the Second World War as a major catalyst for political change with regard to Aboriginals. Many Aboriginal men were directly involved in the war effort (see Shoemaker 30). Yet, he argues that “the military was just as willing and able as any other element of Australian society to exploit Black Australians – and did so during the war years” (Shoemaker, 31). He maintains that some Aboriginals did benefit from their wartime experience but points out that one should not forget that Aboriginal women were excluded from it. And when under the Federal Electoral Act of 1940 Aboriginal soldiers were granted a wartime vote it was again Aboriginal women who were disqualified.

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of major activism and rapid legislative change that coincided with “growing Aboriginal self-confidence and achievement on many

fronts” (Shoemaker 104). Before and after the referendum in 1967 there were many protests and attempts to gain international attention in order to achieve equal rights not only on paper but also in reality. The referendum in which 90.77% (see Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline) of Australians voted for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the national census of the population, thus effectively granting them citizenship, did not abolish all inequalities and racist attitudes. Many expectations were shattered by the frustrating reality. Nevertheless, Shoemaker stresses that “the era saw the initiative for protest activity in Aboriginal affairs pass from white-dominated bodies to co-operative organizations, and then to groups controlled administratively – if not financially – by Black Australians” (Shoemaker 104). He considers the establishment of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines in 1958, and the subsequent election of the first Aboriginal president of the organisation in 1961, with its ensuing high profile media coverage and publicity, as a major step in the fight for equal rights for Indigenous Australians (see Shoemaker 105).

Publicity and attraction of international interest became more important and more pronounced as time progressed. A case in point was the Bark Petition tendered to the House of Parliament in Canberra in 1963. It was the Yirrkala people of Arnhem Land who used a “political protest of modern content but [...] in traditional form” (qtd. in Shoemaker 106). It was a protest against the government’s decision to permit mining in the Arnhem Land Reserve.

Another very public protest was the Freedom Ride campaign in 1965, which was inspired by the Freedom Riders in the United States.<sup>4</sup> It was an attempt to raise awareness and included mainly sympathetic white people. According to Shoemaker, no Aboriginal person went along on the journey through New South Wales rural towns (see Shoemaker 107). Charles Perkins played a major role in this campaign and in his autobiography<sup>5</sup> he gives a detailed account of the effect this experience had on himself and his fellow travellers:

The Freedom Ride was probably the greatest and most exciting event that I have ever been involved in with Aboriginal affairs. It was a new idea and a

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<sup>4</sup> The US Freedom Riders were Civil Rights activists who rode on interstate buses into the segregated South. (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom Ride>)

<sup>5</sup> Perkins, Charles. *A Bastard Like Me*. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1975.



new way of promoting a rapid change in racial attitudes [...] It sowed the seed of concern in the public's thinking across Australia. (qtd. in Shoemaker 107)

The Freedom Rides resulted in media coverage that was in favour of the political cause and therefore they mark another watershed in Aboriginal affairs.

In 1966 a protest in the Northern Territory ultimately resulted in a change in legislation and marked the beginning of the land rights movement. Vincent Lingiari organised a walk-off from the Wave Hill cattle station in protest of poor wages and appalling work conditions (see Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). In addition, the protesters demanded the return of some of their traditional lands, starting a fight that was to last for seven years. Eventually, this protest led to the Commonwealth Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) in 1976. In this respect it is also essential to make a mention of the 'Aboriginal Tent Embassy' that was set up on Australia Day in 1972 in front of Parliament House in Canberra. Roberta Flood argues that "Aborigines' patience snapped" (Flood 240) due to the Prime Minister's ruling out land rights. His reasoning stemmed from his conviction that Indigenous people's argument for land rights was inefficient. The connection between Aboriginals and their land is deeply rooted in their culture and essential for their beliefs – a reason that failed to impress the then Prime Minister. Flood explains that it was

initially one umbrella on the lawn in front of Parliament House to symbolise Aboriginal disadvantage and their desire to be treated as a separate political entity. The encampment grew, a 'Minister for Caucasian Affairs' was appointed and the media had a field day. For six months, Aboriginal campers severely embarrassed the Australian government, who eventually sent police to demolish the 'embassy'. McMahon lost the next election in December 1972, and Gough Whitlam swept into office, heading Australia's first Labour government for 22 years. (Flood 240)

In contrast, Shoemaker argues that the Tent Embassy "probably acted as both a unifying and a divisive factor, simultaneously influencing different elements of the population" (Shoemaker 113). Media coverage was definitely embarrassing for the Australian government on the international level, however, nationally the

controversy might have polarised opinion against the Aboriginal cause (see Shoemaker 113).

A further important step was the presentation of two paintings and text to Prime Minister Bob Hawke at the Barunga Festival<sup>6</sup> in 1988. This is referred to as the Barunga Statement and is now on display in Parliament House in Canberra (see Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). This statement called for a

national system of land rights, permanent control and enjoyment of our ancestral lands; compensation for the loss of use of our lands; protection of and control of access to our sacred sites, sacred objects, artefacts, designs, knowledge and works of art; the return of the remains of our ancestors for burial in accordance with our traditions. (see *Aratjara* 38)

At the time of the Barunga Statement, Eddie Mabo and two other Torres Strait Islanders had sued the State of Queensland, claiming that they held title to the Murray Islands and had never lost title to the Queensland government. It took ten years, but on 3 June 1992 the High Court of Australia ruled in favour of Eddie Mabo, hence declaring false the “legal fiction that Australia had been *terra nullius* at the time of European conquest” (*Aratjara* 30). The federal government welcomed the decision and Prime Minister Keating gave a controversial speech at Redfern voicing his opinion that by “doing away with the bizarre conceit that this continent had no owners prior to the settlement of Europeans, Mabo establishes a fundamental truth and lays the basis for justice” (*Aratjara* 31f).

In order to find better ways of dealing with pressing issues in relation to Indigenous Australians the Australian government set up commissions to inquire into these matters. The reports have always elicited government responses and resulted in new policies across Australia. In 1991 the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody “inquired into the deaths of 99 Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in Australian jails” (Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). Roberta Flood observes that

[a]lthough [I]ndigenous people make up only 2.4 percent of Australia’s population, they comprise 19 percent of adult prison inmates and a startling 41 percent of the juvenile prison population. A contributing factor is the

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<sup>6</sup> The Barunga Festival celebrates Indigenous culture every year. (see [www.barungafestival.com.au](http://www.barungafestival.com.au))

relative youthfulness of the [I]ndigenous population, whose median age is fourteen years less than that of the general population. (Flood 247).

The Commission made several recommendations, among them also the need for recognition by all political leaders and parties that reconciliation must be achieved if “community division, discord and injustice to Aboriginal people are to be avoided” (Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). As a consequence, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act was passed with unanimous support in June 1991 (see Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). The Council for Reconciliation was replaced by Reconciliation Australia in 2001. Reconciliation Australia was set up as an “independent, not-for-profit organization to carry the movement forward” (Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). A highlight in the reconciliation process was the walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000 in which more than 200,000 people participated to demonstrate their support for reconciliation.

In 2006, Reconciliation Australia launched its Reconciliation Action Plan, which is essentially a way of committing governments, business, non-government and community organisations to advance the reconciliation progress by adhering to “specific, measurable, action oriented plans” (Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). A broader plan of action is the closing of the 17 years life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Reconciliation Australia “involves building mutual respectful relationships between Indigenous and other Australians that allow us to work together to solve problems and generate success that is in everyone’s best interest. Achieving reconciliation involves raising awareness and knowledge of Indigenous history and culture” (Reconciliation Australia, What is reconciliation?). On its website one can also find the Australian Reconciliation Barometer, which is a “national research study that looks at the relationship between Indigenous and other Australians” and is “designed to be repeated every two years” and to explore “how attitudes and perceptions affect progress towards reconciliation and closing the gap” (Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Barometer). The Reconciliation Barometer from October 2015 showed that there is “evidence of goodwill” (Reconciliation

Australia, News) despite high levels of prejudice and low trust between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians. In addition, it states that the “lack of historical acceptance stands as a barrier to achieving reconciliation” (Reconciliation Australia, News). Education is critical in order to achieve a better understanding of the past. However, the latest release of the Reconciliation Barometer reveals that almost half of all surveyed Indigenous people have experienced racism.<sup>7</sup>

Many opportunities to learn about Indigenous culture are offered, like the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee, whose acronym NAIDOC has come to stand for the week itself. The annual NAIDOC week celebrates the culture and achievements of Indigenous Australians and is celebrated all over Australia (see Reconciliation Australia, NAIDOC Week). Also, in 2007 the National Indigenous Television (NITV) channel was launched, which became part of SBS<sup>8</sup> in 2012. This channel informs Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians about issues that matter most to Indigenous Australians. It is available on free-to-air television and now reaches over two million viewers across the country each month. It is a valid tool providing “a voice for Indigenous Australia, educating all Australians and opening a dialogue with wider Australia” (SBS, NITV website).

The commitment to the reconciliation process seems to be of concern to many Australians. However, there is still a long way to go and there are many issues that need to be addressed and dealt with. And while celebrations of Indigenous Australian culture attempt to bring closer the Australian nation, one must not forget that there are past matters and present inequalities that need to be resolved in order to achieve true equality and reconciliation.

### ***2.3. The Past is a Country in the Present***

It seems that the Australian government has come to realise that it is high time to reconsider its policies regarding Indigenous Australians. In a world in which political correctness, equal opportunities and respect for other cultures are of major

<sup>7</sup> <http://koorimail.com/latest-australian-reconciliation-barometer-survey-reveals-racism-in-australia/>

<sup>8</sup> The Australian multicultural and multilingual broadcaster

importance, the need arose for the Australian government to acknowledge the country's past in order to open the door for a future that is based on honesty and mutual respect. Without taking a look at past policies and past actions there is no hope for real reconciliation. Undoubtedly, the urge to forget some of the gruesome policies that were introduced by former governments might have been great. Undoubtedly, pointing a finger at the bad former governments might have been easier than assuming responsibility for a better future by admitting that they were wrong. And undoubtedly, ignoring the existence of racist and cruel past policies and hoping Indigenous Australians would simply forget about them might be desirable. Yet, here the question arises whether there is a future for a country that deals with its past in a selective way. Thus it was of utmost importance that in 1995 Prime Minister Keating commissioned the Bringing Them Home report, which was received by Prime Minister Howard in 1997. This report investigated the policy of removing mixed-raced Indigenous children from their families and placing them into institutional care or foster families in order to be educated and assimilated into mainstream society (see Flood 225-233). It furthermore inquired into the effects these forced removals had on Indigenous families and made recommendations for future actions. The affected Indigenous people are referred to as Stolen Generations:

The term 'stolen generations' refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who were forcibly removed as children, from their families and communities by government, welfare or church authorities and placed into institutional care or with non-Indigenous foster families. The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children began as early as the mid 1800s and continued until 1970. This removal occurred as the result of official laws and policies aimed at assimilating the Indigenous population into the wider community. (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations)

Bearing this in mind, Reconciliation Australia reminds one to refrain from confusing the Stolen Generations with

other government policies which aimed to help Aboriginal children in remote areas attend school, with their parents' full consent. It should also not be confused with the removal of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children from dysfunctional families under welfare policies that continue to apply today. (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations)

It is important to point out that the decision of removing these children was solely based on their race, in some cases on the basis of skin colour. Hence, in certain families children with a lighter skin colour were removed, while those with darker skin remained with their families. As Roberta Flood argues, “[i]t seems they considered that only Aborigines of full descent should be encouraged to retain their culture” (Flood 231). This practice had desperate mothers turn to desperate measures, as the following account demonstrates:

My mum was very strict and careful that I didn’t get taken away. She used to get this blackcurrant plum from the bush, and it makes your hair go black. My mum always used to crush the black plum together with a big heap of charcoal and pit it all over my skin to make me go black, and when the Welfare would come along I’d be sitting right in the middle of those other blacks, and the Welfare bloke would call out, ‘Any yella kids? Any half-caste kids around here?’

‘No, nothing ‘ere,’ but I’d be sitting there with them all painted up black. (qtd. in Flood 230)

The Bringing Them Home report, officially named The Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, was conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and revealed shocking insights into the effects of the policy of child removal. It found that the forced removal of these children has had life-long tragic and disabling consequences. For many children, the removal resulted in a loss of their traditional culture, land, language and beliefs and, above all, in a disconnection from their families. For Indigenous communities, parents who lost their children, the negative effects were just as profoundly disturbing.

The inquiry took evidence from a wide range of people of all walks of life that were involved in the carrying out of the policy, foster families and adoptive parents as well as from Indigenous individuals, government representatives and organisations. The collected pieces of evidence paint a horrifying and painstakingly graphic picture of how the actual removals took place and what the removed children were going through afterwards when they were living in the various missions and institutions. People who were removed “gave evidence to the Inquiry of their mistreatment under State care – this ranged from inadequate food and clothing, to physical, sexual and

psychological abuse. Almost a quarter of witnesses [...] who were fostered or adopted reported being physically abused” (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations). Therefore, not only is the suggestion that Stolen Generations children “were better off” (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations) untrue, it is preposterous as a matter of fact. The scars the Stolen Generations bear are ones that never heal. These scars remain with them for life and a government that chooses to regard this issue as a “blank spot in the history of Australia” (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations) denies the people bearing these scars even the slightest chance of their healing. Strictly speaking, the chance of ever overcoming such a traumatic experience is highly unlikely. As one Indigenous person explains:

It never goes away. Just ‘cause we’re not walking around on crutches or with bandages or plasters on our legs and arms, doesn’t mean we’re not hurting. Just ‘cause you can’t see it doesn’t mean... I suspect I’ll carry these sorts of wounds ‘til the day I die. I’d just like it to be not quite as intense, that’s all. (Confidential Evidence 580, Queensland. Bringing Them Home Report)

The outcome of the Bringing Them Home report resulted in several recommendations made by the report. Many of them were in keeping with the new common goal of the time – reconciliation. Thus, the report recommended that

the first step in healing is the acknowledgement of truth and the delivery of an apology. It is the responsibility of the Australian Government, on behalf of previous Australian governments that administered this wrongful policy, to acknowledge what was done and apologise for it” (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations)

It is unfortunate that it took another decade for this apology to happen.

On the one hand, this recommendation raised the question of why there was a need to apologise for a matter that was decided a long time ago. Then there was a fear of ensuing compensation litigation. As a result, the Australian Government led by John Howard refused to express a formal apology. The Prime Minister argued that “it was not appropriate for the current Government to apologise for the actions of past governments” (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations).

Incidentally, all state premiers did (see Flood 232) and eventually in May 1997, Prime Minister Howard

expressed his personal ‘deep sorrow for those of my fellow Australians who suffered injustices under the practices of past generations towards [I]ndigenous peoples’, though he has consistently refused to make a formal apology, despite considerable public pressure. (Flood 232-234).

There was also emphasis placed on the use of the word ‘sorry’. This word carries a special meaning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. According to Reconciliation Australia, “[i]n many Aboriginal communities, sorry is an adapted English word used to describe the rituals surrounding death (Sorry Business). Sorry, in these contexts, is also often used to express empathy or sympathy rather than responsibility” (Reconciliation Australia, *Apology to Stolen Generations*). It was only during the 2007 election campaign that then Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd stepped forward and acknowledged the importance of saying sorry for past policies. When Labour won the elections and he became Prime Minister, he introduced the Motion of Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples in Parliament, making Wednesday 13 February 2008 a historic day for all Australians.<sup>9</sup>

The apology from the Australian Government to the Stolen Generations moved the objective of reconciliation into its long overdue first phase. The acceptance and admittance of past wrongdoings paved the way for a future of mutual understanding and may be imperative for real forgiveness in order to move on. Reconciliation Australia also points out that

[t]he apology is not an expression of personal responsibility or guilt by individual Australians but it does reflect [the] Australian values of compassion and a fair go, and allows the victims of bad policy to feel that their pain and suffering has been acknowledged. It is important that Australians understand the background to the apology so they understand why it’s a good thing for the nation – it is this understanding that will realise the great potential of this historic moment to move [the Australian] nation forward. (Reconciliation Australia, *Apology to Stolen Generations*)

Another recommendation of the *Bringing Them Home* report was the introduction of a ‘Sorry Day’, which has been celebrated each year on 26 May since 1998. On

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<sup>9</sup> For full transcript of the apology please refer to the Reconciliation Australia website.



‘Sorry Day’ 2008 Prime Minister Rudd was presented the Apology Calligraphy artwork, which is a “magnificent hand-written calligraphy manuscript on vellum, or calfskin, immortalizing the historic ‘Motion of Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples’” (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations). It was done by a local artist, Gemma Black, and donated to the Australian Parliament House art collection for “permanent display beside the glass Coolamon, presented to the Government by Stolen Generations in thanks for the apology” (Reconciliation Australia, Apology to Stolen Generations). Most Indigenous people saw “the Apology as an important symbolic and healing gesture for those who directly suffered under legislation “ but “hoped that it would come with practical actions to ensure the future sovereignty” of Indigenous Australians (Heiss, “Homelessness” 8).

## ***2.4. All is not well***

Robert Flood argues that

over the last 30 years of self-determination and improvements in the political and legal spheres, a measureless human tragedy has unfolded in many Aboriginal communities. Tackling Aboriginal disadvantage is the major challenge of the new millennium. Infant mortality, health and life expectancy are appalling, educational standards abysmal, unemployment astronomical, substance abuse and crime horrific. (Flood 251)

She also gives a personal account of her experiences of her visit to a government settlement near Alice Springs in 1980. She recalls the appalling state of the hospital and the fact that the school was denied the practice of looking after its students’ hygiene and nutrition as this was considered “paternalistic” (Flood 252). As a result, many children “played truant and [she] met children who after six years of school could barely write their names, but most distressing were those with black, rotted teeth and ‘glue ear’ – untreated middle ear infections leading to severe hearing loss” (Flood 252-253). Thus, it becomes apparent that the process of reconciliation also involves taking into consideration practical and day-to-day related matters in order

to achieve equality. Mick Dodson, the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner maintains that

Social justice [...] is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to a school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and appreciation of their cultural heritage. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination. (qtd. in Flood 249).

While on the political level a lot may have been achieved, there is still a wide gap between judicial reality and real life. In reality, the low education rate of Indigenous Australians results in less chance to be employed and maintain a decent living. And although Indigenous status has beneficial consequences in the areas of health care, legal aid, educational grants, tertiary scholarships and ‘Indigenous-preferred’ jobs (see Flood 251), the gap between many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is still obvious. As Anita Heiss states,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples made up 2.5 per cent of the Australian population in the 2011 census, but we accounted for 25 per cent of all persons who were homeless on census night (ABS 2012). Of those who were classified homeless, 75 per cent were living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings, which is the same proportion as in 2006; 12 per cent were in supported accommodation for the homeless; and 6 per cent were in improvised dwellings or tents or were sleeping out. For non-Indigenous homeless persons, 30 per cent were living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings, 20 per cent were in supported accommodation, and 7 per cent were in impoverished dwellings or tents and were sleeping out (ABS 2012). (Heiss, “Homelessness” 6)

One might argue that the ensuing problems of a socially difficult status affect Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians all the same; and while this may be true, we should not forget that living as outsiders in a community has many repercussions, and demands utmost strength in order to establish oneself as an equal member of the mainstream community. This establishment can be done in many ways and one can take the road of deliberately shocking the other community. The anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw refers to this manner of behaviour as “performing

stigma” (Cowlshaw 92) and argues that “[o]ne element in such performances is the thrilling ability to shock white observers with an exaggerated version of their known fears. But those outside the Aboriginal realm see these performances as immediate and incontrovertible evidence of a serious social problem” (Cowlshaw 93). She explains that

Social honour within the Aboriginal community is enhanced rather than damaged in such interchanges. Physical actions – urinating on the police station floor, fighting in the street, throwing stones at shop windows – are weapons deployed to sabotage hierarchy, independent of speech acts. Symbolic victories come from causing tension and fear among those external to their secret, ironic meanings, and thus exposing the social conditions of existence. Minor subversions, such as an assertive and noisy street demeanor, can nudge at and irritate the habitual sense of order assumed by whites. (Cowlshaw 94)

Hence, mutual expectations are wrong but at the same time the driving force behind the difficulty in achieving real social equality. Despite a determination to move along the process of reconciliation, daily life in rural towns as well as in urban areas provides a challenge for Indigenous Australians. What is more, substance abuse, like petrol sniffing and alcoholism, has become referred to as the underlying reason for violence in Aboriginal communities. However, the current level of violence has reached a point that bears little resemblance to what traditional Aboriginal communities regarded as acceptable. Moreover, it is mainly women and children who suffer the most. In 1999 the Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission wrote in the Women’s Task Force on Violence report that

Indigenous women’s groups, concerned about their disintegrating world, have been calling for assistance for more than a decade [...] At times, government representatives appeared to regard violence as a normal aspect of indigenous life, like the high rate of alcohol consumption. Interventions were dismissed as politically and culturally intrusive in the newly acquired autonomy of indigenous communities [...] the broader Australian community [...] seemed oblivious to the mayhem that was happening. (qtd. in Flood 256)

In contrast, Queensland Aboriginal Leader Noel Pearson said in 1999, “[Aboriginal] life expectancy is decreasing and the young generation is illiterate; ‘progressive’

thinking about substance abuse holds it is “only a symptom of underlying social and psychological problems. [...] But addiction is a condition in its own right, not a symptom. It must therefore be addressed as a problem in itself” (qtd. in Flood 256). Pearson believes that Indigenous Australians should learn how to help themselves; on top of that, he demands the replacement of “the ‘poison’ of passive welfare dependency” with “integration into the real economy” (Flood 257).

There is no doubt that trying to resolve difficult matters with regard to Indigenous Australians requires awareness and consideration of all angles and related issues, while being respectful of traditional values. At the same time, one should not forget that there are social problems in all walks of Australian society that also need addressing and are of equal importance. Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that history plays a major role in the scenario. Dispossession, displacement and being made ashamed of one’s traditional culture only due to the fact that there seemed to be no room for alternative ways of living have put a burden on Indigenous Australians that puts an additional strain on their circumstances of living.

A step back in time seemed to have been the release of, and the ensuing government action to the report of a Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse in June 2007, which was commissioned by the Government of the Northern Territory, also referred to as the Little Children are Sacred report. This report reveals shocking findings about how the “cumulative effects of poor health, alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, pornography, unemployment, poor education and housing and general disempowerment [led] inexorably to family and other violence and then on to [sexual] abuse of men and women and, finally, of children” (Little Children are Sacred Report extracts). A Journalist for *The Australian*, Nicolas Rothwell, called the report a “report not for the faint-hearted” and states that “[a line] has been drawn in troubled sand. A taboo, long and artfully maintained, stands broken. From this day on, no one can say they do not know how deep the nightmare is in remote Aboriginal Australia, or how urgent the need” (Rothwell, *The Australian*). According to Rothwell, the report focuses on the responsibility of the Australian Government while overlooking the “responsibilities of Aboriginal men, who are the main offenders in this sexual arena” and points out that “40 years after

the referendum [it may be time] for Aboriginal people to enjoy both the rights and the responsibilities of citizenship” (Rothwell, *The Australian*)

The reaction of the Australian Government to the report was a drastic one. Then Prime Minister Howard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough announced in a joint press conference in June 2007 a “dramatic intervention into Northern Territory Aboriginal communities” (Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). Six weeks later, the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act was passed in Government, granting the Government “power to acquire Aboriginal land for 5 years and hold back 50% of all welfare payments for necessary items. The long standing permit system, enacted as part of the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) was scrapped. The legislation includes exemptions from the Racial Discrimination Act” (Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation Timeline). Furthermore, there were new restrictions on alcohol, pornography filters on publicly used computers were installed and welfare payments for families who neglected their children were suspended, only to name a few measures (see Northern Territory National Emergency Response, Social Justice Report 2007). Furthermore, the Government sent up police and military to enforce the changes and oversee the situation. The ensuing protest against this intervention was led by Indigenous Australians across the country. The website *Crikey Daily Mail* explains that

Some of the initial media reporting and public commentary referred to the intervention as an invasion and sought to highlight the involvement of the defence force to emphasise this partisan viewpoint. In some cases this degenerated into outright scaremongering and unfortunately caused some members of the communities concerned to wrongly believe that the Army was somehow coming to remove their children by force of arms. (The Army’s Role, *Crikey*)

Moreover, it states that the army has been working in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities for decades (see The Army’s Role, *Crikey*). In other words, the media coverage was controversial and caused confusion.

Be that as it may, the Little Children are Sacred report and the consequential intervention have stirred the Australian nation and elicited various reactions from many different sides. The United Nations expressed their concern over the Australian Government’s suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (see

Australian Human Rights Commission, Social Report 2007) and within Australia the decision to intervene polarised. Despite concern from Indigenous leaders, most of the measures were extended by the federal Labour government's *Stronger Future* legislation in 2012, which is the name for ten more years of the Northern Territory Intervention (see Heiss, "Homelessness" 9).

Furthermore, the terms 'dispossession' and 'displacement' that used to be words of the past, are notions that are prominent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Heiss, "policies [...] still include the forced removal of Aboriginal people from their land" (Heiss, "Homelessness" 6). What she refers to are the forced closures of 150 remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia as the state announced it could no longer afford to pay for essential services like power and electricity. Then Prime Minister Tony Abbot told ABC Radio on 11 March 2015, "What we can't do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices if those lifestyle choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have" (Heiss, "Homelessness" 7). As reaction to this statement, the #SOSblakaustralia movement officially began the day after and gained momentum when celebrities, such as Hugh Jackman, among thousands of other people from various cultural backgrounds began to support it. The #SOSblakaustralia movement is an umbrella hashtag that has become a national and international movement. It is through such increased social media presence that it has enabled the Indigenous Australian community to centralise its efforts and empower its people. As a result, on 10 April 2015 thousands of people marched in Melbourne and Sydney CBD, bringing both cities to a temporary standstill in order to show their support for keeping remote communities alive. In addition, on SOSblakaustralia's website people are invited to support their petition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are written into the Australian constitution.

To conclude, it is a fact that the situation of Indigenous Australians is a sore spot in the otherwise seemingly very healthy Australian nation. Indigenous Australians are faced with a wealth of issues that they should not be forced to deal with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Roberta Flood argues that "[f]or most [I]ndigenous people, leading a traditional life is no longer feasible, but many living in less remote regions have accomplished the difficult transition into the modern world equally successfully"

(Flood 264). The trick for leading a fulfilled life as an Indigenous Australian seems to lie in the mastering of a balancing act: attaining equal standards of health, education and living while celebrating Aboriginal values and maintaining a traditional cultural identity.

### 3. Development of Aboriginal Literature

The year 2008 saw the first publication of an anthology of Aboriginal Literature. The *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, published 220 years after the arrival of the first settlers in Australia, presents a project of national importance. Mick Dodson, an Indigenous leader and Australian of the year 2009,<sup>10</sup> wrote the foreword to the anthology and stated:

I was lucky to grow up reading – sadly, a lot of Indigenous kids don’t – and literature has played a very influential role in my life. As I get older it seems there is just not a whole lot of time to read all the things I want to. I would hope that one day all Indigenous children are able to read very early and read often and I’m sure a volume like this anthology would be an inspiration to many. It does give a glimpse of what Indigenous people are capable of doing. (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* xiii).

The growing interest in Aboriginal literature in recent years coincides with an increasing interest and renewal in Aboriginal culture. Hence it can be seen as a celebration of the achievements of Aboriginal people as well as a tribute to their resilience. The editors of the anthology aimed to “document literature written in English by Aboriginal authors” and to “introduce readers to the power, eloquence and beauty of a remarkable tradition within Australian writing” (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 1). Mick Dodson points out another fact that makes the reception and acknowledgment of Aboriginal people a necessity when he writes that “[l]iterature and its creation are so important to the lives of everyone. It can be and is used as a powerful political tool by Aboriginal people in a political system which renders us mostly voiceless. It can give us confidence and pride to raise our voices through the silence” (*Macquarie PEN Anthology*, xiii).

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<sup>10</sup> Compare [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mick\\_Dodson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mick_Dodson)



### 3.1. Finding a voice

The arrival of the first settlers in Australia had many disruptive and disturbing consequences for Aboriginal culture. Among them was also the fact that this moment “mark[ed] the arrival of English among Aboriginal people as an unexpected and perhaps unwanted, but eventually prevailing language” (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 2). This means that Aboriginal people found themselves in urgent need to learn to understand and use the foreign language in order to survive in the changed circumstances. Thus, the development of Aboriginal literature should be seen from a historical as well as language point of view. Aboriginal people were faced with new rhetorical and linguistic conditions. What is more, their tradition of story-telling, by which Aboriginal Elders passed on traditional values, history and cultural ideas, was inadequate in the new world order when dealing with colonisers who placed emphasis on the written word.

Here I am concerned with the fact that there is much traditional Aboriginal literature that non-Indigenous people have little or no real understanding of. Attempts to put in print Aboriginal oral literature have been made but there is an underlying assumption that any attempt has failed to convey the complexity and beauty of these orally delivered texts. The methods used for recording these stories have been manifold and taken on a variety of forms, including “diaries, newspapers, pamphlets, monographs, and more recently, films and video tapes” (McGregor 47). Yet, as William B. McGregor argues, one needs to be aware of arising difficulties: “[w]hen the oral and written versions belong in different linguistic and cultural contexts, the problems are even pressing and the potential for misunderstanding and misrepresentation increases exponentially” (McGregor 47). There is a lot of room for unintentional wrong editing that seeks to make Aboriginal stories appealing to a non-Indigenous audience. Colin Johnson<sup>11</sup> observes that

[u]ntil very recently [...] the form of the tale or story has been completely neglected. In the process of editing, the oral form has been divorced from the content. [...] The methods of Aboriginal story-telling are edited out and the content forced into forms akin to the fairy tale. (qtd. in McGregor 51)

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<sup>11</sup> Colin Johnson later changed his name to Mudrooroo.

It can be argued that the arrival of the colonisers on the one hand, and the oral and visual communication styles of the Aboriginals on the other, both contributed to the appearance of an Aboriginal literature in English that succeeded to combine these seemingly opposite forces. Anita Heiss and Peter Minter maintain that

[i]t is generally agreed that at the end of the eighteenth century there were many hundreds of distinct Aboriginal societies in Australia, each of which possessed rich cultural and mercantile and day-to-day languages and forms of expression that had been intact for tens of thousands of years. But just as the Crown's acquisition of 1770 had made sovereign Aboriginal land *terra nullius*, it also made Aboriginal people *vox nullius*. [...] For Aboriginal people, the use of English became a necessity within the broader struggle to survive colonization. (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 2)

From the early days on, writing was an important tool for Aboriginal people to be heard and taken seriously. As a result, the first Aboriginal writings can be placed in genres that are closely related to political discourse. Hodge argues that literature is political

if it establishes the dignity and worth of a people, to themselves and to others; if it counteracts the processes of demoralisation that make a people vulnerable to destruction and exploitation or if it reminds potential aggressors of the humanity and dignity of their intended victims. (Hodge 83)

In other words, first Aboriginal literature appears as letters by individuals to local authorities and newspapers or as petitions by communities in order to “register, control and negotiate [Aboriginals’] social, historical and political presence inside white Australia” (Healy, “Ethnogenesis” 1).

The editors of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* mark the beginning of Aboriginal literature with a letter written by Bennelong (1764-1813). He was a senior man of Wangal who helped Governor Arthur Philip become familiar with Aboriginal language and traditions. Bennelong was one of the first Aboriginal people to take on the colonisers’ way of dressing and to learn English. He spent time in England in 1792 and returned to Australia in 1795. Due to his health problems and inability to reconnect with his own people after his return, he wrote a letter to the former governor in 1796:

Sir

I am very well. I hope you are very well. I live at the Governor's. I have every day dinner there. I have not my wife: another black man took her away: we had had murry doings: he spear'd me in the back, but I better now: his name is now Carroway. all my friends alive & well. Not me go to England no more. I am at home now. I hope Sir you send me anything you please Sir. hope all are well in England. I hope Mrs Philip very well. You nurse me Madam when I sick. You very good Madam: thank you Madam, & hope you remember me Madam, not forget. I know you very well Madam. Madam I want stockings. thank you Madam; send me two Pair stockings. You very good Madam. Thank you Madam. Sir, you give my duty to [Lord] Sydney. Thank you very good my Lord. very good: hope very well all family. very well. Sir, send me you please some Handkerchiefs for Pocket. you please Sir send me some shoes: two pair you please Sir.

Bannalong (qtd. in *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 9)

When reading this letter one cannot but help feel for the author. His command of English is rather limited, yet he manages to convey his state of mind and his emotional state in a very convincing way. Bennelong's miserable situation is obvious and an underlying sadness is conceivable. At the same time it is difficult, however, to decipher his true feelings for the former governor. The motive for his expressing his concern for the well-being of the English couple remains in the dark as it is almost always linked with an expression of what he would like them to do for him.

Be that as it may, the choice of this letter as the first known text in the English language by an Aboriginal author as the starting point for Aboriginal literature proves an excellent one. It is a true testimony of how the knowledge of the English language facilitated the act of communication of needs, wants, fears and demands. In fact, until the beginning of the twentieth century Aboriginal writing was mainly concerned with the plight of Aboriginal people, the suffering, dispossession and fear of incarceration (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 2). These writings carry a

range of moving and persuasive voices which are all the more valuable for their scarcity. These works reveal modes of performativity that are central to literary writing. They also demonstrate one of the persistent and now characteristic elements of Aboriginal literature - the nexus between the literary and the political. (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 2)

The first decades of the twentieth century were ripe with documents of a very public struggle to right the wrong policies of various Australian governments with regard to Aboriginals.

Organisations like the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association represented a central point for Aboriginal people from which they could focus their joint forces in the fight for their rights between 1925 and 1938. In this time fall William Cooper's 'Petition to the King' and the Aboriginal Progressive Association's manifesto 'Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights!' (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 1-31). These text display reactions and responses to the treatment Aboriginals received at the hands of the respective Australian governments and deal with issues like land rights, education, health and property. Furthermore they object to the protectionist and assimilation policies. Public displays of their dissatisfaction with the system at the time<sup>12</sup> "deepened the bond between political protest and Aboriginal writing" (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 3). Yet, it is exactly this bond that also put a lot of pressure on the Aboriginal writers. Shoemaker argues that Aboriginal writers were not "entirely free of white expectations if they [wanted] their work to be published, distributed and widely read" (Shoemaker 187). Hence, as Jack Davis points out:

You've got to remember, too, that Aboriginal writers are not like non-Aboriginal writers, inasmuch as they've got the political scene to contend with. And, they've got their own thoughts to put down on paper, regardless of what's political, in terms of writing something which they want to *sell* [his emphasis]. So, it's sort of like splitting their mind. You know, if you haven't got any political hang-ups, I should imagine you can sit down and go ahead and write with your mind fairly free. But, most Aboriginal writers were involved with the Black movement [...] We all started off as political people. (qtd in Shoemaker 187).

As a result, these writings are evidence of how Aboriginal people found their voice in English and used it to convey their message to the non-Indigenous part of Australian society that still put limitations on every aspect of Aboriginal lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Like the 'Aboriginal Day of Mourning & Protest' held on 26 January 1938-the day the Commonwealth celebrated 150 years of British settlement (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 3)

### 3.2. First publications

In the year 1929, David Unaipon's *Native Legends* was published, making him the first published Aboriginal author. Although his book should more appropriately be termed a "booklet, given its diminutive length of fifteen pages" one cannot but concede that it is a "fascinating social and artistic document" (Shoemaker 42). In fact, David Unaipon's work is a collection of stories of his traditional people and "his slim volume, produced by a publisher for white, middle-class readership in Australia and England, [marked] the arrival of a new genre of Aboriginal literature in English" (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 4).

Unaipon was born in 1872 and raised on a mission in South Australia. This mission was under the wings of the Aborigines' Friends' Association, which later played an important role in Unaipon's life and career by supporting him in many ways (see Shoemaker 42). His classical education, his gift for public speaking, and his "analytical and synthetic approach of his more factual writing [are] indicative of a mind which was both questing and incisive" (Shoemaker 42). *Native Legends* is a piece of work that is grounded in traditional Aboriginal culture. Unaipon may have feared that his people's traditions were in danger of becoming lost and his book was an attempt to preserve his culture. Evidently, his writing was also political but he employed different styles of narrative (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 4).

Adam Shoemaker raises the interesting question of whether David Unaipon regarded himself as truly belonging to his Aboriginal people and uses Unaipon's published address "An Aboriginal Pleads For His Race"<sup>13</sup> to support his argument. He claims that

the essence of Unaipon's brief speech is its implied endorsement of Aboriginal assimilation into White Australian society. [...] He comes across as something akin to a self-professed black prophet or seer, who has managed to cast off his "uncivilised nature" (read Aboriginal) and has adopted the lifestyle and attitudes of "civilisation" (read Christian white society). (Shoemaker 43-44).

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<sup>13</sup> Unaipon, David. 'An Aboriginal Pleads For His Race.' *Australian Aborigines, Photographs of Natives and Address*. Adelaide 1928[?]: 9

What Shoemaker expresses here is doubt about Unaipon's motivation for writing about his culture and about where Unaipon positions himself with regard to Aboriginal people. It is evident that Unaipon's Christian upbringing and close connection to and dependence on the Aborigines' Friends' Association have permeated his writing, maybe even his reason for writing. Nevertheless, with a view to Aboriginal literature Unaipon's significance is manifold. On the one hand, he succeeded in preserving for future generations essential aspects of his people's culture. At the same time, he managed to reduce the gap between European and Aboriginal cultures by providing the Europeans with some insight into an Aboriginal culture that was closer to reality than any assumptions the Europeans had made before. Finally, he "also gave subsequent Aboriginal writers a significant precedent by which to imagine their authorship of a culturally grounded future literature" (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 4).

Interestingly enough, it was a long time before the next publication of an Aboriginal author. The post Second World War period in which Australian governments' main concern was to assimilate Aboriginals into mainstream Australian society did not see any publication of an authored volume of Aboriginal writing. Shoemaker claims that there was a market and a readership for narratives that were based on traditional Aboriginal stories but argues that "traditional Aboriginal literature not written by Aborigines 'came into vogue'" (Shoemaker 86). The attention of Aboriginal activists at that time was focused on Aboriginal citizenship and the abolishment of Aboriginal state-based Protection and Welfare boards (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 4). Hence, there was again a plethora of letters, reports and petitions, the majority of which was supported and organised by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). These texts are true testimonies of the determination and focus of Aboriginal activists. "[...] Aboriginal writing was on the forefront of a renewed and partially successful resistance to state authority. Aboriginal writer-activists such as Kath Walker<sup>14</sup> helped lead the fight for full citizenship while producing early poetry and political pieces that became major contributions to Aboriginal literature" (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 4) The publication of Kath Walker's book of poetry *We Are Going* in

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<sup>14</sup> Kath Walker changed her name officially to Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1987 (see Shoemaker 225).

1964 was the second published volume of Aboriginal literature. More importantly, it was the first by an Aboriginal woman.

With this publication, poetry was established as another way of expressing political and social dissatisfaction. Yet Shoemaker states that “[t]his is not to say that the poetry merely presented political slogans in slightly-disguised verse form, but that the heightening of Aboriginal pride, resolve and socio-political involvement which characterized the 1960s helped to provide the impetus for cultural expressions [...]” (Shoemaker 182).

### ***3.3. Spreading the word***

According to Heiss and Minter, “Aboriginal literature as we know it today had its origins in the late 1960s, as the intensification of Aboriginal political activity posed an increasing range of aesthetic questions and possibilities for Aboriginal authors” (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 5). Thus, the Aboriginal voice found its expression also in drama and prose, combining the tradition of political protest with a distinctive Aboriginal approach to these genres. Healy observes that the “very important notion to grasp is the oppressive poverty and marginalized neglect of the contemporary [Aboriginal]. [...] It is only after one accepts the fringe as the starting point of Aboriginal literature that one can move out and back to horizons greater, deeper, more luminous with traditional cultures” (Healy, “True Life” 79). With regard to themes, Shoemaker points out that “Aboriginal writers have [...] [a] preoccupation with the theme of past injustice and [place] emphasis upon the concept of a venerable, autonomous, Aboriginal history” (Shoemaker 128). He argues that Aboriginal writers aimed to disseminate their version of historical events that started with the first contacts with the colonisers. In addition, he maintains that the creation of Aboriginal heroes and heroines of former generations stemmed from an attempt to increase pride and self-esteem of a people who have been subjected to the cruel hardship of colonisation (see Shoemaker 128-130).

The period between 1967 and the mid-1970s saw an increase in Aboriginal authorship. Aboriginal writers were published by both mainstream and new presses, successful theatre productions were on the rise and attracted a broad audience to the theatres. The plays were also widely read around the country, and Aboriginal journalists strongly influenced and contributed to newspapers, pamphlets and magazines. Eventually, all this activity resulted in the creation of independent Aboriginal print media that have been growing ever since (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 5).

In 1971, the quarterly magazine *Identity* was established and became the most significant Aboriginal periodical in the country. Jack Davis, the editor for six years, was particularly concerned with exploring the theme of Aboriginality (see Shoemaker 231). The definition and concept of Aboriginality are neither simple nor straightforward:

The concept of Aboriginality encompasses many things: respect for the Aboriginal past and for traditional [Indigenous] Australian ties to the land, a sense of pride and dignity, and sometimes one of dismay and outrage. An impetus towards action in both the social and political spheres is also involved, ranging from petitions and demonstrations to the establishment of Aboriginal-controlled health, legal and housing services. (Shoemaker 233)

Despite all these pressing issues and seemingly conflicting influences, Aboriginal writers managed to not only express their people's suffering in their work, they also succeeded in conveying their shared enjoyment of life that survived nevertheless. Jack Davis stated that Aboriginals "learnt to keep themselves alive by laughing" (Shoemaker 233). As a result, Aboriginal plays were ripe with scenes of "hardship, misery, poverty, discrimination and even death, but none of them is unrelievedly somber in tone. Humour tempers the seriousness of these plays and concurrently enhances their impact" (Shoemaker 234). According to Davis, other reasons why Aboriginals have survived are their reliance on one another and their traditions. This reliance found its expression in plays through the use of Aboriginal language in certain scenes. As a consequence, the non-Indigenous audience was challenged and faced with the reverse situation of being excluded due to a language barrier (see Shoemaker 253). The first Aboriginal play to be performed on stage was Kevin



Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* in Sydney in August 1971. Shoemaker observes this was "during the Captain Cook Bicentenary celebration, an ironic time for the debut" and adds that "[n]o less ironic was the fact that it took nearly eighteen years for *The Cherry Pickers* to be published, in the Australian bicentennial year of 1988" (Shoemaker 236).

What makes Aboriginal playwrights like Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert and Robert Merritt so outstanding is the unique Aboriginal point of view from which they present historical events. In some cases, the Western theatre conventions are adhered to while others succeed in pushing the boundaries and moving to another level. According to Shoemaker,

[...]Merritt has skillfully appropriated the techniques of Western theater in his first dramatic work. Unlike Davis's drama, the language of Merritt's play never presents a challenge to white members of the audience. It caters more to European theatrical conventions and is generally more accessible to non-[Indigenous people] as a result. Admittedly, Davis also bows to some of these conventions but he pushes his drama further from European expectations, into a realm of greater overall originality. (Shoemaker 136).

Theatre provided a great means to raise awareness of the diverging view of history in Australia. The plays were accessible to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences as they could also be performed in small country towns and Aboriginal settlements. Furthermore, they also reached out to illiterate Indigenous people who were able to identify with the characters on stage and hence become part of this highly political struggle of that time (see Shoemaker 136-137).

### ***3.4. Fiction as the Means to Recovery***

The publication of Colin Johnson's novel *Wild Cat Falling* in 1965 marked the beginning of a literature that was mainly concerned with a search of identity and finding a place in a society that had not been very accommodating and appreciative. At the same time, although the worst years of the assimilation period were over, the effect on individuals, families and communities and a need to reconnect with

traditional Aboriginal roots became pressing issues for Aboriginal writers (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 7).

According to Healy, Colin's novel "ventriloquizes, soliloquizes, explores. By its conclusion the narrator has fought his way through petty crime, prison, to a fugitive truce with himself and his ancestors" (Healy, "True Life" 80). Shoemaker argues that "Aboriginal novelists, in their best work, play the important role of illustrating the sometimes base, raw reality of Australian social violence" holding "a mirror up to European violence, sexual jealousy, physical brutality, and authoritarianism" (Shoemaker 161-162). At the same time, they advocate confidence in Aboriginal culture and identity (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology* 6). It is evident that these authors reflected on and reacted to the current and past plight of Indigenous people. Moreover, they attempted to offer their non-Indigenous readers real insight into the impact colonisation and its consequences had on Australia's Indigenous people. Shoemaker names the temptation of alcohol, the focus on material wealth, commercialising of sexuality and systemic violence as the main themes that can be found in Aboriginal novels (see Shoemaker 169-176).

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the beginning of emphasis on reconciliation and acknowledgment of the impact of colonisation in Australia. Aboriginal voices were not only heard, they gained in authority and significance. Aboriginal scholars and critical writers were regarded with respect and listened to. The increasing amount of Aboriginal media provided further means of broadcasting Aboriginal voices in film, television and music. Their reception was greatly successful and resulted in a spreading of issues that were important to Aboriginals. Hence, "autobiographical narratives and testimonial fiction became the key storytelling genres" (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 7) at that time. They were especially embraced by the growing number of Aboriginal women who "found in literary writing a vehicle for both authorial independence and cultural responsibility" (*Macquarie PEN Anthology* 7). Among these are Alexis Wright, Melissa Lucashenko, Lisa Bellear, Vivienne Cleven and Larissa Behrendt. All these women are highly educated, strongly committed to the Aboriginal cause, involved in political Aboriginal organisations at some point in their life and generally, leading figures in Australian society. Their voice is authoritative, authentic and powerful. Their message is clear – embrace

Aboriginality and raise awareness of the past while pointing out inequalities of the present.

These new novelist are concerned with the overcoming and sharing of past sufferings due to government policies. The emotional and physical injuries that were inflicted on Indigenous people by these policies left life-long scarring. There is no doubt that these experiences, however tragic and unimaginable, also were a means of voicing concerns that summed up experiences many Aboriginals had undergone. Indigenous people share these experiences and one should not underrate the bond that is created by such common grounds (see *Macquarie PEN Anthology 7*). These shared experiences are closely connected with a renewed pride in being of Aboriginal descent and with a responsibility to sustain Aboriginal culture. Heiss and Minter explain that

[t]he resurgence of Aboriginal writing in recent years has taken place during a widespread and vigorous renewal in Aboriginal culture. In the visual arts, performance, film, photography and music, Aboriginal practitioners and their critical communities produce highly significant works that speak to audiences around the world. (*Macquarie PEN Anthology 7*)

## 4. The Dilemma of Postcolonialism

### 4.1. Discussion of the Term

The notion of postcolonialism came into existence in the late 1970s when literary critics started to consider effects on culture, politics and linguistics that were a direct result of colonization and formed the basis of colonial discourse theory (see Polak, 136). The spelling of the term has been a cause for debate, as some critics (Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, see Polak 136) insist on hyphenating the word in order to emphasise a distinction between “postcolonial studies *as a field* from colonial discourse theory *per se*, which formed only one aspect of many approaches and interests that the term ‘post-colonialism’ sought to embrace” (Ashcroft et al. 187, emphasis in the original). Ashcroft et al, on the other hand, postulate a definition of postcolonialism as a notion that refers to the effects of an imperial process from the period of colonization onwards. Hence, the prefix *post* suggests that literature subsumed under this term is a result or product of imperialism. As a consequence, the hyphen should not be included as it would imply that such literature has been written after the end of colonization (see Ashcroft et al 2).

Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge introduced a third option – post(-)colonialism, the controversial hyphen in brackets – which also allows for a plural form of the word. Their reasoning for accepting the plural form stems from their belief that the field of postcolonialism comprises a set of “heterogeneous ‘moments’ arising from very different historical processes” (Mishra and Hodge 285). Another critic, Simon During, arrived at the same conclusion, and emphasized that “each country’s experience with colonization is different; thus the postcolonial effect is specific to each country, too” (During 369).

What is more, Mishra and Hodge postulate two different types of postcolonialisms which are defined by time and independence. They distinguish between oppositional postcolonialism and complicit postcolonialism. The former is present in “post-independent colonies at the historical phase of ‘post-colonialism’ whereas the latter

is considered an “always present ‘underside’ within colonization itself” (Mishra and Hodge 284). These definitions correspond with Simon During’s identification of two forms of postcolonialism. He bases his differentiation on the subject’s hierarchical position in society with regard to the process of colonisation, and defines postcolonising forms and postcolonised forms. Postcolonising forms include “those communities and individuals who profit from and identify as heirs to the work of colonizing” (During 369f), while postcolonised forms are produced by those who have been “dispossessed by that work and who identify as heirs to a more or less undone culture” (During 370). Stephan Slemon adds another distinguishing marker to the mix by postulating that a difference should be made between the post-colonial state, or the “post-colony” and the “post-colonial condition” (Polak 137). It follows that Indigenous texts are embedded in the post-colonies in a different post-colonial condition than white postcolonial text. White postcolonial texts have been rooted in the sphere of the colonizer/colonized while indigenous texts have been operating in the field of the colonized/twice colonized condition (see Polak 137). This notion is supported by the traditional definition of postcolonialism, which sees postcolonialism as a “period of history initializing the ‘handing over’ of colonized states by what were classified as supreme powers to rulers born and bred in the colonies themselves” (Kumar 82). Considering Australia, these born and bred rulers failed to include the Indigenous people of Australia. Hence, Slemon’s category of colonized/twice colonized is fitting.

## ***4.2. The Fourth World***

In his article “White Forms, Aboriginal Content” (Ashcroft et al 228), Mudrooroo emphasizes that “Aborigines do not occupy a unique position in this world but are just one of the many peoples that became immersed in the European flood which flowed out from the fifteenth century onwards.” As a result, ninety-nine percent of Australian culture is derived from European culture, and white Australians’ knowledge of history is predominately focused on their own. According to Mudrooroo, “too often it seems that a lot believe that [Aboriginals] were created in Australia sometime in the recent past after Captain James Cook and Governor

Arthur Philip (two Poms<sup>15</sup>) arrived in Australia” (Ashcroft et al 228). The struggle to set the record straight and create a more objective account of history resulted in what Bain Attwood refers to as “history wars” (Attwood 183). These were a direct consequence of conservative forces in Australia who claimed that

the narratives of the kind produced by Aboriginal history and Aboriginal histories had failed to observe the procedures traditionally observed by the discipline of history in order to ensure that truthful accounts of the past were being told; and their accounts of the past were designed to advance the goals of Aboriginality and Aboriginal self-determination or sovereignty in a way that threatened to undermine the unitary nature of the Australian nation. (Attwood 183f)

With regard to Aboriginal literature, white domination took on different forms. Traditionally, oral literature and memory aids (letter sticks and some types of bark painting), “a form of pictorial writing which could be read off by someone with a knowledge of the symbol system” (Ashcroft et al 229) were in use. After the European arrival, white people began to write down Aboriginal stories, providing a view of Aboriginals through the colonisers’ eyes. Hence, Aboriginal culture and history became distorted and was produced in white forms for a white audience. At the same time, Aboriginal literature evolved and English became the medium for Aboriginals to make themselves heard in their resistance and fight for freedom. Still, these writings were disregarded by the colonisers and considered childish attempts to gain some power and acknowledgement. Robert JC Young states that the postcolonial remains “operate in a dialectic of invisibility and visibility” (Young 19). In his opinion, postcolonial studies failed to include the history of indigenous activism in postcolonial countries. This activism uses “a set of paradigms that do not fit easily with the postcolonial presuppositions and theories” (Young 24). These include ideas of the sacred and ancestral land and the indigenous peoples’ rights to return to it. Young states that “there is little doubt that the fourth world emphatically remains” and that it has “risen to a new prominence, its issues thrown into starker visibility” (Young 24). Moreover, as Robert JC Young points out, the “real problem lies in the fact that the postcolonial remains” (Young 19), despite a desire “on both sides of the Atlantic” (Young 19) to move on from it.

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<sup>15</sup> *Poms* is an Australian term used to refer to English people.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007,<sup>16</sup> in tandem with the use of the internet and other media, empowered indigenous peoples and provided effective and visible ways for them to assert themselves in an international arena against the oppression of sovereign states (see Young 24). Yet, Fourth World colonialism continues, especially with regard to the “exploitation of natural resources that shows scant regard to the lives and lands of indigenous peoples” (Young 25). This “settler colonialism” (Young 25) is the reason why the term *postcolonialism* remains disputed. According to Lorenzo Veracini, settler colonies practiced a “form of ‘deep colonialism’ [...] which underscores the extent to which the achievement of settler self-governance enforced the subjection of indigenous peoples and indeed increased the operation of oppressive colonial practices against them” (Young 25). Land rights, social equality, equality in education, rights not mediated by the terms of settler emancipation, are all areas that need to be addressed in order to achieve indigenous emancipation. Therefore the postcolonial question that remains is how this emancipation can become the status quo in the Fourth World. In Australia, indigenous peoples, who “were mostly displaced and/or destroyed by colonisation or colonialism across much of the nineteenth century, remain a tiny minority (less than 2.5 percent of the Australian population)” (Attwood 172) and, as a result, are no political mass in any meaningful sense.

#### **4.3. Rejection of the Notion of Postcolonialism**

Stephan Slemon states that “the most important forms of resistance to any form of social power will be produced from within the communities that are most immediately and visibly subordinated by that power structure” (Ashcroft et al 106). He claims that the identification of the “scope and nature of anti-colonist resistance in writing” (Ashcroft et al 106) is closely linked to the concept of colonialism and is crucial when discussing past and present power relations. Mudrooroo’s position is similar to Slemon’s as he considers Australian Aboriginal literature as a literature of the Fourth World, in which indigenous minorities are “submerged in a surrounding

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<sup>16</sup> UN Declaration: <http://www.un.org.esa.socdev/unpfii/eng/drip.html>

majority and governed by them” (Ashcroft et al 231). Mudrooroo also argues that the Aboriginal writer is a “Janus-type figure with one face turned to the past and the other to the future while existing in a postmodern, multicultural Australia in which he or she must fight for cultural space “ (Ashcroft et al 240). Hence, the position of the Aboriginal writer is a difficult one since there is a complex task to be fulfilled. On the one hand, the traditional is to be revived and maintained, while on the other hand, the fight for an empowered position within contemporary Australian society must continue. This fight includes the search for identity in the Australian political and cultural space. Therefore, as Mudrooroo states, Aboriginal literature “must and does deal with the problems inherent in this position” (Ashcroft et al 231).

Anita Heiss argues that there are “two distinct views” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 43) among Indigenous Australian writers with regard to defining Aboriginal writing as post-colonial literature. She suggests that one is held by the “literary establishment who use the term as a way of describing a genre in which Aboriginal people write” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 43), while the other one is the one that most Aboriginal writers hold, namely that the term postcolonialism implies that

colonialism is a matter of the past and that decolonisation has taken place, which of course is not the case. In this way, most writers do not even consider the term in relation to their writing at all [...] [T]he term ‘post-colonialism’ is largely meaningless to Aboriginal people, bearing in mind the political, social and economic status [they] currently occupy. (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 43)

Some Aboriginal writers consider post-colonialism a “linguistic manoeuvre on the part of some white theorists who find this a comfortable zone that precludes the necessity for political action” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 43). This view is shared by Robert JC Young, who believes that the objectives of postcolonialism have “always involved a wide-ranging political project – to reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down.” (Young 20) He continues to argue that the end of postcolonialism will be marked by the end of peoples or culture suffering from the “long-lingering aftereffects of imperial, colonial and neo-colonial rule, albeit in contemporary forms such as economic globalization” (Young 20).



Sandra Phillips maintains that Aboriginal peoples are still colonised and “that it makes those in the literary and publishing community feel better to think [they] are post-colonial” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 44). Another writer prefers the term “neo-colonial” but feels that “[these terms] are all just yuppie buzz words which convolute the whole process of writing that says there isn’t a colonial mentality still in existence.” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 44) Anita Heiss concurs with Cathy Craigie with regard to the continuum of time:

We’re still in Aboriginal time, Murri time, we’re still in there doing the same things. For me it’s a continuation of a culture that’s thousands and thousands of years old. It’s not something that you cut off just because white man has come in. [...] My definition of time is endless, it’s past, present and future. (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 45)

Melissa Lucashenko and Kenny Laughton, however, argue that their writing is a reflection of the effects of colonisation. Rather than being a result of the traditional, everything in their lives has been formed by and has been rooted in colonialism, including their writing. Lucashenko comments on the issue of post-colonialism:

What’s post-colonialism? Then you have to ask what’s colonialism?, which is the process of coming in and taking people’s land and sovereignty away from them. The process of actually taking that has almost ended, but it hasn’t quite ended because of Mabo and Wik where it’s politically still going on, and psychologically, because people in the bush are much closer to that stuff I think, than people in the city, so to them they are far more in the colonial period than we are. In some senses, people have discovered how to be Black living in Redfern, living in the urban lifestyle, and that’s sort of edging towards post-colonialism to me. I’m not saying that we’re not oppressed, I’m saying that what I define as colonial era is ending and now the oppression is still there, but the circumstances of our oppression are changing. (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 45)

Kenny Laughton, despite not accepting the term, states that there might be some reason as to why Aboriginal writing can be called post-colonial when considering that Aboriginal literature has changed from oral to written after the arrival of the colonisers (see Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 45).

Post-colonialism as a discourse has not made a proper distinction between very different “formations of colonisation and the decolonisation in ‘settler’ and Indigenous cultures” (Brewster, in Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 45). Stephen Muecke points out that “Australia seems to be caught in a post-colonial syndrome” (Heiss,

*Dhuuluu-Yala* 46) and agrees with Bruce Pascoe, who says that “[a]ll our writing is influenced by the stories and cultures which have developed for 200,000 years. Colonial we aren’t. Colonised we are” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 46). This post-colonial syndrome will only become a matter of the past if Indigenous people achieve equality and acceptance in Australian society in all areas of life.

## 5. The Past as a Way to the Future – Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* and Kim Scott’s *Benang*

This chapter analyses Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise*, published in 1997, and Kim Scott’s *Benang*, published in 1999, with regard to their importance in the aftermath of the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s Report *Bringing Them Home*.<sup>17</sup> Both novels were written in the 1990s, 1997 and 1999 respectively, during a time in Australia when the reconciliation process was starting and Indigenous Australians demanded self-determination and recognition of the impossible situations to which various Australian governments had subjected them. The Report found that the forcible removal of Aboriginal children had been an act of genocide and the demand for a formal apology to the *Stolen Generation* was great. It was the first time that an official report confirmed what the Indigenous people of Australia had already known.

In their novels, both Wright and Scott depict the difficulty of Aboriginals during a time in which forcible removal, missions and complete lack of control over their own lives was the norm for Indigenous people. They show the detrimental effects such treatment and policies have on the individual, and that regardless of one’s determination and will to survive and succeed in such circumstances, one is doomed to fail. They therefore demonstrate that only self-determination will enable the Indigenous population of Australia to become equal members of Australian society. In addition, both novels emphasise the importance of knowledge about and understanding of one’s family history and Aboriginal roots. Lack of understanding and knowledge will result in little chance for the individual of being at peace and feeling complete. They show that the best chance to lead a content and successful life is to embrace one’s Aboriginality despite living in a white Australia that makes building this cultural bridge difficult.

This chapter will briefly look at the *Bringing Them Home* Report and its implications, and analyse the effects of forcible removal of Aboriginal children as presented in Alexis Wright’s novel. It will discuss Kim Scott’s presentation the

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<sup>17</sup> Bringing Them Home Report: [www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997)

importance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's entering into a dialogue in order to enable a more realistic view of Aboriginals and their abilities and achievements. In addition, it will consider the author's message that facing the past is essential for the reconciliation process. It will then analyse the importance of Indigenous self-determination and issues that are detrimental to the implementation of it. Finally, this chapter will argue that there is no need to give up or deny one's Aboriginality in order to be a member of Australian mainstream society.

### ***5.1. Dealing With Past Policies***

In Chapter 1 of the *Bringing Them Home* Report it is stated that “[m]uch of this matter is so personal and intimate that ordinarily it would not be discussed” and that “the past is very much with us today, in the continuing devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians” (Bringing Them Home Report, Chapter 1). The original report was a 689 page document that was sold for AUD 59.95, at the time about four times the price of a novel. The Australian Government Publishing Service printed two thousand copies which were sold out in a very short time. The public interest in the report was unusually great and so there were also video versions, community guides – abbreviated versions of the report – and further 14 thousand government print runs. (compare Brennan 24) According to Bernadette Brennan, there was “obviously a hunger in some sections of the Australian community to know and understand more about the life experience of Indigenous Australians” (Brennan, “Bringing Them Home” 25).

The Commission was presided over by Sir Ronald Wilson and Mick Dodson who had conducted the Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families which resulted in the *Bringing Them Home* Report. They heard oral and written submissions from 535 Aboriginal people that were recorded, submitted and then published in the report. Wilson stated that

I think the secret has been to keep intact the actual words of the story-tellers as far as possible in describing the effects of the process. That has built in an enormous capacity in the book itself to compel the reader to be moved by it,

because it's almost as if they were listening to the stories themselves.  
(Brennan, "Bringing Them Home" 25)

These powerful stories and their authentic presentations were most likely the reason why the public showed such unprecedented interest in a government report. At the same time, however, herein lay the problem. The personal presentations had not been verified in a court of law which created a backlash so that in March 1998 an erratum slip was inserted in Carmel Bird's publication *stolen children: their stories*<sup>18</sup> which stated:

The publisher has been contacted by a party that denies certain allegations made in the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This party states the Inquiry process did not allow it to respond to the allegations in the Report. The nature of the Inquiry process and of the information sought and provided meant that evidence submissions could not be tested as thoroughly as would occur in a courtroom. This applies to all the evidence. (Brennan, "Bringing Them Home" 25)

Critics of the Report argued that it showed "scant regard for evidence, balance and credibility of witnesses" (Brennan, "Bringing Them Home" 25) and that it is highly likely that there are more reasons for unhappiness as an adult than removal from one's parents. This criticism may have had its valid points; however, a study undertaken in Melbourne in the mid-1980s showed that there is a marked difference between adults removed in childhood and those who had remained with their families or in their communities. Generally speaking, those removed were less likely to have undertaken post-secondary education, have stable living conditions or stable relationships, and more likely to have been in gaol, deal with drug abuse issues, and have discovered their Aboriginality later in life (compare *Bringing Them Home* Report, *The Effects*). Sir Ronald Wilson stated in an interview that "[they] weren't asked to decide whether the offences had been committed [but to] trace the history and record the effects of a policy" (Brennan, "Bringing Them Home" 27). He explained that their main focus was to record the stories and not further distress the witnesses:

I didn't stop, as a judge would have stopped, to ask where's the corroboration. How could you doubt the authenticity of a story when tears

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<sup>18</sup> Bird, Carmel (ed), *the stolen children: their stories*. Sydney: Random House, 1998.

are running down the faces of storytellers? (Brennan, “Bringing Them Home” 27)

The *Bringing Them Home* Report and its reception made it clear that there was a need for Indigenous Australians to be allowed to tell their stories in the public arena. The many recommendations of the report included, among other measures, public acknowledgment of past policies and an apology to the Stolen Generation. But it was not until February 2008 that then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally made this apology that his predecessor John Howard had refused to offer. It was a first step in the right direction and crucial for the reconciliation process. In addition, learning about what happened to Indigenous Australians in the past is imperative when reconciliation is the common goal. Bernadette Brennan argues that there “is and must be an Indigenous history of Australia and a non-Indigenous history of Australia. These histories [...] are not competing narratives, they are narratives that speak to each other” (Brennan, “Bringing Them Home” 29). Indigenous Australians need to tell their stories so that they can heal, their community can heal, and Australia can heal.

Indigenous Australian literature forms an important part of this healing process. It is said to “provide a vehicle for the author to learn about their own history” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 36). At the same time, as Heiss argues, it is essential in educating and entertaining a wider audience “who may have a narrow perspective on Aboriginal Australians [...]” as it offers “first hand accounts of sometimes disturbing and hitherto hidden aspects of Australian history” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 36). Mudrooroo, an Indigenous writer himself, states that

Indigenous literature in English does not exist in an aesthetic vacuum, but within the context of Indigenous affairs [and therefore] must be seen holistically, within a cultural, historical and social context. (*Blacklines* 4).

Michele Grossman, professor in literary and cultural studies at Victoria University, Melbourne, claims that Indigenous Australian texts consolidate “the profile of Indigenous Australian contributions” (*Blacklines*, 2). She believes that these writings support the understanding and spreading of a “more nuanced and textured appraisal of the shared histories, regional differences and gendered specificities of Indigenous Australian lives and strategies of narrative self-representation” (*Blacklines* 2). The shared history and its comprehensive presentation play an

important role in the reconciliation process of Australia. Without the acknowledgement of the fact that “[I]mperialism frames the indigenous experience [and that] it is part of [their] story, [their] version of modernity” (*Blacklines* 22) there can be no common ground and overcoming the past in a way that ensures real equality. Grossman also argues that Indigenous Australian writing is “crucial in forging a reconsideration of the kinds of resistance such work offers to the continuing hegemony of institutionally sanctioned discourse of Aboriginality” (*Blacklines* 2). Hence, in addition to raising awareness of the shared past, self-representation is the basis for equality for Indigenous peoples of Australia. This basic right was never given to them after the arrival of the colonisers.

## ***5.2. The Effects of Forcible Removal in Plains of Promise***

Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* deals with issues that are still troublesome for Indigenous Australians of today – “state interference in Black lives, neglect, mistreatment, evil disguised as piety, the disintegration of indigenous culture” (Davison 42), and the assimilation policy of the early twentieth century. She has admitted in interviews that her writing is a way of coming to terms with her own as well as her families’ and community’s past and present situation. Wright states that she

wrote *Plains of Promise* to deal with [her] inner crisis and loneliness of the soul. Writing was a way of consoling [herself] in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat that [they] were facing as Waanyi people. [She] hoped to achieve some recognition for [their] land. [...] In a way the story wrote itself and as much as it is a story about the main characters, it is a story about land and the powers that ties people to land. (Wright, “Politics” 12f)

The writer feels strongly about her stories and her reasons to write. Wright believes that the “role of Aboriginal writers is to put the true name to the testimonies and times of our people, with our use of language, our visions, our imaginations, our facts” (Wright, “Politics” 19). At the same time, it is of importance that her “community accepts [her] work” (Wright, “Politics2 19) while other goals like

“publication, and as many people as possible reading [her] work” (Wright, “Politics” 19) are also driving forces.

Wright invites her readers to challenge their preconceived notions about Indigenous Australians and their shared history. As Lisa Slater observes, Scott “declares that, for Australia to become postcolonial, Australians need to acknowledge that there is much beyond [their] knowledge” (Slater, “Monstrous Bodies” 73). Alexis Wright is more vocal and to the point with her criticism:

I want to use the pen to the best of my ability for the mob where, everyday, we continue to lose too many people to the grave with our histories. We sit in hospitals watching our cultural knowledge sliding away from us, which the rest of Australia are glad to see buried, while they hurry to the beach with their lighthearted reading, about similar lives to themselves. Books that say nothing are taught in schools in a dulling down exercise, teaching children not *how* to think, but *what* to think. It is no wonder outdated politicians and their political structures can continue to control the country. Someone said to me the other day that ignorance is the weapon used now to kill Aboriginal people, instead of guns. (Wright, “Politics” 18)

According to Wright, Australian politics continues to fail the Indigenous community and she strongly believes that “[l]iterature is a very good tool for speaking out about the pain of humanity for Aboriginal people in this country” (Wright, “Politics” 13). In addition, she states that Australia has a “total colonial history of genocidal acts which spurs on our desperate need to write to give this country a memory” (Wright, “Politics” 14). Lynn Jacobs observes that Wright writes from “within homelands about the re-discovery of Indigenous inheritance in a three-generational saga that depicts the chaotic, on-going repercussions of colonial repression and dispossession” (Jacobs 175). Her narrative style in *Plains of Promise* is realistic and abstains from pathos and sentimentality. Wright uses short sentences that are loaded with information and focus the reader on the harshness of her characters’ lives and the message Wright wants to convey. Ivy Koopundi and her daughter Mary play a prominent role in the first two and last two parts of the book respectively. Ivy’s mother and her fate are a determining factor in Ivy’s life although the first part of the book starts with her having just committed suicide. The narrative is linear although there are about 35 years between the first two parts and the last two parts (part one is set in the early 1950s and part three around 1988), and the reader follows the two women and their journey through life. The parts are loosely



connected, which mirrors the almost non-existent connection between mother Ivy and her daughter Mary, both victims of the forcible removal policy albeit at different times and with different consequences. But the cruelty of this policy, its effects and repercussions are presented in such a straightforward and blunt manner that leaves the reader with a bitter aftertaste of guilt and sorrow.

### 5.2.1. Loneliness and Abuse

Alexis Wright's main character Ivy Koopundi Andrews can be regarded as a representative of the loneliness and abuse removed children were subjected to, and how their removal has an effect on their whole life. Ivy is seven years old at the beginning of the *Plains of Promise*. She was forcefully removed from her mother, who killed herself as a result of losing her daughter. Ivy's mother is considered a "crazy woman" (*PoP* 7) by the "movers and shakers" (*PoP* 7) of the mission, who believe that she "did not belong here" (*PoP* 7). Her suicide is a scandal in the Aboriginal community as her choice to end her life also stands in contrast to the accepted "[w]aitin' for spirits to come and get her" (*PoP* 8). Thus her decision to commit suicide is met with little understanding from other Aboriginals in the mission:

I'm crazy myself – got kids of mine there too in the dormitory. That don't make me happy either. But what can I do? What can anyone do to stop old Jipp and his mob. They run everything here. They in charge. Not me, that's for sure. Do that make me go around wantin' to kill myself or telling other people to kill themselves too? (*PoP* 8)

Ivy's mother's reaction to the forced separation from her daughter may be an accumulation of several factors that make her life unbearable, and the forcible removal from her daughter might have been the incident that broke the camel's back. Ivy's mother grew up on a sheep station (compare *PoP* 12) and was sent to a mission after being "left to give birth alone" (*PoP* 12) as she "disgraced herself by confusing lust for kindness and kindness for love" (*PoP* 12). In the mission she was an outsider and rumours were plentiful:

It was said that none of her own people wanted anything to do with her. She was too different, having grown up away from the native compound in the whitefellas household. And having slept with white men ... 'That makes black women like that really uppity,' they said. (*PoP* 12)

There is no compassion for the woman whose child was taken away from her for the simple reason that it was a common occurrence. The description of the separation of mother and child and the respective emotional distress is poignant and touching:

[Ivy] thought of her mother – that was about all she had done since being put into the dormitory a few days earlier. How her mother had screamed, and she herself had felt abandoned, alone for the first time in her life. She could hear her mother crying, following and being dragged away, still crying. She did not know what had happened to her but she had not come back again to the fence that barricaded the dormitory after she was dragged away. (*PoP* 6)

The mother's distress and desperation are apparent and are made all the more gruesome by the fact that the child, Ivy, had little understanding of what happened and what consequences that moment has for her life. That moment of separation puts an abrupt end to Ivy's childhood and marks the turning point of her mother's life.

Ivy's placement in the mission as protection is the beginning of her life of violence, suppression, scrutiny and captivity. Alexis Wright states that she wrote *Plains of Promise* to "deal with [her] inner crisis and loneliness of the soul" and that [she was] interested in the notion of what it meant to be ostracised" (Wright, "Politics" 12f). Ivy's experiences and her life is representative of the lives of many forcibly removed children who were robbed of their community, their family, and their childhood. Ivy is misunderstood and lonely as well as judged by her own people and by white people due to the fact that no one takes the time to get to know her. As a result, Ivy is faced with prejudice and rumour, being misunderstood throughout her life. In addition, she suffers tremendous abuse – sexual, physical and emotional – from various people after the separation from her mother.

Ivy's position in the mission is a difficult one from the beginning due to her mother's suicide. She is a young girl who has just lost her mother and is desperate for recognition, protection and some understanding. She is hopeful and - being a child – naïve in believing that she will be looked after. Little does she know that she

is “only” a “half-caste” who is “endured with slight tolerance” and would have to leave “to live in the civilised world, whenever [she] acquired the necessary skills” (*PoP* 5). Wright leaves little doubt that Ivy’s life on the mission will be more than difficult as becomes clear when considering the first description of Ivy meeting Jipp on the day of her mother’s death:

‘When you hear the bell ring after class, come over to the mission house, child. Mrs Jipp will take you to the chapel.’ Best to make the day as normal as possible, Jipp thought as he gave the child a slight pat on the shoulder then turned and walked out. Ivy stood where she was, proud of the fact that Jipp had been so kind to her; hoping the other girls had noticed. She watched the middle-aged white man, the father figure, shaking out his handkerchief to wipe his hand, walking away into the distance. (*PoP* 7)

The missionary wipes his hand after patting Ivy on the shoulder while the girl, probably craving for human compassion, misinterprets his behaviour as an act of kindness. This scene is also one of the very few scenes in which Wright uses direct speech to express Ivy’s emotions. “‘He’s kind, that Mr Jipp” (*PoP* 7) sums up Ivy’s first impression of the missionary and also one that could not be further from the truth.

Ivy’s life at the mission is dominated by violence. She is beaten up by other Aboriginal girls living on the mission. These beatings often leave her “semi-conscious” (*PoP* 22) and “[b]roken to mend itself. No one bothers, not even the missionaries, to acquaint themselves with the child’s injuries” (*PoP* 23). She is sexually abused by Jipp and believes the other girls attack her as a result of that so “[s]he hated them all. And she knew it was all because of what she did with Jipp” (*PoP* 25). She is ashamed and angry, especially when she believes that her only elderly friend, Maudie, avoids her: “‘Thinks I ask for Jipp slobbering all over me,’ Ivy thought bitterly. Knowing what they all thought of her, she felt ashamed” (*PoP* 51). Ivy’s anger is apparent and understandable, yet it is evident that, despite feeling ashamed, she will not break down and cry. She is proud and determined to survive her impossible situation, which is an indication of Wright’s message to her readers. Indigenous Australians should take pride in themselves regardless of their circumstances, and should believe in and fight for their survival. At the same time, Wright also shows that within the Aboriginal community there is cruelty against certain members if these members, for some reason or other, fail to meet the

community's expectations and standards. Wright's criticism of the Aboriginal community's difficulty to stand together and work together appears again later in the book.

Ivy becomes increasingly aware of her situation and hence she becomes sarcastic and bitter for a child. When she is offered a scarf by Jipp's wife, she accepts it "without offering any further acknowledgement. It was, she thought, a small enough reward for doing this woman's dirty work. (*PoP* 64). Ivy considers Beverly Jipp "incapable of keeping Jipp at home" (*PoP* 64) due to Ivy's belief that "[w]hite women are different [...]. They don't say nothing. Always polite. She could see for herself that Jipp and his wife did not sleep together" (*PoP* 63). Ivy's understanding of the reason for her being abused by Jipp is interesting as it fails to take into account the underlying racism and disregard for Aboriginal people by white people that also plays a role in her situation. Ivy is aware of the fact that the mission staff are judgemental and harsh in their judgement of Aboriginal people:

'It's what you expect from inbreeding,' one voice said. Ivy felt the voice cut like a knife inside her stomach; she felt sick.

'Inbreeding produces the worst from both sides of the fence,' someone else remarked.

'Mark my words. They're all the same, these half-castes. They are the ones that cause trouble. Can't help themselves. And the gins!'

'Take pride in nothing. Look at the way they treat their kids. Dirty. Disgraceful. Call themselves mothers! Isn't it obvious their race is sick and dying out? Just as well we're trying to do something for the littlies. (*PoP* 23f)

Such blatantly racist statements, after initially causing sadness, instil a determination in Ivy to "show them that they were wrong" (*PoP* 24). She also realises, albeit later, that she "should have said something. [...] They were wrong about her. She wasn't like the rest of them?" (*PoP* 24). It is noteworthy that Ivy uses the pronoun *them* to refer to other Aboriginals, other "half-casts". It can be argued that she considers herself different, not part of them, although "somehow she did not feel they were wrong. How could they be?" (*PoP* 24). In her difficult position she does not feel part of her community and at the same time she accepts white people's judgement of her without questioning it. She is trapped within a system that was

created to make her feel worthless, dependent on others, and full of doubts about herself. This leads to a life of loneliness that is hard to endure for a small child.

Crying is a coping mechanism to deal with her loneliness, shame and anger by evoking a reaction from people around her. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to act like a movie star which suggests that Ivy still has resources within herself that enable her to find the strength to continue her life:

Whenever the mission staff spoke to her she would form tears in her eyes [...]. Exposed from the cover of isolation she cried. It was as though people were noticing the ugliest thing on earth for the first time. If she was asked to answer a question she would look down to the ground and say nothing, and let her tears swell. She enjoyed the damp coolness sliding down her cheek. At the same time she knew the swelling tears made her eyes look beautiful. It was the look of the film stars she admired so much. She held the look before allowing the largest tears to fall. (*PoP* 23)

Ivy is misunderstood and judged by others based on her appearance and her “promiscuous look” (*PoP* 23). When the other girls leave her on a river bank in the blazing heat and glaring sun because they “know what youse up too, no-shame slut face” (*PoP* 34) Ivy manages to survive and “[a]fter that day [...] never tried to be like the other girls in the dormitory again” (*PoP* 34).

Her arranged marriage to Eliot is full of violence, due to the fact that neither of them is happy with the arrangement. Ivy is pregnant with Jipp’s baby, a disgrace for her husband, while Eliot is in love with Gloria. Ivy’s daughter is forcibly removed by Jipp and adopted by white Australians. Here, history repeats itself. Ivy’s daughter is taken away from her and the young mother is left with no information of her whereabouts or her well-being. When she enquires after her baby she is lied to and appeased:

‘Sorry, Ivy, but the baby is not here,’ Jipp told her the baby had been flown out with the flying doctors soon after it was born, because it was gravely ill. ‘When it is better it will come back from the hospital,’ he said. In the meantime, she should get better and not worry – the baby was being properly looked after. When Ivy asked if she had had a daughter, he answered, ‘Yes.’ Then he told her to go home. (*PoP* 158)

Again, Wright presents a moment in Ivy’s life that is heartbreaking and distressing in a narrative style that is matter-of-factly and uses short sentences. Her style, which is similar to that of a news report, seems to emphasise the harsh reality of the

removal policy, and leaves little room for debating its harsh consequences. It also appears to underline the careless and patronising attitude that Aboriginals are subjected to, and the lack of empathy with their suffering. Wright holds up a mirror to Australian society, showing them how horribly they treat Indigenous Australians and what little regard they have for their plight.

When the mission is closed down, Ivy, “prematurely aged” (*PoP* 167), is moved to a mental institution where she is the “star patient” (*PoP* 172) and manages to maintain “a massive sulk” (*PoP* 168) for “each day of her more than twenty years” (*PoP* 172) in the institution. Ivy learns early on “to cower into the deteriorating depths of herself from which she would never again surface” (*PoP* 52). She retreats, relying only on herself, as there is no one else that she can count on. Interestingly enough, at the end of her life, it is Eliot who looks after her by providing her with food in her humble dwelling on the far outskirts of a town. It is there that she and her daughter Mary meet, although they are seemingly unaware of the other’s identity.

Ivy lives her whole life being relocated to different places, according to government policies. Her forceful removal from her mother, her mother’s suicide, her own daughter’s forceful removal from her, her abusive treatment by men represent various cycles of violence which that woman endures without faltering and losing her pride. Wright creates a character that is strong and evokes sympathy in the reader. It can be argued that Ivy’s character is representative of all Aboriginals who were victims of various government policies but survived and lived to tell their stories. Ivy’s strength, her plight and continuous suffering culminate in the end when Ivy comes face to face with her daughter Mary without either of them realising who it is they finally meet. It is then that the tragedy that is Ivy’s life is at another crucial point. Ivy and Mary meet for a short moment that may result in recognition later on but at the time fails to create a happy ending. Wright continues her factual presentation of emotional situations with the result that the reader is stunned, curious and very touched by the scene. Wright presents this brief moment when Ivy’s, Mary’s and her daughter Jesse’s paths meet with few yet powerful words that evoke sadness in the reader for the two women:

'Hello, Ivy.' Mary did as she was told. And was surprised to find herself rewarded by a gentler look from the old woman, peeping over her folded arms position.

'This is Jesse,' Mary went on, but the child had gone to sleep in her arms. The woman peeped out again then turned away. Mary felt a sudden surge of disappointment and depression which she could not explain to herself. (*PoP* 295)

Wright manages to evoke in the reader a feeling of disappointment at that moment, which mirrors Mary's disappointment. But the question remains whether this is disappointment at the fact that Wright will not offer a happy ending for the two women or whether it is disappointment at the treatment of Aboriginals and its effects and consequences that are depicted in Wright's novel.

### 5.2.2. Being Brought Up White

Alexis Wright's character Mary Nelson, Ivy Koopundi's daughter, is introduced to depict another consequence of forcible removal that many Indigenous people have to deal with. In many cases, the removed person has no inclination that he or she was removed from his or her family before being either institutionalised or adopted by a non-Indigenous family. Learning about one's Indigenous heritage may come as a shock, and then trigger a curiosity about one's heritage that needs to be sated. Nevertheless, this newfound connection with the Aboriginal community may result in difficulties to adapt and understand what it means to be Aboriginal. Alexis Wright introduces Mary, Ivy Koopundi's daughter, in the final two parts of the story. We meet her in the year 1988 on her way to a job interview with the Coalition of the Aboriginal Governments. Mary was adopted by white people and is now determined to find out about her past:

Mary told them that recently, following the death of her parents in a car accident she had learned that she had been adopted. In their will they had asked forgiveness for not telling her. Her father was unknown. Her real mother was Aboriginal – but her birth certificate stated that her step parents were her real parents. Somehow all traces of her past had been removed. Mary told the board she wanted to be Aboriginal. (*PoP* 209)

Learning of her adoption offers an explanation for Mary why “she had felt different all her life” (*PoP* 209) and “working for an Aboriginal organisation seemed the best way to achieve her aims” (*PoP* 209) of finding out who she really is. Mary is determined to learn more about her Aboriginal roots that she gives up a well-paid position uptown (compare *PoP* 208) to work for the Coalition. She is highly educated as she “had recently completed university studies, majoring in politics and anthropology” (*PoP* 208) and rather well off as her step-parents’ will “included a house and other assets, as well as money in the bank for her as sole heir” (*PoP* 209).

Mary is presented as being different to the other people working at the Coalition. She notices the area their offices are in and walks “quickly uphill past the second-hand stores that gave way to more tacky shopfronts whose broken windows were sealed with boards or tin” (*PoP* 206). Her co-worker, Lesly, “a vision of beauty” (*PoP* 206) addresses Mary as “Sis” (*PoP* 206), is comfortable in her Aboriginality and embraces it. Mary, on the other hand, is new to this world and acutely aware of this as “[f]or Mary, it was ‘on the job’ training from the first day, learning to become Aboriginal as well as beginning a career in Aboriginal politics” (*PoP* 210). Wright depicts Mary as university educated, wealthy and sure of herself in the white world while she appears naïve and insecure in the Aboriginal world. She feels ashamed of “her embarrassingly upmarket flat, several suburbs away on the better side of the city” (*PoP* 210) so she “found a cheaper place [...] in the trendy street around the corner from the office” (*PoP* 211). She is “keen to abandon her former life completely”, as “she believed implicitly in Aboriginality” (*PoP* 211).

Nevertheless, her implicit belief is challenged after the birth of her daughter, Jessie, whose father is Buddy Doolan, the Director of the Coalition. Taking her baby for a walk soon becomes Mary’s least favourite pastime:

It was a real ordeal going past the corner pub. The doors swung open to see her moving past, accompanied by whistles and abuse. Could Buddy really have so many relatives? Out they came announcing their skin classification and relationship to Jessie. Pulling her out of the stroller and disappearing into the pub with her. Mary soon put a stop to that. She began to give sermons about grog, handing out pamphlets about Alcoholics Anonymous. (*PoP* 216)



It is apparent that Mary is unfamiliar with the way family is of utmost importance for Aboriginals. At the same time, it is obvious that Mary feels uncomfortable and different to these people who, to her, are strangers. As a result of her reaction and preaching about alcohol abuse, people believe that “she had a righteous streak about her” (*PoP* 217) and decide that “she must have turned into some kind of evangelist, a weirdo type, a religious nut. It was hotly debated whether she believed alcoholism was contagious” (*PoP* 217). Therefore, she prefers to go for walks in “the nearby parks [...] in the gentrified inner-city” (*PoP* 217).

The difficulty of leading a life as an Aboriginal in a prejudiced white society and the ensuing hardship are aspects that Mary has little or no experience with. She had a sheltered upbringing and “probably didn’t know much about the sleazy side of life” (*PoP* 237). Her only concern is finding her mother as she believes that this is the key to finding herself:

Try as she might to fit into the organisation, she was still alone at the end of the day. She had no family strength to back her in the life she had chosen for herself. She perceived a denial by Aboriginal people wherever she worked to accept her Aboriginality. She believed that if her life was to change for the better, she must gain their full acceptance. And this, she was certain, depended on finding her mother so that she could claim family and land affiliations. (*PoP* 240)

Like Ivy before, Mary experiences resistance from within the Aboriginal community and is made to feel like an outsider. Again, Wright shows her dissatisfaction with the seeming inability of the Aboriginal community to stand united and open their arms to members of the community whose life has provided them with different experiences. However, different experiences do not take away one’s Aboriginality, and this appears to be Wright’s message to her readers.

Family and land affiliations are important in the Aboriginal community. The connection to family and homeland is what makes a person, and helps others to relate to and accept a person. At the same time, Mary has difficulty accepting the people she meets as her “own people” (*PoP* 249) and “[t]he truth of the matter was that she felt superior to the yokels she had met” (*PoP* 249) and “there was no one she could trust sufficiently to discuss the problems she was experiencing in identifying with her Aboriginality” (*PoP* 249).

Mary's job with the Coalition enables her to travel to the homeland her mother was from. Yet again, Mary's obvious difference is so apparent that even the children spot it instantly:

They were not fooled by appearances. The smooth evenness of Mary's skin said she was different – flash. Her haircut was definitely not how Auntie Josie would do it for the ones who thought themselves the 'flash women' at home. [...] The woman and child were Murries alright, but not from anywhere around this place. (*PoP* 261)

Mary spends three months at St Dominic's and discovers nothing about her mother, as "[s]omehow no one felt she had been born there. It was rare for anyone who had been taken away to return" (*PoP* 282). Mary returns as "a white woman, and everyone came straight out and said so" (*PoP* 282). They recognise her difference as a result of her upbringing, yet unlike the other Aboriginals Mary meets, they accept her and Mary finds a family in them that "adopted her right from the start" (*PoP* 283).

Mary's first and only encounter with her mother is short, unexpected, and partly accidental. Ivy lives far away from anybody, alone and only Elliot, to whom she was married on the mission when she was pregnant with Mary, provides her with the necessities of life. Victor, Elliot's son, takes Elliot, Mary and Jessie to this outstation, against the advice of the Council of Elders who accuse him of "making trouble by bringing Mary and the child together with Ivy" (*PoP* 299). Here again, Alexis Wright illustrates how prejudiced and unforgiving some members of the Aboriginal community can be. Wright's message that the Aboriginal community only has a chance of achieving their goals of self-determination and respect if they act unitedly and refrain from attacking one another. The meeting of Ivy and her daughter is related as follows:

At first Mary thought it was an animal. A wild animal cowering in one corner. A 'roo or emu, with long, matted fur or feathers. [...] Mary felt her heart beating against Jessie's head.

'Auntie – is it you?' Victor spoke softly to the bundle in rags, a creature with matted white hair. The old woman jammed herself farther into the corner, her face locked beneath her folded arms. (*PoP*, 294)

Mary is scared and shocked while Jessie, like Ivy, "was about to explode from the violent convulsions" (*PoP* 294). Elliot makes the introductions by simply saying,

“Ivy, you listening to me? [...] I want you to meet Mary and little Jessie here. They are our family” (*PoP* 294f). The meeting is brief and it remains unclear whether Ivy recognises her own daughter. Mary’s reaction is inexplicable to herself as she “felt a sudden surge of disappointment and depression which she could not explain to herself” (*PoP* 295). She is concerned about the old woman, yet all her attempts to find out more about her are futile and she comes to understand that “you needed to have been through it all in order to understand. You were never going to be told” (*PoP* 297). Mary’s reconnection with her past is incomplete. Although Buddy Dolan’s family accept her and embrace her and her daughter as their own, it is unclear whether she will ever learn the truth about her mother Ivy. It can be argued that Wright wants her readers to comprehend how painful and complicated the process of discovering one’s past is. Moreover, she states that she is aware of her duty to protect people as she knows that “we as a family have suffered through each successive generation from the things that happened in the past which our families will not talk about” (Wright, “Politics” 13). She calls this “the massacre of our voices which continues to this day” (Wright, “Politics” 13). Ivy has no voice anymore and she “growled like a wild animal” (*PoP* 294). But she is heard by Mary who will continue her search for her past and her true identity.

### ***5.3. Opening the dialogue in Kim Scott’s Benang***

Anne Le Guellec argues that Kim Scott “undertakes [...] to subvert the simplistic, destructive and ultimately self-defeating doctrine of progress championed by colonists whose eugenicist policies aimed at ‘breeding out’ the Aboriginal heritage” (Le Guellec 35). She maintains that his critical approach of this topic seems relevant “in the context of ongoing national reconciliation, since most non-Aboriginal Australians were until quite recently unaware of the true nature of the colonisation of the continent” (Le Guellec 36). In fact, Scott was “trying to work out [his] own family history” (Koval 48) which he considered an

important story [...] about the damage done, and about white madness, and about survival. I think that will be important to people. One of the issues is that, with visual arts or with writing, you get manoeuvred by media interest

into being some sort of spokesperson. And I don't want to get into that. I want to make it a singular voice even though it goes against conventions, a singular voice speaking just for myself and making a quite strong claim about having an Aboriginal identity, taking on all that rhetoric and all those racist sorts of discourses and using white voices. (Koval 48)

Kim Scott goes against conventions, not only by succeeding in making his novel a singular and very strong voice, but also by creating a work of fiction that is structurally creative and challenging for the reader. Victor Oost questions Scott's narrative strategy, which he believes to be aggressive and employed to make *white* readers feel uncomfortable. He wonders whether "the technique [needs] to be as experimental, and the narrative voice as uncertain, in order to destabilise the white readers" (Oost 114). It can be argued that the narrative is confusing due to the lack of chronological order of events or generations. Nevertheless, Scott manages to create urgency about his story, which allows the reader to get an idea of its importance and the need to make the reader understand why the issues presented in this story should be addressed. Scott abandons the concept of linear progress, and includes the reader by having the narrator Harvey addressing the reader as if they were engaged in a dialogue:

Once again, I am confusing things, not following an appropriate sequence." (*Benang* 97)

"He might also have written: *Displace, disperse, dismiss* ... My friends, you recognise the language. (*Benang* 107f)

"But, I digress, this is a simple family history, not a treatise on the economy." (*Benang* 207)

"But again, I digress and confuse all of us, one with the other. As if we were not all individuals, as if there was no such thing as progress or development, as if this history were just variations on the one motif.

And, after all, I have a story to tell. This little family history to share with you. (*Benang* 367)

As the above examples show, Kim Scott reaches out to his readers and creates the connection that is necessary if the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians is to be bridged. He employs techniques reminiscent of oral story telling, which also support his aim to bring the two Australian communities closer.

At the same time, Scott succeeds in using irony to make critical statements all the more effective, as the following example shows. When the townspeople make

formal complaints about too many Aboriginals residing on the pastoralists' leases on the outskirts of town, Scott writes:

It needs very few *natives* to upset the well-being of a new and insecure community. The one community's progress is measured by the other's decline. The power of the one community is increased by the feebleness of the other; or better still, the complete absence of an indigenous community – as the Mustles, my own ancestors the Coolman twins, and my own grandfather Ernest Salomon Scat have been so keen, in their various ways, to prove. (*Benang* 207)

The community can also be interpreted as Australia, a young country, still finding its own cultural identity. Scott indicates that the imbalance and inequality are not only prevalent but actively encouraged. It is accepted that the betterment of white Australian society is detrimental to the development of the Indigenous community. This mentality has been passed on from generation to generation and strengthened with each telling. The message Scott portrays is clear – Indigenous Australians are here to stay. Their resilience and resistance are qualities that enable them to fork out a future. Even the title of the novel is indicative of Scott's message. *Benang* is a Nyoongar word meaning tomorrow, as the narrator explains in his novel:

There are others of her names, or her father's, which have been variously preserved on paper. Father's name: Wonyin, Winnery. Her name: Pinyan, Benang.

None of these make sense to me now, although there is a Nyoongar word, sometimes spelt benang, which means tomorrow. Benang is tomorrow. (*Benang* 464)

The final paragraph of his novel reads:

I offer these words, especially, to those of you I embarrass, and who turn away from the shame of seeing me; or perhaps it is because your eyes smart as the wind blows the smoke a little toward you, and you hear something like a million many-sized hearts beating, and the whispering of waves, leaves, grasses ...

We are still here, Benang. (*Benang* 495)

As the above quotes show, Scott writes about the survival of a people that were believed to die out soon due to their “lacking in reflection, judgement and foresight” and their state of “unfitness for heaven” and “entirely lost to all moral and spiritual perception” (*Blacklines* 26). Yet, his story shows how wrong this notion is and asks

the reader to take steps towards the perceived other with an open mind. This will ensure a dialogue that will result in mutual understanding and appreciation and ultimately, this is the purpose of these writings. Scott's starts the dialogue by using a narrator that addresses the reader, hence, making the story more personal and therefore less likely to be dismissed.

### 5.3.1. Managing Life in New Circumstances

Kim Scott depicts an Aboriginal character, Fanny Benang, who successfully adapts to the new living conditions she finds herself in due to colonisation. The author uses her as an example of how many Indigenous people manage to do the balancing act between two cultures that could not be more different. In addition, he also shows that Indigenous people are able to embrace the new culture and incorporate it in their lives. Fanny Benang successfully avoids being moved into a mission, chooses her future husband Sandy One Mason with a decisiveness that is unrivalled. When Sandy and other white men land near where Fanny lives, she reacts in a way that shows how fearless she is and how determined to survive. Fanny and other women gather shells from the edge of the rocks and collect shellfish when a whale boat comes into sight. The women are unable to leave as

[t]here were men – at least three or four white men – standing among the huge broken rocks where the sloping sheet of granite became scrub. [...] This scene was one the women knew and feared. There appeared no escape. The men stayed where they were, able to cut off any retreat. (*Benang* 462)

Fanny's decision in that moment determines her life and that of her future offsprings. She chooses her future husband, a white man<sup>19</sup>, and this marriage ensures her and her family's survival:

Fanny walked at the boat [...]. She brushed a man's hands aside, stepped light and quick into the boat, and put her own hands on Sandy One Mason's shoulder.

Maybe it was something about the way the sun lit his hair, maybe she saw a youthful, ancestral hero, but she went straight to him, and she grabbed him.

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<sup>19</sup> The end of the book reveals that Sandy One Mason's mother is part-Aboriginal and, eventually, her and Sandy One are schooled by a white man. (compare *Benang* 484)

She looked boldly into his eyes, wanting to take him on, this one among others closing a trap. (*Benang* 463)

Fanny's ability to read situations and follow her survival instinct result in a relatively protected life:

Sandy One Mason was among those stalking the women, yet one turned to him, and stuck with him. It limited the violence, solved some immediate and pressing problems. She saved herself, and she saved him. (*Benang* 462)

The narrator Harley states that Fanny "recognised" Sandy One Mason "by his blond hair" (*Benang* 463), a feature that "some blond ancestral hero" (*Benang* 464) also displayed. It can be argued that this recognition is only possible because Sandy was part-Aboriginal, despite his fair colour of skin. Their connection can be explained by their Aboriginality, although it is unclear whether they are aware of Sandy One's family story. Nevertheless, their outstanding relationship is apparent to others. Harley and his Uncle Jack talk about the couple's special bond:

We would end up discussing Fanny and Sandy One. They must have had something special going, unna? Really. All that time alone, following the team him watching her, and she absorbed as if – I say – as if reading. His awareness was growing, he was becoming intimate with his land, with her. (*Benang* 351)

Fanny teaches her husband how to be an Aboriginal and survive and live in the traditional way. They are happy, look out for each other and try to stay out of harm's way and out of any missions to which Fanny or their children could be forcefully removed. This fear is not unfounded as Fanny is under observation by Mr Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines<sup>20</sup>. The Chief Protector is a prominent feature in the story and his power over Aboriginals is palpable. In order to show how rigid and inhumane his attitude to Aboriginals was, Scott incorporates different forms of documents in his novel that give an impression of authenticity. Xavier Pons explains:

They include excerpts from A.O. Neville's book *Australia's Coloured Minority*, from his official correspondence as well as interviews; excerpts

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<sup>20</sup> A. O. Neville was the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (1915-1936). After that he became Western Australia Commissioner of Native Affairs and "at the 1937 conference [he was] the most uncompromising advocate of absorption [arguing] that absorption would ultimately be the fate of the entire Aboriginal race" (McGregor, R. 178)

from official reports, submissions to a Royal Commission, newspaper articles, etc. Scott lists all those sources in his ‘acknowledgments’ and they confirm how much archival research has gone into writing the novel. (Pons 39f)

The following letter is an example of one such document that imitates the style of correspondence and is modified to fit the story. It shows the Chief Protector’s patronising and harsh attitude that are rooted in his feeling of superiority and lack of empathy. Fanny is under observation and the information presented by the Constable could not be further from the truth:

*To the Chief Protector of Aborigines*

*There is an Aboriginal woman named Fanny Benang, who wanders about the country between Wirlup Haven and Dubitj Creek. She has two half-caste children with her; one little girl between nine and ten years old and the other I am informed was born at the Dubitj Creek about four weeks ago.*

*The woman I am informed is at present at fifty miles from Wirlup Haven. From what I can learn from stockmen and others she is a notorious prostitute. It would be exceedingly difficult to say who is the father of the children. I would suggest arrangements be made to have her and her children removed to an institution when opportunity offers.*

*Mr Ernest Scat of Gebalup, a reputable and kindly person, informed me that he would willingly adopt this eldest half-caste if you give your consent.*

*PC Blake*

*1/7/1930 (Benang 104)*

Stating that Fanny is a *prostitute* who has no idea who the father of her children is an assumption that has no truth in it. But discovering real facts about Aboriginals by making their acquaintance and establishing a rapport rather than classifying them seems out of the question. And it seems it is this lack of knowledge of and interest in Indigenous Australians is what Scott addresses in his novel. He asks his readers to take a look, to listen, and to pay attention to his characters and see them for who they really are. Only by doing so can you bridge a gap between two strangers or communities. Learning about the other in order to become familiar with it will ensure mutual understanding.

Scott presents Fanny as a caring, loving and extremely clever woman – street-wise you might call her. She and Sandy One are together for a long time and she cares for him when he is old, “tending him. Wiping, washing, drying. Gently, not rushing. It was a rare time, to be safe and alone together, those last years” (*Benang* 351). At the



same time, she ensures that their children's lives are somewhat protected by making her white husband register them:

If he registered his child, then it would be murder when they took, used, killed like they did. Because there would be the certificate. It'd be written down, there'd be words saying who there was. Then it couldn't be just for fun, just to fell the power, just to try to make up for being like nearly dead that people were killed. Some people wanted everything for themselves, and if you got in their way... (*Benang* 178)

Fanny understands the harsh reality she lives in and has adapted to it. She abides by the law, and keeps a low profile while maintaining a fairly traditional way of living and upholding her Aboriginal traditions and culture. She passes on her Aboriginal traditions to her children and shares them with her husband. As a result, she is very much in touch with her Aboriginality, allowing the reader to see how considerate, caring and clever she is.

Fanny has successfully managed to combine both worlds – the colonisers' and the Aboriginals' – and leads a happy and fulfilled life as far as the times allow that. She is the driving force and protector of her family and her relatives in spite of having to remain on the sideline and using her white husband as protection. Her Aboriginality is the essence of her being, giving her strength, faith, and resilience to continue through life. Scott depicts a character that is fully-rounded, observant and with an unflinching will to survive. Her survival is guaranteed through her ability to add another layer to her life experience and knowledge. Scott allows his reader to see the possibilities that are available if two cultures are open to learn from each other and to embrace their differences. By doing so, a new culture might be created that combines the best of both and, as a result, is better than either individually. They could be stronger together.

Despite Fanny's relatively good situation in life, she experiences second-hand loss, death and abuse. Her people are murdered, raped, children stolen or killed in a *spree*. Fanny is aware of such attacks and lives in constant fear of her children falling victim to one such *spree* (*Benang* 202):

Shots roared in the vast canyon of night the little hollow had suddenly become.  
Perhaps the stars had brightened; he could see figures leaping to their feet, helping one another up, running. And there were voices calling, calling.

People fell, were shot. Were shot. A woman running at Sandy jerked, and was flung to the ground. In the little space between gunshots there was the sound of running feet, other bodies hitting the ground, screams and shouting. Small voices, too. (*Benang* 186)

Such descriptions of violence against Aboriginals are juxtaposed with Fanny's moments in which she retreats and resorts to Aboriginal culture to find strength to carry on and to connect with her ancestors and loved ones. When the white world is taxing, she refuses to give in, and draws on her Aboriginality to continue her fight. This fight, however, would be unnecessary if white society were more open-minded and inclusive rather than exclusive. Fanny has succeeded in combining the two worlds, and therefore she is powerful and equipped to continue her peaceful fight for survival. She understands the advantages both worlds bring and is determined to succeed. By remembering her past and her family she remains grounded and calm regardless of how terrible a situation she finds herself in:

In the firelight, the movement of the eyes, seeking reassurance.  
Fanny embellished, linked led him on. Later in the night, Fanny and the fire spoke to all the sleeping, slumped bodies. She mumbled, sang softly to herself, often with words that they might not know. Sometimes of children she had lost, the father mother that were taken. Her brothers, sisters.  
Wondering, always, how to say it softly enough so that they might remember. (*Benang* 245f)

Passages, in which the focus is on Fanny's Aboriginality, enable the reader to comprehend fully the character that is Fanny Benang. It can be argued that by depicting such a wonderful character Kim Scott wants his readers to project their comprehension they have gained through fiction into the real world and by doing so, initiate communication that can lead to mutual understanding. Fanny epitomises the successful marriage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of living and loving. Her character teaches the reader how beneficial open-mindedness and willingness to learn from each other are.

### 5.3.2. Understanding the Past and its Consequences

Kim Scott's narrator in *Benang* epitomises the difficulty many Indigenous people are faced with when trying to put the pieces of one's past together in order to understand themselves and their heritage better. This search involves opening the dialogue with the Aboriginal community as well as the non-Indigenous community who may be in possession of essential documents and information that will aid one's search. Harley, the narrator in *Benang*, introduces himself as "[t]he first white man born" (*Benang* 10) in his family, and states that "he [does] not wish this to be a story of [him] – other than in the healing – but before [him]" (*Benang* 10). He is a narrator that is hectic and "confusing things, not following an appropriate sequence" (*Benang* 97), yet he is brutally honest, and insecure about his identity. In the introductory paragraph he states:

I know I make people uncomfortable, and embarrass even those who come to hear me sing. I regret that, but now how all the talk and nervous laughter fades as I rise from the ground, and, hovering in the campfire smoke, slowly turn to consider this small circle of which I am the centre. (*Benang* 7)

In an interview, Kim Scott elaborates on Harley's magic-realist tendency to *float away*, and how it was a concept that was created during his research of his own family history and the documents he discovered. He explains how he "wanted to take on Neville and defuse the potency of all the written stuff and that uplift and elevation" and how he just wanted "to take it literally" as it would "get him out of the strait-jacket of staying within his terms" (Koval 49). Le Guellec argues that by "parodying the assimilationist metaphor" (Le Guellec 40) Scott succeeds in "[subverting] the language of power which resorts to metaphorical euphemisms to refer to its politics of assimilation" (Le Guellec 40). Xavier Pons claims that Harley's "propensity for elevation [...] signifies his lack of substance and of roots because of the white tampering with Aboriginal identity" (Pons 41). Scott's narrator is disconnected from himself, his past, from the people, and the land. The levitation epitomises this disconnection which is diminished gradually through the discovery of his family history.

Harley is the "first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line" (*Benang* 11) and the result of his grandfather's obsession with "breeding up" (*Benang* 26):

*In the third or fourth generation no sign of native origin is apparent. The repetition of the boarding school process and careful breeding ... after two or three generations the advance should be so great that families should be living like the rest of the community. (Benang 26)*<sup>21</sup>

Ernest Solomon Scat, Harley's grandfather, considered himself "a scientist who *with his trained mind and keen desire to exert his efforts in the field investigating native culture and in studying the life history of the species*" (Benang 28) can become successful in the new country. Harley understands that "much effort had gone into arriving at [him] (Benang 28). In short, Harley was raised to "carry on one heritage, and ignore another" and consequently, finds himself "wishing to reverse that upbringing" (Benang 19). It can be argued that Kim Scott created Harley to express his own dilemma and anger at what happened to the Indigenous population at the hands of the colonisers as the author states in an interview:

When I started reading the historical stuff, Neville's stuff and native welfare and local histories, I started to think about myself in an historical position, then there was a lot of anger and bitterness. It's inevitable. Then you feel like you've been duped or you feel like there is all this history, knowledge and information that I'd been cut off from. (Koval 48)

This feeling of disconnection is the root of Harley's anger and frustration and he tries to reconnect with the part in him that he was forced to ignore. His research enables him to establish a connection:

but my kinship with Fanny and the two Sandies becomes all the stronger with the realisation that, when I began this project, I too breathed in the scent of something discarded, something cast away and let drift and only now washed up. It was the smell of anxiety, of anger and betrayal. (Benang 9)

Lisa Slater argues that "Harley does not comfortably *settle* into an Aboriginal identity, rather Scott playfully critiques the positioning of Aboriginality and whiteness" (Slater, "Benang" 221). The process of discovering himself requires strength and determination as Harley's description of himself explains that he "had come back from the dead. Obviously, I was not in the best of health; I was pale, my memory was poor" (Benang 14). He is sickly, unhappy, angry, and bitter, but also focused on his goal of writing his family history. His Uncles Will and Jack

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<sup>21</sup> These passages are taken from A.O.Neville's book *Australia's Coloured Minority: Their Place in Our Community*. Currawong Publishing, Sydney, 1947.

Chatalong try to support him in his search for his Aboriginal identity by reminding him to focus on what he wants to achieve. His anger, albeit understandable, will be detrimental in his search for his Aboriginality. Understanding the past and dealing with it is important but at the same time the focus should be on building a common future. As this is a difficult task, Uncle Jack advises Harley:

[Harley] showed them the photos, and Uncle Jack was angry. ‘Yeah, well this is just to make you sad, reading and looking at things like this. It’s just a wadjela way of thinking, this is. You should just relax, feel it. You gotta go right back, ask your spirits for help.’ (*Benang* 111)

Like Mary in Wright’s *Plain of Promise*, Harley needs to learn to accept that he was raised as a white man and reconnecting with his Aboriginal roots, and fully understanding what it means to be Aboriginal will take time. It is easier said than done for Harley to discover his Aboriginal identity, and the recurring floating is a reminder that the narrator is still disconnected, although writing “apparently helped knot and tie [him] down” (*Benang* 147). The narrator struggles to “work through his white way of thinking” (*Benang* 112) and to follow his Uncle’s advice to “feel it in [his] heart” (*Benang* 148). Harley is lost and desperate to find his Aboriginality and eagerly looks for a “likeness to Harriette” (*Benang* 161) or other ancestors in the mirror but is told by Jack that he needs “to throw that away” (*Benang* 161). Aboriginality is not merely about your appearance or the tone of your skin, it is about your feeling, your understanding, and your self-identification. Jack guides Harley on his journey into himself and accelerates his progress by taking him to the country where Jack comes from, and where there is time and space to relate stories and dive further into history.

Harley learns about “people learning to live in two cultures” (*Benang* 216) and how Aboriginals “could be moved anywhere, told to marry, where to live, had to get a permit to work, not allowed to drink or vote” and how it “separated [them] all” (*Benang* 216). Harley understands that there “are so many things it is difficult to speak of, adequately” (*Benang* 216) and how painful it is for his Uncles to remember their difficult past, and wonders whether there “were words for what we felt” (*Benang* 268). The narrator struggles to build a bridge to his past and to reconnect with it in a way that allows him to comprehend what it means to be

Aboriginal, especially if his skin is white and his upbringing was white. The gap can only be closed by analysing the past, and dealing with it in an open and honest manner, even if it is painful. Marilyn Strelau argues that

There can be no tomorrow without looking at the past from an Aboriginal perspective; without facing the truths about genocide, assimilation, the Stolen Generation, abuse; without being educated in mind and heart. Only through self-examination can these memories form the hope suggested by the word *benang*. (Strelau 164)

Through Harley Scott wants his readers to understand that facing the past is the only way to move forward as it fosters mutual understanding and creates a basis for honest communication. Harley “found [himself] among paper, and words not formed by an intention corresponding to my own, and [he reads] a world weak in its creative spirit” (*Benang* 472). He urges his reader to understand that “[t]here is no other end, not other destination for all this paper talk but to keep doing it, to keep talking, to remake it” (*Benang* 472). Scott encourages communication despite a possible need of non-Indigenous Australians to avert their eyes from the cruel past and the distant memories of what really happened to the Indigenous population of Australia. Harley admits that he has “written this story wanting to embrace all of you, and it is the best I can do in this language we share” and points out that “there is an older tongue which also tells it” (*Benang* 495).

In the end, Harley manages to speak “from the heart” (*Benang* 495) and informs the reader that he is “part of a much older story” (*Benang* 495). As a narrator, he seems calmer and more peaceful, at ease with himself – he seems to have established a connection with his fragmented self by reconnecting with the past.

Harley, the “first white man” in his family, shows the reader a possible way for a better future. He is sure that his people will be a part of this future as they have survived hardship. Lisa Slater maintains that Scott “writes a counter-history that demands that Indigenous people be listened to and that a new future be forged that respects and enables difference” (Slater, “Most Local of Histories” 52). She explains that Scott envisages a better present and future for Australia that is informed by history and improved through a dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. (compare Slater, “Most Local of Histories” 52) Scott invites his non-Indigenous readers to face the past and open their eyes and hearts to it. He

invites his Indigenous readers to continue their search for their identity as only if one is truly certain of who they are can one experience true happiness, and move on from a past that is filled with suffering and pain.

#### ***5.4. Self-determination as a Way Forward***

Mudrooroo argues that Indigenous writers are “deeply concerned with problems of their community” (Mudrooroo, “Indigenous Literature” 4) and maintains that “Indigenous texts should intervene politically and [...] should not only be political but also enjoyable and entertaining” (Mudrooroo, “Indigenous Literature” 96). The ensuing difficulty is how to create a literary work of fiction that is entertaining while dealing with issues that the majority of white Australians seem to either know little about, or care little about or do not want to be confronted with. Yet it is this challenge to combine those seemingly extreme opposites that makes Indigenous Australian writing so compelling and outstanding. Grossman argues that this literature has

compelled readers [...] to revisit the received narratives of colonially-driven national history and identity that have governed non-Indigenous understandings of, and relationships with, Aboriginal peoples since contact. [...] [I]t has been crucial in forging a reconsideration of the kinds of resistance such work offers to the continuing hegemony of institutionally-sanctioned discourses of Aboriginality, both past and present. (*Blacklines* 3)

According to Wright, Australian politics continues to fail the Indigenous community and she strongly believes that “[l]iterature is a very good tool for speaking out about the pain of humanity for Aboriginal people in this country” (Wright, “Politics” 13). Both Kim Scott and Alexis Wright depict how inequality is major factor in the slow advancement of Indigenous Australians. Scott presents characters that work hard to improve their situation yet they find themselves imprisoned by a system created by white society that works against them. In contrast, Wright looks at the organised fight for equality and points out weaknesses and obstacles that result in the failure of such a movement.

#### 5.4.1. The Difficulty of Being Accepted as presented in *Benang*

Kim Scott's *Benang* portrays some Aboriginal characters that are represented as adaptable, flexible, and law-abiding. These characters include Jack Chattalong, Fanny's nephew and Harriette, Fanny's daughter, who both are remarkable in terms of their ability to survive in circumstances that hardly are positive or allow for a successful life. In addition, they represent people who live their Aboriginal traditions and take pride in their Aboriginality while understanding the inevitable truth that change is enforced on them and in order to survive they need to accept these changed circumstances. Nevertheless, their ability to modify their way of living in order to advance in the new system is hindered by white society's prejudice and racism.

Harriette, like her sister Dinah, is married to a white man, Daniel Coolman, in order to ensure a better status for herself in life. The Coolman twins are the chosen ones:

'My daughters', [Sandy One Mason] said. 'They are educated, they can read and write.' [...] 'I registered their births. I will marry their mother. She's everything you want a woman to be...' [...] 'A good partner, knows this country, keeps out of the way. Food everywhere. A best partner.' (*Benang* 344)

Their father "was proud. So many children had been lost, but now their daughters would be safe" (*Benang* 346). Being married to a white person is seen to be a guarantee of being accepted in white society, and proof of an ability to become a member of mainstream society. All precautions are taken to ensure a chance of his daughters' survival during a time that is unsafe and unpredictable in terms of reactions of white people to Aboriginals. Harriette's marriage to a white man is considered protection despite the fact that she is a woman whose ability to look after herself and her family is outstanding, as the narrator explains:

My great-grandmother, Daniel's wife – Harriette Coolman – used to go hunting. It was she who supported the family. For the sake of the town's mental peace – Harriette after all was a *black* – Daniel provided the appearance of working while Harriette smuggled the children to the bush and back each day, wanting them to learn what she knew, hunted and gathered most of their nourishment. Each time she did the shopping she took her shuffling husband with her for support and security against an insecure town which might suddenly turn hostile. She kept the house as clean as



anyone – lest they ever doubt – and she washed and stitched, organised and sheltered those that she could; we survivors. (*Benang* 56)

It is apparent that white people's fear and racism stem from insecurity and lack of knowledge of Aboriginal culture, and an unwillingness to see them as human beings. As the above quote states, there is nothing to fear about Aboriginals. In fact, Harriette, unlike white women at that time, supports her family and looks after her aging husband. She also ensures that her children learn Aboriginal ways from her so that they can pass on her traditions. She equips them with skills that allow them to be fully rounded individuals. She continues in her parents' tradition by raising her children bi-culturally in order to prepare them for their life as best they can. This is evidence of how forward thinking, intelligent and adaptable Harriette and her family are. In addition, Harriette introduces her husband to her traditional way of life, which is depicted as peaceful, joyful and full of awareness of what the country has to offer:

The truth is, the Coolman twins were happy. It was a decent life. Moving slow; hunting, drinking. There was always the chance of gold. They had wives who knew that country; who found water, food, a place to camp. The women could do everything. They could work like men, feed off the land, embrace their men and make them strong. (*Benang* 170)

This description of their lives together shows the opportunities that are available if one is able to accept them, and to allow for chances to be taken. Scott clearly wants his readers to see that, contrary to common belief, Aboriginal traditions and knowledge are valuable and offer additional aspects of life that would enhance the lives of white people. Happiness and a decent life are what people strive for and Scott shows that it can be realised in mixed marriages. As Russell McGregor states, in 1941

the ultimate objective was the complete disappearance of mixed-bloods as a distinct ethnic group. Its achievement entailed a good deal of social amelioration, raising the educational, vocational and economic standards of the half-castes to a level that made them fit members of a civilised society, and fit spouses for white people. (McGregor, R. 159)

Accordingly, the expectation was that Aboriginals or part-Aboriginals had nothing to offer white people and needed to be trained and “uplifted” in order to be acceptable members of society and potential partners for white men. Scott's characters, however, epitomise perfect wives, partners, mothers, and members of

society while still maintaining their Aboriginality. Scott's message is loud and clear – Aboriginals can do anything when given a chance.

Unfortunately, they are not given a chance, and Scott demonstrates that in a scene that shows Harriette fighting for her children's right to education during an "Extraordinary Parents and Citizens Association Meeting" (*Benang* 289):

'We' – she said we – 'We have as much right as anyone to give our children an education. More right.' She said she had been brought up and educated pretty much the same as any of them. Better than some. Her ideals of life were not so different from those of white people. She thought it was possible for her children to have the best of both worlds, the white as well as the black. To be proud of themselves. (*Benang* 290)

Scott juxtaposes Harriette's passion and belief with white people's fear, sarcasm and patronising attitude (compare *Benang* 290). Scott presents a strong and fearless woman who stands up for her family, her community, in the face of inequality and racism:

'There's plenty of you here know me, know my father. He's dying, but he stood by us enough to make sure we got a chance in the world. There's men here who've not done that, who leave kids everywhere, or send them away. 'Some of you say you want a civilised and kind nation.' Harriette paused, seemed to be trying to adjust herself to the tension and hostility in the room, but when she continued her voice was a little more strained. 'So why are you acting like this?' (*Benang* 290)

Scott points out the hypocrisy of white people and the gratuitousness of their stereotyping of Aboriginal people. In the face of Harriette's accusations and her holding up a mirror to the town people they resort to simple racist statements telling her to "[g]o back to where [she] came from" (*Benang* 290). She is ridiculed and dismissed as sick (compare *Benang* 291). But Harriette refuses to let them silence her and continues:

I come from here. There were a lot more of us at one time. I'm married to a white man.' [...] 'Some Aborigines they might need some help. We don't. Just the same chance as you others. Why you trying to keep us back? Is it to make yourselves feel big? Give all children the same chance as your own, and they will do just the same; some good, and some not so good probably. (*Benang*, 290)

Scott gives Harriette a voice and a platform to address the concerns of Indigenous Australians. His character stands up for his community in the hope that this raising

of awareness will initiate a thinking process in his readership. He addresses stereotypes, inequality and unfair treatment through his character:

I tell you, we're no dirtier, or lazier, or stupider, or badder than you. You want to throw all the blame for our troubles – and your own troubles – onto us. You try to keep us out of town, out of the hotels – even some of us who been paying taxes and working as hard as anyone, and you want to keep our children out of schools. How would any of you stand up to that sort of treatment?' [...] Maybe you men here tonight are more like my brother-in-law was. [...] The sort of man who won't stand by his kids, who abuses women, who'll run and leave a woman and children to themselves.' (Benang 291)

Harriette's speech is testimony of her strength, determination and unfaltering will to give her children the best in life despite all odds. Her analysis of her people's plight is apt and evidence of her intelligence and awareness. Despite the logic and correctness of her observations, they fail to achieve the desired outcome as the newspaper report covering the meeting illustrates:

*It was resolved that unless a reply is received from the Minister of Education by the thirtieth of this month all white parents will cease sending their children to the school until the blacks are otherwise provided for. It must be stressed again that unkindliness of feeling towards the blacks is not a factor in this matter of black and white in our school and, indeed, in our town. On the contrary, if the townspeople were not so indiscriminately kind to them, the present trouble would not exist. [...] It is the threat of the coming of all and sundry that is the disquieting factor. (Benang 292f)*

The wish for hegemony, which is the root of Aboriginal suffering, is as apparent. In addition, it seems clear that a fear of the unknown is the governing emotion. Scott depicts a reasonable, powerful character, unafraid and truthful, who is asking for a fair chance.

Harriette's nephew, Jack Chatalong, is an example of how unfairness ruled the world of the Aboriginals at the time the novel is set. Jack is a hard worker, educated, and lives in a hut that "was made from materials gleaned from other people's rubbish" (Benang 61). He works for a farmer called Starr, who "had kept his long-ago promise, and arranged for Jack's education, after a fashion, and fed and clothed him in return for his labour" (Benang 61). After discovering that he "could get paid for the same work, and that his skills were valued ... Well, of course he moved away when he could" (Benang 61). In short, Jack Chatalong lives a quiet life, works

hard, is known in town, and, like other workers, goes to the pub for a drink after work. Jack's difficulty starts when there is a new pub owner who refuses to let him enter, because of his being part-Aboriginal. This prompts Jack to write to the Chief Protector of Aborigines in order to apply for exemption from the *Aboriginals Act*.<sup>22</sup> Scott provides an example of such a correspondence (compare *Benang* 62-67) to exemplify how difficult and impossible the situation for Aboriginal people was at that time. Moreover, Jack Chatalong is presented as a determined person, who refuses to simply accept an immediate refusal of his request. In his second letter a couple of months later, Jack writes:

*Sir,  
On the twenty sixth of last October I applied for a certificate of Exemption and Received a letter stating that my application can not be granted. Please can you tell me for what Reason my application can not be granted and another thing I would like to know am I under the Aborigines Act or am I not and if I am under the Aborigines Act I don't think it is right that I should be under the Aborigines Act Because I do not mix up with them nor live with them and I am always with white people.  
I am yours  
faithfully  
Jack Chatalong  
a half-caste (Benang 66)*

Reading Jack Chatalong's letter it becomes apparent how much legal knowledge he has with regard to the Aborigines Act and his rights and responsibilities. In addition, the language use in this letter is a rather successful attempt at correct register and therefore more proof of the writer's education, awareness and determination. Sadly, Jack's knowledge of the legal aspects of the Aborigines Act includes his openly stating that he does "not mix up with them" - referring to other Aboriginals, his family, his community. He knows that his chances of receiving a Certificate of Exemption are greatly improved by stating that he is "always with white people" which indicates that he knows that consorting with whites will improve his status. Denying one's own heritage, people, and family in order to be given a fair chance was a necessity in those times that can only be considered cruel. Michael Dodson argues that

the basic assumption was that Aboriginal people were incompetent to look after their own affairs, and were degenerates, drunkards and criminals

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<sup>22</sup> The full letter is quoted in chapter 5.1.

unable to fulfil their status as social subjects. To be otherwise was to be an exception, and in effect to have moved away from Aboriginality. (*Blacklines* 35)

Scott makes a point of this as this assumption still seemed to be widely accepted at the time he wrote the novel. Jack is part-Aboriginal, “a half-caste”, who is trying to find his place in the new world order. This proves difficult as he is refused a chance to do so at any opportunity:

Jack read old newspapers he had collected, and – in the very act of doing so – dispelled and disproved of what those very same papers said about him and his people. But it was hard for him to be aware of this, and it was a lonely battle because he felt as if the print was a wall advancing him, pushing him further and further away.

*A Menace in our Midst: the Aborigines Camp in our Town.*

It was very hard to get past such a headline. Such words made it hard to even remember how to read. (*Benang* 137f)

Scott depicts the impossible situation Indigenous Australians find themselves in. They abide by the rules, earn their living, and merely want to lead a quiet and happy life like everyone else. Although there are other figures who fall victim to the system, are weaker and find it difficult to adapt to the new times, Scott presents several characters that refuse to surrender and continue to fight for themselves and their people. These major characters are the ones that succeed in uniting their Aboriginality with the required Western way of living and the necessary adaptations of their lifestyles. These are characters that stand for the endless possibilities that embracing a new culture and self-determination offer.

#### **5.4.2. Indigenous Australians’ Political Movements in *Plains of Promise***

In *Plains of Promise*, Alexis Wright offers her view on Indigenous Australian’s organised political movements that were established to advance the lives of Indigenous Australians by achieving equality, autonomy, and self-determination. In an article, she addresses that fact that there are “Indigenous communities stricken by poverty and associated injury of enormous magnitude, and that [they] cannot be held accountable when [they] are prevented by foreign, imposed systems of law from being in control of [their] lives” (Wright, “Embracing the Indigenous Vision” 104).

She believes in the “decolonisation of our communities and of the administration of our communities” (Wright, “Embracing the Indigenous Vision” 104) and points out that already in the early 1970s a report<sup>23</sup> recommended the “establishment of Aboriginal Land Councils to advise the Commissioner on matters relating to land rights” (Wright, “Embracing the Indigenous Vision” 104). She emphasises the principle that was to make up the basis of dealing with land rights “was that the governance of such lands must be based upon local Indigenous systems of law” (Wright, “Embracing the Indigenous Vision” 104), in other words, autonomy and self-determination were to be achieved. The achievement of this important notion proves to be difficult, complicated, and unattainable due to various factors that Wright depicts in her novel.

Her character Mary Nelson, Ivy Koopundi’s daughter that was adopted by a white couple, is used as the voice of Wright’s criticism and concerns. Mary’s employment with the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments starts around the time of the Bicentenary of the settlement of Australia in 1988 when white Australians celebrated the settlement and Indigenous Australians were reminded that their suffering and inequality had lasted two hundred years. Mary’s reason to work for the Coalition, besides trying to find her mother is explained in the following quote:

Mary went on to explain her newspaper research on Aboriginal issues. Most of the problems seemed to be about funding, with the Aboriginal people saying that the return of their land and self-determination presented the only solution. It seemed that the rest of the country was a long way off being reconciled to Aboriginal Land Rights and autonomy. (*PoP* 208)

Mary considers herself useful as she has “financial programming knowledge” (*PoP* 208) and a degree in “politics and anthropology” (*PoP* 208). Yet despite her educational background, it “was ‘on the job’ training from the first day, learning to become Aboriginal as well as beginning a career in Aboriginal politics” (*PoP* 210). The team at the Coalition consists of “highly motivated project workers consigned on request to regions throughout the country to coordinate special political tasks” (*PoP* 210). Mary learns that it is “a fight all the way, a struggle to be Aboriginal”

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<sup>23</sup> The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights was led by Justice Woodward, 1973-1974 was looking into appropriate ways to recognise Aboriginal Land Rights in the Northern Territory. ([www.clc.org.au/articles/info/the-history-of-the-land-rights-act/](http://www.clc.org.au/articles/info/the-history-of-the-land-rights-act/))

(*PoP* 212). Wright shows that this struggle already begins in Aboriginal children's childhood and affects families and "their disintegrating community" (*PoP* 219) in which "illness and deaths of adults and children" (*PoP* 219) are of major concern. Like Kim Scott in *True Country*, Wright criticises that the schools that are set up in remote communities fail to provide young Aboriginals with the education they need. The curriculum fails to make provisions for Aboriginal culture and fails to combine Aboriginal learning with mainstream society's way of learning. Furthermore, the teachers are not equipped to deal with what is expected of them in outback communities. Frank Doolan, Mary's daughter's Aboriginal grandfather, explains:

That school is useless, the children aren't being taught anything. I went there and looked for myself. 'There's nothing there for those kids of ours', I thought when I saw what they were doing. It's being run by a couple of airheads sent up from the city. 'We are trying to teach them respect for Aboriginal law', they told me in their high falutin' way of talking. 'We want them to respect the environment.' – 'What are you?' I asked them – bugger if I knew. And bugger if they knew how to teach our kids to read and write, either. (*PoP* 219)

Wright points out that no one "listens to us" (*PoP* 219) when children die from "poisoning themselves [...] playing with aviation fuel" (*PoP* 219) and paints a clear picture of "death and powerlessness" (*PoP* 221) that paralyse the Indigenous community.

Mary's task at the Coalition also includes the organisation of "regional conferences for Aboriginal communities on methods of negotiating land settlements as well as self-government agreements based on practices used by Indigenous groups in other countries" (*PoP* 223). It is up to her to explain

the policies of the organisation and demonstrate how these matched local knowledge and aspirations of autonomy. [...] She was to gauge what support was required to work out political strategies to move communities towards achieving their goals of self-government and autonomy. (*PoP* 238)

It is this task that presents itself as difficult due to the fact that various Indigenous communities seem to be opposing each other: "Autonomy! Where did it get Aboriginal people anyhow? They were too busy fighting among themselves" (*PoP* 243). Wright's criticism of her own people is poignant. She wants her people to stand united and fight for a common cause, not against one another. Focusing their strength and energy is more likely to achieve the desired result. Wright maintains

that achieving goals and improving lives is attainable if the focus is on priorities and the communities themselves:

It is imperative that we must be given the space to be able to look squarely at our situation with all of our concerns put on the table of our decision makers. The decision makers I am talking about are the Aboriginal communities themselves, in their own chosen groups, the people who actually live there and know what they are talking about. (Wright, "Politics" 17)

Empowering the communities by listening to their needs seems of importance to Wright so Mary learns that "the politics of the organisation, with its pan-Aboriginal expectations of united action" (*PoP* 273) is not appreciated by everyone.

Mary considers the difficulties her job brings with her when she sees Buddy, the Aboriginal father of her child and Director of the Coalition, with his family in the outback community he grew up in. She understands that there is a difference between her and him that is more of a barrier than she realised. In addition, she comes to comprehend how this barrier is the reason for the difficulties Indigenous Australians face in their fight for equality and autonomy:

So this was the real Buddy. The true Aboriginal. [...] He came from an Aboriginal reserve and only people like him who come from an Aboriginal reserve knew what it was like. According to Buddy.

-God, I'm sick of people like that, she thought. *The bloody know-alls. No wonder we can't get it together and get anywhere when all we do is argue about how much more oppressed we are than each other.*

She smiled to herself at the cynicism of the whole thing. It was rather amusing for a race of people to have stooped so low on the oppressors' terms and money and to have created their own secular power bases, cheap and nasty, based on a competition about who was the most oppressed. Reduced to grovelling after government like a bunch of beggars. (*PoP* 265f)

Once again, Wright criticises the lack of unison in the Aboriginal community. Her message to her Indigenous readers is repeated once again. She believes that a community that is fighting for equality is best served when it presents a united front. Wright considers this lack of unity as one of the reasons why the challenging circumstances of Indigenous Australians are complicated. She also attacks the "Aboriginal bureaucracy in the federal capital" (*PoP* 211) by calling them a "bunch



of fuckin' no-hopers without a brain between them" (*PoP* 211) and making her position clear:

We have wholesale suffering in every aspect of our people's lives. You can read about it if you haven't yet seen it for yourself. There are fundamental reasons for this. The record shows that government programs and control don't work. Yet these buggers in Canberra still want to work with our biggest enemies, the state governments, who go on squealing about their sovereignty over our lives. Chances are, we're on our way out. The old assimilation theory is still alive and kicking, and now it's even being peddled like hot cakes by our own mob! (*PoP* 211f)

It becomes apparent that Alexis Wright believes that the complications and struggles within the Indigenous community are partly responsible for its inability to work efficiently and unitedly, and it is easy to see why lack of unity results in inefficiency. When allowing the opposing team in a negotiation to get a glimpse of the disagreement in one's team, one opens the door for weakness and opportunism. Any negotiation that is begun from a point of weakness will be unlikely to bring the desired result. Wright is clear on what she want for her community. She wants her community to settle matters by joint action and from a position of strength to move forward the cause of Indigenous Australians.

Both Alexis Wright and Kim Scott portray issues in their novels that they feel should be addressed and brought to the attention of mainstream society. They believe that once these concerns and challenges are common knowledge empathy with what has long been perceived as the other is a consequence that brings with it understanding and sympathy that form the basis for reconciliation. John Donnelly observes that after the Stolen Generations report "the national anxiety and political cynicism surrounding the proposed constitutional preamble acknowledging indigenous [sic] occupation of Australia" (Donnelly, 30)<sup>24</sup> increased. When asked why she writes, Alexis Wright states that Australia has a "total colonial history of genocidal acts which spurs on our desperate need to write to give this country a memory" (Wright, "Politics" 14)

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<sup>24</sup> "With the election of a new Coalition federal government in the late 1990s the reconciliation movement stalled and inspirations for a reform were suspended." (241)  
([www.unswlawjournal.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/11\\_davis\\_jemezina\\_2010.pdf](http://www.unswlawjournal.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/11_davis_jemezina_2010.pdf))

## 6. The World's End – Outback Communities in Kim Scott's *True Country* and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

This chapter will analyse Kim Scott's first novel *True Country* published in 1993 and Alexis Wright's 2006 award winning novel *Carpentaria*. Both texts are set in remote outback communities, and offer insights into the daily struggles and issues Indigenous Australians living in such communities face. Today, these difficulties also include pressure from the Australian federal government and Western Australian state government to close a great number of outback communities due to funding problems. Outback communities have been in the spotlight for a while for a number of reasons. In 2007, an Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, also known as Little Children are Sacred Report, by the Northern Territory government resulted in drastic government action. As a consequence of the Report, the Australian government introduced the emergency intervention legislation in the Northern Territory, also known as *Emergency Response* or *NT Intervention*. More recently, remote Indigenous communities are in danger of being closed down due to government funding issues. This chapter will give a brief overview of the Report, the Intervention, and other challenges life in remote communities poses. It will briefly present land rights issues their implications on the mining industry. Furthermore, it will look at matters of education, alcohol abuse, and the social implications the mining industry has on remote communities. Finally, it will consider the harsh living conditions in these remote communities, their racist implications, and their effects on the Aboriginal community in remote areas.

Both Kim Scott and Alexis Wright show that being allowed to live in remote Aboriginal communities is important for Indigenous Australians as it allows them to sustain a connection with their country. However, they also highlight that the way these communities are maintained and treated by the Australian government is evidence of inequality and little consideration for self-determination. Both novels present life in these communities as one of low standard of living, and with limited perspectives and future possibilities. They show that these communities are the sore spot in Australian society as they are a reminder of failed government policies and

the inequality that Indigenous Australians are still subjected to. This chapter will argue that the struggles and difficulties in these outback communities are due to government policies that fail to allow Indigenous Australians their right to self-determination. In addition, it will show that mainstream society's general lack of understanding for Indigenous Australians' culture manifests itself in prejudiced attitudes that arguably are the reasons why remote communities are places that seem neglected, and where future perspectives seem limited. It will show that loss of Aboriginal culture and a forced life in limbo are main reasons why these communities face tremendous problems. Moreover, apparent lack of government care, consideration, and funding result in frustration, boredom, and anger in remote Indigenous communities which lead to negative behaviour and bad choices that in return fuel mainstream society's prejudice and misunderstanding.

### ***6.1. Challenges in Remote Indigenous Communities<sup>25</sup>***

On 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2006, the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory commissioned a Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, more commonly referred to as Little Children are Sacred Report. The completion of this report took eight months, and was a result of extensive research and collaboration and consultation with the Aboriginal community. The report found that sexual abuse was widespread and in most cases was unreported. In addition, it found that

- The combined effects of poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, gambling, pornography, poor education and housing, and a general loss of identity and control have contributed to violence and to sexual abuse in many forms.
- Existing government programs to help Aboriginal people break the cycle of poverty and violence need to work better. There is not enough coordination and communication between government departments and agencies, and this is causing a breakdown in services and poor crisis intervention. Improvements in health and social services are desperately needed.

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<sup>25</sup> compare: [www.humanrights.gov.at](http://www.humanrights.gov.at)

Social Justice Report 2007-Chapter 3: The Northern Territory 'Emergency Response' intervention, retrieved April 2017

(Anderson, P. and Wild, R., Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'Little Children are Sacred' Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007.)

The above quote clearly shows that there was a great need for the government to act in order to improve general life quality in Aboriginal community, and to ensure that Aboriginals living in remote communities have access to health care, education, better housing, and government services that are provided everywhere else in Australia. According to a study in 2014 of the Australian government Institute of Health and Welfare<sup>26</sup>, over one hundred thousand Indigenous people live in overcrowded houses. Moreover, Indigenous households are three times more likely to be overcrowded. There are cultural reasons and strong family ties and responsibilities that are underlying factors that contribute to Indigenous households welcoming relations and friends into their house. This, however, should not cloud the fact that Indigenous housing is inferior to that of non-Indigenous people. Another point to consider is that overcrowded living situations result in a lack of privacy, health issues, and social problems, such as stress, fighting and drinking.<sup>27</sup> Mick Mundine, the CEO of Aboriginal Housing Community related that in 2006, the United Nations “declared that Australia has the worst Indigenous housing in the world.”<sup>28</sup> It is a situation that needs to be addressed in order to take a step in the right direction and show the Aboriginal community that there is equality in reality, and not only on paper.

Genuine consultation with the Aboriginal community and involvement of Aboriginal people in the process of improvement and change are imperative. Improvement of government services and infrastructure funding are essential. Furthermore, the necessity of accepting Aboriginal world view and culture, diversity and language to close the culture gap and reduce the language barrier that Indigenous people still struggle with needs to be addressed. In short, the disadvantaged position of Aboriginal people in remote Australia is to be resolved. Such living conditions leave Aboriginal people feel disempowered, confused,

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<sup>26</sup> Vanden Heuvel, Adriana and Bernadette Kok, “Housing Circumstances of Indigenous Households”. Indigenous Children’s Group at the Australian Government Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014.

([www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129548056](http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129548056)) retrieved on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2017

<sup>27</sup> compare: [www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/overcrowded-houses#axzz4cbdtkp](http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/overcrowded-houses#axzz4cbdtkp)

<sup>28</sup> [www.CreativeSpirits.info](http://www.CreativeSpirits.info) Aboriginal Culture – Land – Overcrowded Houses, retrieved 10 February 2017

overwhelmed and disillusioned. Therefore solutions that empower Aboriginal people, return strength to them and allow them to provide community support for their own people based on their culture and beliefs are the solution. Consultation with the Aboriginal community is imperative in order to apply the recommendations and bring about real change for remote Aboriginal communities.

Nevertheless, on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2007, six days after the public release of the Little Children are Sacred Report, then Prime Minister John Howard announced broad ranging measures that would affect Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. This national emergency response is known as the 'NT Intervention' or 'Emergency Response'. The speed of the passing of the NT emergency intervention legislation was unprecedented, and included the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (reinstated in 2010) and the Land Rights Act (1976) in the affected areas. According to the government, the measures were designed to ensure the protection of Aboriginal children from harm but were considered by Aboriginal leaders to shift the social, cultural, and legal landscape of Aboriginal communities for years to come. The initial phase of the intervention was five years, and in 2012 the Stronger Futures Legislation extended the measures, which will then affect remote Aboriginal communities in general until 2022. Both times there was no prior consultation with the Aboriginal community, and no consideration of the effectiveness or implication of the intervention measures.

The Aboriginal community has also been fighting for land rights<sup>29</sup> which are considered essential for many reasons, as the following quote shows:

Land rights means a spiritual and economic base (not in a profit and loss way) and the opportunity to once again become a self-determining people. We are not asking for Land rights to be given or granted – we are demanding recognition of our rights to our own land. Land rights include religious, fishing, hunting and camping rights if currently forbidden on all relevant 'crown' land. Land Rights includes our right to refuse mining on any part of our land. (quoted on [www.CreativeSpirits.info](http://www.CreativeSpirits.info), Aboriginal culture - Land - Aboriginal land rights, retrieved 10 April 2017)

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<sup>29</sup> compare [www.CreativeSpirits.info](http://www.CreativeSpirits.info), Aboriginal culture-Land-Aboriginal land rights, retrieved 10 April 2017

The land rights movement started in 1966 when Aboriginal stockmen walked off Wave Hill pastoral station<sup>30</sup> in protest over their wages. But soon this protest became a dispute over Aboriginal traditional lands. In 1976, the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act was ratified, and in the early 1980s the Labour Party endorsed nationwide land rights, including the Aboriginal community's right to veto mining or exploratory activities on Aboriginal land. This resulted in a campaign by the mining industry against land rights in 1984. Political considerations led to the Labour party's withdrawal of their commitment to support the Aboriginal community. Paul Coe, an Aboriginal activist commented at the time:

What happened to land rights was that the mining industry was too powerful, the pastoral industry was too powerful and the Commonwealth government didn't have the will to stand up to those vested interest groups. (Coe, Paul, quoted on [www.treatyrepublic.net/content/how-bob-hawke-killed-land-rights](http://www.treatyrepublic.net/content/how-bob-hawke-killed-land-rights), retrieved 10 April 2017)

Aboriginal political activists continued their fight for land rights which climaxed with a march through Sydney during the 1988 Bicentennial festivities. The Native Title Act 1993 allows Aboriginal people to buy and maintain land as long as this native title does not interfere with the interests of pastoralists, federal government, mining companies or private owners. Naturally, land rights and related issues continue to pose problems today.

The assumption that all Aboriginal communities oppose mining is untrue. Some Aboriginal communities embrace mining as it offers employment opportunities and better economic prosperity for the area. However, poor representation of Aboriginal land rights in the law leads to unequal negotiations, stacked in favour of mining companies and government economic interest. In other words, a more dynamic involvement in negotiations would enable Aboriginal communities to ensure protection against the myriad problems the boom and bust mining industry can bring to remote communities.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Please refer to chapter 2.2. for more detail.

<sup>31</sup> compare: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/old-habits-die-hard-indigenous-land-rights-and-mining>

The problems in remote Aboriginal communities are a result of measures and policies that have continuously failed to allow for self-determination, improved quality of life through provision of adequate housing and services, improved medical and educational facilities, and employment.<sup>32</sup> These are contributing factors to a life in these communities that is particularly hard, challenging, and bleak. The younger generation of Indigenous Australians living in remote communities are particularly at risk of making decisions and taking actions that more often than not are difficult to undo or correct. Little or no education and unemployment usually result in boredom, and may eventually lead to crime, substance abuse, and violence. In an article, Lorraine Lyons talks about remote communities and states that “[young Aboriginals] are lost, there is no cultural direction. You think about it, their home life is zilch, there are lots of cultural problems, they don’t go to school, they don’t go to work and they have no money. There is no reason to get up in the morning” (The Daily Advertiser, 21/11/2015). Another factor to consider is that “many of the young parents have known nothing other than violence, mostly towards women, neglect of children, and an almost complete lack of understanding of the wider world” (‘Solution must be to break the cycle of dysfunction’, The Weekend Australian, 16/02/2008). These issues are developments that coincide with the loss of Aboriginal culture, connection to their land, and traditions. Aboriginal leaders have repeatedly asked for the right to self-determination which they consider the only solution to their problems. Aboriginal Elders demanded for the intervention measures to stop and released a powerful statement on 7 February 2011:

To the People of Australia

We are the people of the land. The land is our mother. For more than 40,000 years we have been caring for this land. We are its natural farmers.

Now, after so many years of dispossession, we find once again we are being thrust towards a new dispossession. Our pain and our fear are real. Our people are again being shamed.

Under the Intervention we lost our rights as human beings, as Australian citizens, as the First People of the Land. We feel very deeply the threat to our languages, our culture and our heritage. Through harsh changes we have had removed from us all control over our communities and our lives. Our lands have been compulsory taken from us. We have been left with nothing.

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<sup>32</sup> compare: [www.CreativeSpirits.info](http://www.CreativeSpirits.info),

Aboriginal culture - People - Aboriginal communities are breaking down, retrieved 5 April 2017

The legislation under which we now live does not comply with international law. It is discriminatory. We are no longer equal to other Australians. We are no longer equal to you.

As people in our own land, we are shocked by the failure of democratic processes, of the failure to consult with us and of the total disregard for us as human beings. We demand the return of our rights, our freedom to live our traditional lives, support to develop our economic enterprises to develop jobs and to work towards a better future for all our peoples.

So extreme have been the action against our people that we must appeal to all people of Australia to walk with us in true equality. Speak out and help to put an end to the nightmare that Northern Territory Aboriginal people are experiencing on a daily basis.

([http://www.concernedaustralians.com.au/media/NIT\\_Intervention\\_coverage\\_17-02-11.pdf](http://www.concernedaustralians.com.au/media/NIT_Intervention_coverage_17-02-11.pdf) 5)

There is no denying the fact that remote Aboriginal communities face challenges and problems that need to be resolved. Yet, there is also no denying the fact that it would be in the best interest of these communities if they were given the power to find solutions that are in line with their culture and customary law. This would also ensure their empowerment and mainstream society's taking seriously their beliefs. The harsh punitive measures lead to many Aboriginal people fleeing to the nearest towns, leaving their homeland and their communities behind, and ending up homeless and without ties to their community. This again results in additional social problems that may be preventable if close collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities were the basis of any future processes.

## ***6.2. The Problem with Education as presented in Kim Scott's True Country***

*True Country* is set in a small Aboriginal mission community called Karnama in the remote Kimberly region of northwestern Australia. Penny van Toorn argues it is "communally generated and culturally hybrid as it breaks with "static, monolithic models of culture [...] and deconstructs unitary concepts of language, voice, medium, and narrative form" (van Toorn, "A Journey" 41) She argues that Scott's text "articulates a space of overlap between varieties of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal verbal art" (van Toorn, 41). She states that he draws on "Aboriginal and



European traditions, thereby breaking down the ‘us-and-them mentality’ covertly fostered by Eurocentric literary forms” (van Toorn, “A Journey” 41). In an interview Scott states about the technique of multiple voices that

[i]t’s to suggest that continuity and spiritual inheritance. Early on [the main character Billy] is storying with others, he’s a conduit for others and involved in all that. And there is no single story as such. No singular position but there is a responsibility. He is informed by other stories but it’s articulated through one mouth. It has to do with the language as well I guess. [...] [I]t was then about the story being inclusive and empowering tellers and listeners, that sort of thing. (Guy 12f).

But Scott states that being “an Aboriginal writer is a burden” (Guy 14) as “there’s the politics that flow from it all, so that your writing can be used as ammunition in the political discourse [which he is] not very comfortable with because [he does not] like the idea of speaking for anyone else” (Guy 14). This may be the reason why in his novels Scott offers no solution to the question of how the situation in remote Aboriginal communities can be improved.

*True Country* focuses on the experiences non-Indigenous Australians who work on the mission as teachers, principal and office workers. The main character, Billy Storey, is a teacher who has come to the school in order to find out about his Aboriginal heritage and also “wanted to come to a place like this, where some things that happened a long time ago, where [he comes] from, that [he has] only heard or read of, are still happening” (TC 82). Richard Pascal remarks that Billy Storey is “sufficiently light-skinned to have passed as white throughout his life, and whose upbringing and cultural orientation have in most respects been Euroaustralian (Pascal, 4). In an interview, Kim Scott explains that he went to the Kimberly as a teacher, which was like a “psychological quest” (Guy 9) and how he was “shocked at the racist psychology or mentality there which is something that [he has] been sheltered from” (Guy 9). He admits that he believes that he is “an end product of [...] policies we had across Australia of assimilation” and continues to present the narrator Billy Storey’s “movement from relative ignorance to something else” (Guy 9) as a result of his time as a teacher in the outback. Billy’s motivation to be posted in the outback may be unique. Loretta de Plevitz argues that

[f]or many teachers, being posted to a remote falls far down the list of desirable appointments. Therefore some educational authorities have instituted a system whereby these placements are rewarded with 'points' which give the teacher the chance of advancing to a more attractive environment. There are suggestions that some graduates who have not achieved a good academic record choose to go to these schools, which are often Indigenous communities, solely on the basis that they can 'earn' points. Having served two years, they leave. Their place is taken by another inexperienced teacher looking to move away. (Plevitz 65)

As a result, there is little time to establish a rapport and build relationships with their students, and probably little support for first time teachers that face a rather challenging task. Kim Scott shows that more often than not expectations and reality differ.

The novel also touches upon various social issues that are of concern with regard to remote communities, like poverty, education, racism, drug abuse and domestic violence. At the same time, it shows wonderful Aboriginal people who are trying hard to live in two worlds, and Elders who are worried about the desperate and hopeless situation the younger generations find themselves in.

*True Country* also offers some insight into the importance and difficulty of transcribing Aboriginal stories as different versions of history available. Billy Storey has set out to complete such a project while on the mission and wants to work with Fatima, who was "the first baby born on the mission" (TC 24) and who "must have some interesting stories to tell [as] she would have seen a lot of changes in her life" (TC 24). He uses a tape recorder and then wants to write out the stories "for the kids to read, or me to read to them" (TC 29). In these sessions, Billy learns about the history of Karnama and how it affects Fatima to talk about it:

She took a deep breath, and exhaled noisily through her nose. You can hear it on the tape. It was a preparation, I suppose. It occurred to me later that it was almost as if she was taking on a burden, or a duty. I don't know if it was an affectation, or to what degree. A film came over her eyes and she looked into an imaginary distance. She began speaking, slowly and hesitantly. (TC 37)

Discrepancies between Fatima's version and what was written down in the mission book leave Billy confused and make Fatima angry, as she knows the truth about what happened. Most tellingly, the mission book omits the shooting of an

Aboriginal woman who had run away from the missionaries. (compare *TC* 38) She informs Billy that

'Well, it should be like I say it in that book', she continued. 'That book might tell you different, this one or this one might tell you 'nother way.' She pointed to the books on the table. 'If you find it, it might tell you that way. So I tell people, like I do now, to you, the right way it happened. The true way, and what we people think. You can do that too, maybe.' (*TC* 43)

Fatima hopes that Billy tells her story and Aboriginal stories as he "can write what I say, what we say, all together. Some of us? So people will read it and know" (*TC* 43f). Once again, Kim Scott stresses the importance of knowing the truth about past events in order to move forward and arrive at real reconciliation.

The arrival of the new teachers in Karnama is commented on by the Aboriginal community with little excitement. "Teacher plane" (*TC* 15) states one person and some others make jokes about them:

'Who them gardiya?'  
 'Teachers.'  
 'Look out, 'm fall off not careful.'  
 'Wave 'em, look at 'm they wave. Think they pope, or what?'  
 'Look at that one, blondie one, that short one.'  
 'See that hat? That John Wayne, maybe, ridin' Toyota.'  
 'Aiee! That red hair girl, mine!'  
 Screams of laughter. (*TC* 18)

Plevitz states that many Indigenous parents and communities believe that "novice teachers needed guidance in learning how to relate to students' families" (Plevitz 65). The children are described as "friendly and affectionate" (*TC* 19) and are happy when teachers make an effort to spend time with them outside school. When Liz and Billy have dinner at Fatima's house one evening, the little girl Beatrice is proud:

Next morning at school Beatrice ran up to Liz and embraced her. 'You ate supper with aunty Fatima last night, didn't you? You had them things? You had chicken, and potato, and cool drink, didn't you?' She looked around at the beaming faces of the other small children around her and then back up to Liz. 'And I came to get you, didn't I?' She hugged Liz tighter. (*TC* 49)

Other members of the Aboriginal community also take notice of teachers and school staff and their behaviour toward them. When some Aboriginals go hunting only

Jasmine, the young office worker, follows their invitation to join them, which is noted in a passage written from an Aboriginal point of view:

The teachers and the new office mob see all the people going down the track and don't go with them when they're asked because they're too busy. Only that new girl, Jasmine, she goes. They laugh when she pulls away from the catches they show her, but the young men hunt harder, and the women notice her there. *(TC 55)*

The pride and joy that comes with spending time with and being respected by non-Indigenous people is almost childlike and an indication of how much it is needed in order to allow Aboriginal people to feel as equals.

The children in the community grow up fairly freely, and are being taught Aboriginal traditions and customs at the same time as they try to adhere to mainstream society's rules. They are distracted and not really motivated to go to school. Each morning "a siren sounded" *(TC 71)* before seven to "signal that it was almost time to start work" [and] "school started at seven" and "kids would arrive dream mumbling, stiff legged and stumbling, knuckling their puffy eyes" *(TC 71)*. Teaching staff discuss changing the schools hours in the dry season as the mornings are cooler but decide against it. The principal points out

the need to learn to work the clock. And there were advantages to having long afternoons, especially once we got television reception, courtesy of a satellite dish donated to us because of our status as the most isolated school in Australia. The teachers' houses were incorporated into the school connection. *(TC 72)*

Billy decides to help the Aboriginals and goes from house to house in the morning to wake and pick up the children that would not make it to school otherwise. This is also noticed and appreciated by the Aboriginal community:

He get to school proper early anyway, sun-up even. Sebastian, he say he see him then at the school. Sebastian just sitting making fire, you know, making tea. He see him.

He get one of the kids with him, go out and get the lazy kids that still sleeping. Lazy those kids. Their mums, dads, still sleeping. [...] He goes and he gets 'em, the big ones mostly, them boys over in Moses' house. *(TC 71)*

A very keen student, Deslie, becomes his partner on his morning walk to pick up the school children, which Deslie calls “children hunting” (TC 72). He enjoys helping the teacher and it becomes clear that the reasons for their inability to get up in the morning are “watching videos” [...], “playing cards” [...], “or just talking and telling stories” while others “might have been up all night, dropping in and out of sleep” (TC 75). Billy’s effort is registered with the Aboriginal community who applaud his commitment and comment that “[y]ou see them. Teacher out front and them boys sleepy walking behind him sort of in a line waking up. [...] He get them there. He’s all right that fella, good teacher” (TC 75).

There are obvious problems and the children are “behind most kids in school” (TC 92), simply because “there is none of that back-up at home” (TC 92). But, as Liz observes, there are some areas in which they excel, like “telling stories, joking, sometimes miming. And visual literacy” (TC 92), and she wonders “what we’re doing here” (TC 92). Some Aboriginal parents send their children to private schools in larger cities, and Liz contemplates whether “it helps to be taken away from your family and that. Not like they used to do, but ... this place is so tiny, so insular and isolated. To get away is an education” (TC 94). Kim Scott introduces the character Gabriella to show that it is challenging for Aboriginal people to live in two worlds. Gabriella was raised by the Sisters at the mission after her mother’s death. After primary school in Perth and moving from school to school in her teenage years she was sent to study at a university in Melbourne. Father Paul arranged that for her as “he knows people there she could board with and there were special bridging courses available” (TC 66). Gabriella’s dream is to return to Karnama as a teacher and live “in a house like those the teachers had” (TC 67). Gabriella is paraded as a role model in Karnama when she is back for her holidays and she is aware of how different life is for the Aboriginal children in the community:

Around the camp, she saw the rubbish spilling out of the smelly drums. She saw the kids coming to school late and knew that children elsewhere did homework, and had desks at home and little bags with packed lunches. She saw Brother Tom give the kids money for their week’s work on the gardens and the kids gorging on cool drinks and lollies, and clutching twenty dollar notes. Later in the week they were hungry. (TC 79)

However, her experience at university in Melbourne, too, is marked by a feeling of being misunderstood or out of place and not belonging. She explains to Billy that

the “[t]rouble is, even if I want it, I don’t feel like all them others” (*TC* 166). She is given Aboriginal Literature to read that is primarily dreaming stories which “weren’t so good to read, not like being told them” (*TC* 78). Sometimes they were “just like any old story, but with black people. Or off-white people” (*TC* 78f). As Billy knows from his own difficulties transcribing Fatima’s stories, putting oral stories into words is a challenge, and reading stories written by non-Indigenous people in English has little to do with traditional story telling. The intention of Gabriella’s teachers at university is most likely one that is meant well. But Kim Scott shows that it fails to acknowledge the difficulty that being an Aboriginal at university creates. He shows that Gabriella is caught between two worlds, and in a position to experience how life in her community is the polar opposite of life in Melbourne. It can be argued that this experience, aside from causing sadness for her community, creates a feeling of alienation from both communities and results in a search for identity and belonging that can possibly dominate her life.

It becomes apparent that there is a need for improving the way Aboriginal children receive education in remote communities so that it will allow them to be educated by their parents in the Aboriginal way of life as well as by their teachers in Western education. Plevitz maintains that “the appropriate approach would be to consult Indigenous people who are more likely to be able to identify the hidden barriers that are preventing their children from reaching their true potential” (Plevitz 68). In addition, there is a need for English as a Second language classes as in many cases English is the second or third language that Aboriginal children speak. At the same time, the English that is spoken in remote communities “was good for talking [...] but it wasn’t so good for writing, maybe” (*TC* 79). Plevitz quotes linguists who “have noted that the forms of English spoken by Aboriginal people differ in a number of substantial respects from standard English” (Plevitz 62), which results in a different form of communication. (compare Plevitz 62) Loretta de Plevitz suggests that “apparently race-neutral educational policies and practices are based on underlying assumptions that are not in accordance with Indigenous experience or culture” (Plevitz 54f) and concludes that this is the reason why Indigenous students “struggle to comply with them” (Plevitz 55). She argues that Indigenous students are victims of “indirect discrimination provisions [which] aim to address systemic

discrimination” (Plevitz 55). This means that they are seemingly treated the same but the negative effect of this treatment is only felt by certain members of society. She identifies several hidden barriers, which include “curricula based on the building blocks of learning” (Plevitz 57), “cultural obligations” (Plevitz 59), and “students’ health and hearing” (Plevitz 59). She also explains that the “Eurocentric model of teaching” (Plevitz 60) results in “feelings of alienation, which are manifested in the students dropping out, poor attendance, low self-esteem and under-achieving” (Plevitz 60). If Aboriginal culture and philosophy were implemented in schools, and considered equally important, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students would benefit.

### ***6.3. The Problem with Alcohol as presented in True Country***

In *True Country*, Kim Scott presents alcohol as a problem that is worse for Indigenous people than it is for non-Indigenous people. He depicts alcohol as the root of many evils in the Aboriginal community. There is alcohol induced violence within the Aboriginal community, and against the Aboriginal community from white people, as the murder of Franny by two intoxicated white men shows. One of the chapters in the book is titled *We drink* and another is called *They drink*. Both chapters are narrated from an Aboriginal point of view in Aboriginal English, and discuss the effect alcohol consumption has on the small community in Karnama. The reader is allowed some insight into the problem from the Aboriginal perspective, and at the same time, provided with information about what Aboriginal Elders perceive to be the best way of dealing with the issue. Naturally, there is no simple or clear-cut solution so Kim Scott refrains from offering one. But he clearly conveys the message that there is a problem that needs to be tackled and it needs to be done in collaboration with the Aboriginal community so that solutions can be found that will be successful.

Construction work is done by builders in Karnama who drive in to complete a job, and then disappear again. When that happens, they bring in alcohol for themselves but also, if asked, for Aboriginal people. When “grog’s around” because “someone

must have asked [a builder] to bring some in for them” (*TC* 110), the younger Aboriginals spend their time drinking:

Alphones, Raphael, some other young ones, they down near Running Creek opposite the old people’s camp. They had flagons with them, passing them ‘round. They sitting there in the shade, on the rocks, just talking and drinking but when they got a bit drunk and started up they got noisier. (*TC* 110)

The builders “sell beer to some of the men” and they “drink until have to fall asleep” (*TC* 123). Some women spend time with them in their quarters, and on their days off, all they do is consume alcohol. The builders are considered a bad influence as “[t]hey were too drunk. This was not work day, see, and they been drinking long time. All the people were watching them, laughing. It was really funny. Kids copied them, staggering and talking lazy” (*TC* 122). It is only funny since their behaviour does not result in violence. Kim Scott suggests that the difference between them and the Aboriginal people drinking alcohol is that “they don’t go silly like [the Aboriginal] young blokes” (*TC* 124). This is debatable as there are countless incidences of alcohol induced violence and stupidity that occur in mainstream Australian society. Nevertheless, Kim Scott’s Aboriginal narrator explains that

[w]e don’t like the grog, really. It’s no good for us. We don’t like it. Them young ones, they get drunk, they want to fight. They get car and think they’re like in a video. One day someone get killed, a kid maybe. The drunk they hit wives, fight with other blokes, go after their rumbud. They don’t listen. (*TC* 124)

The Aboriginal narrator also states that it is “no good having people like that in Karnama” as they “build houses but don’t let the young men work” and “they look at the women, part laughing and part hungry” and “bring too much beer with them” (*TC* 123)

The older Aboriginal people understand the dangers of alcohol; their frustration at the younger Aboriginals’ behaviour and refusal to listen to them is apparent. But the world of the young ones differs from the older Aboriginals’ world. They are unemployed, bored and probably feel worthless and desperate. They turn to alcohol to numb their pain or forget their painful existence. As a result, a day spent drinking can result in rough and rowdy behaviour that leads to unnecessary fistfights and possible injuries. Alcohol is the vehicle that allows them to vent frustrations



bypassing their inhibitions which ultimately leads to violence. This behaviour is one that they consider normal as that is how they grow up and what life is like in the community. What is considered the norm or normal behaviour within the community differs from what is considered as such outside it. At the same time, such behaviour is also disapproved of by the older Aboriginal people who suffer as well. They are reduced to merely being spectators as they have little influence or power in such situations, unlike in former times:

Later they came up to the camp here and were shouting and making noise. Alphonse did fight with one of Araselli's brothers. Raphael was yelling yelling all the time and acting like a crazy man. He pushed Sebastian even, a little bit, and Sebastian's boys came in and they took him away and pushed him, shoved him. He's crazy that Raphael. We should do something. They was making noise all night. [...] When we were on the council and Father Pujol was here this didn't happen. We should do something. But they don't listen this mob. (*TC* 111)

There is a marked difference between the older and the younger Aboriginal people, and, as the above quote shows, the older people experience frustration at their inability to change the younger people's behaviour and make them see sense. But the problems run deeper as the younger people are part of different times and circumstances; times that theoretically promise them a future and show them on television how other Australians live. Their feeling of alienation and detachment from the rest of the country is the root of their frustration which they numb with alcohol, the only tangible means they have to create a connection to a world in which they have no place. Alcohol is consumed in both worlds, and it destroys lives in both worlds.

Aboriginal women also drink and start fights in the middle of the day, causing a spectacle and leaving Billy and Liz "intrigued" (*TC* 113):

Billy and Liz were over at the school on Sunday. From there they watched a fight take place among houses near the school gate. Two women were pushing and sparring at one another like buck kangaroos. A group of men and women jeered and cheered them, and swore and cursed one another. (*TC* 113)

These disturbing scenes leave their mark on the Aboriginal community, like they do in any other community that is subjected to violence due to substance abuse. One of the senior girls writes in her journal the day after the fighting:

Someone brought grog to Karnama and all the people get drunk and they start having fights with one other that drinking business makes the older people like Fatima Walanguh Sebastian Samson very upset so when all the people are better next the old people talk out loud to all the people who was drunk and tell them what they think of them when they are drunk and of course they feel shame. (TC 113)

The older Aboriginals' role in this scenario is to be reminders of Aboriginal tradition, beliefs, and customs that are prominent with the older people but appear to be hidden under clouds with the younger generation. The cycle of addiction needs to be interrupted with help and guidance, preferably by Aboriginal people, like the Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service,<sup>33</sup> which was non-existent in this form at the time when Kim Scott wrote *True Country*. Here the government bans alcohol, saying that

From now on  
No grog in Karnama  
By plane by overland By any whatever  
The Karnama Aboriginal Corporation Land  
is now a dry area  
ANYONE breaking this council rule  
Will be punished  
Mission or other workers found Drinking  
on Aboriginal land will also be Punished (TC 123)

The ban is relayed from an Aboriginal perspective and it can be argued that Kim Scott wants to demonstrate that such bans are welcome by many members of the Aboriginal community. Alcohol is not part of their traditional culture, and it has brought them more harm than joy. It is a part of non-Indigenous culture that has easily managed to slip into Indigenous culture as a vice that wreaks havoc in their community. In an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Report it is stated that

Excess alcohol consumption has significant impacts on communities. In 2012–13, 14% of Indigenous Australians reported experiencing a family stressor related to alcohol problems. After adjusting for differences in the age structure of the two populations Indigenous Australians were 3.6 times more likely to report a stressor relating to alcohol or drug-related problems than non-Indigenous Australians. Numerous studies show that alcohol increases the risk of violence among people pre-disposed to aggression

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.aads.org.au/>

(Exum 2006; Fergusson et al. 2000). One study in NSW found that, after controlling for social and demographic variables, rates of offensive behavior and property damage tended to be higher in areas with higher levels of alcohol sales (Stevenson et al. 1999). There is a clear link between alcohol, violence and imprisonment. ([www.dpmc.gov.au](http://www.dpmc.gov.au), Health Performance Framework 2014, retrieved April 2017)

As the above quote shows, alcohol abuse is the root of many problems and therefore it is understandable that Kim Scott supports a ban of alcohol. The picture of the effects of alcohol that Scott presents in his novel is one that fills the Aboriginal people with shame. By painting such a tragic picture of the effects of alcohol on the Aboriginal community, he emphasises his message that alcohol is the root of all evil and should be banned. At the same time, he manages to convey the message that Aboriginals need support, are misunderstood, and ostracised. When Billy takes the kids on a school field trip to a small town, they happen to see how other Aboriginals outside their community live. This experience is unsettling and makes them feel uneasy, so they are more than ready to return back home after a short while. The living situations and conditions of Aboriginal people living outside their community fill the school kids with shame as they see what their people are experiencing and what lives they lead:

They wanted to stay in the bus as they drove through Kathrine. Black people were drunk, and sitting on the ground outside pubs, or at the back of car parks, or on the grass near public toilets. People looked at our people, too, as if they were savages, or monkeys or something? For all these reasons, and more, our young people felt shame. (*TC* 160)

The image that is presented in the above quote is poignant, expressive and strong. Aboriginals separated from the white community, in a state of drunkenness and seeming idleness. It takes empathy and a willingness to dig deeper in order to uncover the story of how they ended up in this situation. Kim Scott achieves that by presenting this image through an Aboriginal narrator who expresses the Aboriginal children's feeling of shame and sadness at what they see. This technique allows the non-Indigenous reader to connect with the Aboriginal narrator, and to understand the feelings and emotions this situation must evoke, when taking into consideration that they are in this situation through no fault of their own. Of course, drinking alcohol is never a solution, and the blame lies with the individual and their choices.

Yet, if an individual is stripped of most of their choices and dignity, they are more likely to make irresponsible and regrettable decisions.

The final words of the chapter *They drink* Kim Scott offers his evaluation of the situation, related by the Aboriginal narrator:

Our time, we never see all these things. When early people was alive, in their own land, we never see such things. When we were little children, when we grow big, all our life we see things get all mixed. We see wrong things for our people, so far for the Aborigine gardiya make trouble. Grog, money, everything.

So. What we gunna do? We can only do, we can only say. They can listen to us. They can believe us, what we say and what we tell them.

That's all we say. That's what we ask.

That's what Billy should write down and show those kids. (TC 125)

It is apparent that white society is blamed for what is happening to the Aboriginal community in terms of life in general and alcohol in particular. There is a marked sense of longing for the times when they were able to lead their traditional lives without any of the white people's vices. The personal pronoun "they" in this quote refers to mainstream society, not the Aboriginal young men who refuse to listen to the Aboriginal Elders. It is the essential message that the Aboriginal community has wanted non-Indigenous people to understand for a long time – they want to be heard. They want to be considered and taken seriously. They want a voice.

#### **6.4. *The Trouble with Mining in Alexis Wright's Carpentaria***

Like Kim Scott's *True Country*, Alexis Wright's 2006 novel *Carpentaria* is set in remote Australia in an imaginary small town called Desperance which is inland from the southern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria. As Ian Syson points out, the "very naming of places and characters" evokes memories of "Dickens' grotesqueries" (Syson 85), and is in line with the novel's humorous tone that is apparent more often than not. And while Syson admits that he "mostly enjoyed reading *Carpentaria*" (Syson 86), he continues that he was "sometimes soldiering on for 'professional reasons'" (Syson 86). Devlin-Glass identifies the reason for that

which is the fact that Wright “writes knowingly for a more ecologically literate readership, and more poetically and authoritatively” (Devlin-Glass 84). Alison Ravenscroft summarises her reading of *Carpentaria* as follows:

*Carpentaria* puts into effect an aesthetics of uncertainty; in its language and form there is a radical doubleness, a poetics of equivocality. It is ‘unpinnable’. It inscribes different worlds and representational modes in the space of a few lines or phrases; it brings different objects, different worlds, into such close proximity that their placement in a rational or magical mode is undecidable. It makes the very division into magical and rational, living and dead, body and country undecidable – at least for the white reader. (Ravenscroft 206)

Anne Brewster suggests that Alexis Wright manages to maintain a “hybridity [...] which draws on a storytelling voice” (Brewster 89). She explains that Wright “received her inspiration upon eavesdropping on a conversation between two elderly indigenous men” (Brewster 89). Louise Loomes argues that Alexis Wright herself states that “*Carpentaria*’s predominantly oral form was a point that occupied” (Loomes 130) for a long time as she wanted to “create in writing an authentic form of Indigenous storytelling that uses the diction and vernacular of the region” (Loomes 130). *Carpentaria* is an epic piece of writing which, according to Ravenscroft, is “a labyrinth narrative that opens onto one scene and then onto another, one story folded between other as if in parenthesis. Past and present intermingle in the space of a page” (Ravenscroft 205). It is full of images and beautiful descriptions of the landscape while at the same time it is a reminder that Wright does not “like the way we are being treated by successive governments, or the way our histories have been smudged, distorted and hidden, or written for us” (Wright, “Breaking Taboos”, *Australian Humanities Review*). The taboos she breaks are “this nation’s silence about Aboriginal rights” (Wright, “Breaking Taboos” *Australian Humanities Review*). *Carpentaria*, similarly to *True Country*, portrays inequality of housing, violence, drug abuse, and also the mining industry and its effects on remote Australian communities.

In *Carpentaria* Alexis Wright presents her views on the controversial mining industry and its implications with regard to Native Title and Aboriginal communities in general. The Native Title Act 1993 is a property right that acknowledges Aboriginal people’s relationship with the land and its foundation of

their beliefs, customs, and tradition.<sup>34</sup> Indigenous Australians have limited control over mining on their land, and negotiations with mining companies are problematic, and more often than not result in disadvantageous outcomes for the Aboriginal community.<sup>35</sup> Alexis Wright admitted in an interview that she

was asked to write a non-fiction work about the troubles that we had in the Gulf with mining, but I didn't feel I had the appropriate skills to write that kind of work without being sued. My truth would probably have been different from other people's truths. The novel is more an attempt to explore what's happening in the indigenous mind. (Interview Moss, *The Guardian*, 15 April 2008)

She introduces Will Phantom, Normal Phantom's eldest son, who is a maverick fighting against the "big powerful mining company, Gurfurrit International" (*Carpentaria* 366), a fight that fails to attract support of the whole Aboriginal community, where some believe that Desperance "used to be a safe place before you lot started arguing and mucking around with that bloody mine" (*Carpentaria* 191). Will Phantom, however, is determined to fight for his land rights and as a result forced to leave Desperance for two years after he sabotaged the mining company:

The whole world had turned upside down two years ago when Will Phantom had blocked Gurfurrit's pipeline in a dozen different places along the 150-kilometre stretch, when it was being built too carry the ore from the mine to the coastline. (*Carpentaria* 366f)

Will Phantom is radical and angry at the mining company's modus operandi which involves "playing the game of innocence with bumbling front men who broke and won the hearts of his own relatives and members of their communities" (*Carpentaria* 391). He understands that the "friendly meetings where the mining representatives claimed not to know that was required from Native title claims" (*Carpentaria* 391) are not to be trusted. The Aboriginal community in Desperance is divided with some believing that the mining company will employ them and increase their welfare, and others being outraged about them and their land being exploited and ruined by the company:

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<sup>34</sup> compare: [www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/projects/native-title](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/projects/native-title)

<sup>35</sup> compare: <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/threats-to-aboriginal-land#toc3>

'You know who we all hear about all the time now?', he asked us. 'International mining company. Look how we got to suit international mining people. Rich people. How we going to do that?' Now even we, any old uneducated buggers, are talking globally. We got to help United Kingdom money. Netherlands lead air problems. Asia shipping. United States of America industry, and we don't even know German people. 'I says,' he says like he is singing, 'we mobs got to start acting locally.. Show whose got the Dreaming. The Laaaw [sic].' (*Carpentaria* 408f)

It is apparent that anger at the situation and frustration with the Aboriginal community's powerless position that is further weakened by any divisive approach is an essential message for the author. Alexis Wright's position is clear when members of the Aboriginal community in Desperance gather to discuss further steps after an explosion that was caused by a fire started by Mozzie Fishman's man to discuss further steps. The sarcasm in the following quote is obvious:

We were burning the white man's very important places and wasting all his money. We must have forgotten our heads. We were really stupid people to just plumb forget – because the white man was a very important person who was very precious about money. Well! He was the boss. We are not boss. [...] Straight out we should have been asking ourselves – Why are you not hanging your head in shame to the white man. We were supposed to say, Oh! No! You can't do things like that to the , umm, beg your pardon, please and thankyou, to the arrr, em, WHITE MAN. (*Carpentaria* 407f)

The fire and subsequent explosion of the mine, "pride of the banana state"<sup>36</sup> (*Carpentaria* 411) attracts the "frenzied media from the bustling world of 'Down South'" (*Carpentaria* 413) to report on the incident. The damage is extensive as the explosion destroys the underground fuel tanks as well as the main fuel tanks. (compare *Carpentaria* 415) The mine is supposed to provide employment for Australians and sustain the economy. Loss of these opportunities is considered disastrous for the country, and warrants a manhunt for the person responsible for the damage, as the mining company's spokesperson explains on TV:

'I swear, hundreds of jobs, and because we fully support the sunshine State of Queensland, and we want to help the people in this state to get ahead and want to see good things happen here like this development, I am offering a \$10,000 reward, no questions asked, for any information leading to the capture of ...' (*Carpentaria* 399)

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<sup>36</sup> Queensland

The tragedy of loss of possible employment and threat to the economy will resonate with mainstream society whose lifestyle feeds of a great economy and secure jobs. As a result, there is little room for consideration of Indigenous culture and its basic needs when one's own opportunity for advancement is at stake. The media allow the mining company to showcase its importance for the economy in a rather one-sided presentation of the incident.

Wright criticises the way journalists intrude and portray an image of Aboriginal land for people who have no knowledge of their country:

[...] the journalists saw the Gulf through virgin eyes. It was a place few Australians had been to, let alone those of any other country tied up with the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was a world apart from their own. Anything in this world could be created, moulded, and placed on television like something to dream about, or a nightmare. (*Carpentaria* 413)

It can be argued that Wright aims to show that such presentations of the mining industry on Aboriginal land lead to an attitude in mainstream society that is detrimental to the Indigenous community's goal of self-determination. If a "multi-million dollar mine [...] was probed, described and paraded to network viewers [...] in soap opera intensity" (*Carpentaria* 414) then "viewers were encouraged to dissect what had become of this showcase of the nation" (*Carpentaria* 414). The result of this is portrayed by Wright in the following quote:

Ordinary people living thousands of miles away, who had no former interest whatsoever in the mine or its location, joined the growing number of bereaved viewers gendering at the still untameable, northern hinterland. (*Carpentaria* 414)

Wright's perception of the reason for the rather wide gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities becomes apparent in the above quote. There seems to be a need to tame the hinterland which is the place where Aboriginal people want to lead a life that allows them to pursue their traditions and be connected to their land. This need has social implications that indicate non-Indigenous people's misunderstanding and incomprehension of the essence of Indigenous culture. At the same time, it unveils underlying white supremacist attitudes which prevent true understanding and acceptance of Indigenous culture and rights. Without this acceptance there is little hope for self-determination for the Indigenous community.



The message Alexis Wright conveys is simple and straightforward. She wants Aboriginal people to “end [their] cowtailing after the white people” as it is “finale time” (*Carpentaria* 409). She points out that “nomadism was no longer the answer” (*Carpentaria* 123) as “Aborigine people were different now” (*Carpentaria* 123), and “white hands” are “running like mice all over every dwelling, trying to reshape, push, mould, trying to make things different” and “some of those hands belonged to people who were [...] still sitting themselves on top of traditional Law” (*Carpentaria* 127).

The integration of customary law into the Australian legal system is a matter that Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner addressed in the National Indigenous Legal Conference in September 2009<sup>37</sup>. He states that the need for such integration is great since only with recognition of customary law does true equality and respect of Indigenous culture come. Until then, the Australian government will be likely to continue to put monetary gains before respecting Aboriginal customs and beliefs. As Gillian Terzis points out in her essay about outback mining communities in Western Australia, “[i]t is clear that not everyone is benefitting from the boom, and that public policy has been beleaguered by complacency. Groups that have missed out include the region’s significant Indigenous population” (Terzis 108).

The mining industry continues to be a controversial issue that Aboriginal communities face throughout Australia. Alexis Wright presents her community’s requirements from, worries about, and problems with the mining industry. In addition, she offers insight into the role the media play in manipulating mainstream society’s attitude to the mining industry by highlighting the economic advantages it brings and refraining from considering the detrimental effects it can have on the Aboriginal community. It also becomes apparent that the matter is not resolved easily as the Indigenous community itself seems divided on this matter.

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<sup>37</sup> compare: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/speeches/integration-customary-law-australian-legal-system-calma>

## 6.5. Life in remote Aboriginal communities in Kim Scott's *True Country* and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

### 6.5.1. Inferior Living Standards

When reading both novels it is obvious that there is a marked difference between areas and houses of non-Indigenous and Indigenous members of the towns' communities. The Aboriginals in Desperance live in Pricklebush as fringe dwellers, "all choked up, living piled up together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump" (*Carpentaria* 4). They are unwanted by the white people in Uptown, the nice part of the town, who agreed that "*the Aboriginal was really not part of the town [...] and only dumped here by pastoralists, because they refused to pay the blackfella equal wages, even when it came in*"[sic] (*Carpentaria* 4). Normal Phantom, the elder and leader of the Aboriginals in Pricklebush, lives with his wife, Angel Day, in "Number One house [...], the first blackfella place built on the edge of Desperance" (*Carpentaria* 12), which incidentally was built "on top of the nest of a snake spirit" (*Carpentaria* 13) and therefore has detrimental effects on Normal's bones. Angel Day, however, loves this house as she can "walk across the road to the rubbish dump, and there she should get anything her heart desired" (*Carpentaria* 14). She collects all sorts of materials and objects from the dump in order to help her "family through the Wet as dry as a bone" (*Carpentaria* 15):

Diligently, she undertook the chore of checking for leaks making alterations, choosing the right bits and pieces from her pile of accumulated junk which she leant, tied or stitched to the original blankets, until she ended up with an igloo made of rubbish. (*Carpentaria* 15)

Angel Day considers herself a "very rich woman" (*Carpentaria* 16) and so she "became a genius in the new ideas of blackfella advancement" (*Carpentaria* 16):

Bureaucratic people for the *Aborigines* department said she had 'Go'. She became a prime example of government policies at work and to prove it, they came and took pictures of her with a Pentax camera for a report. (*Carpentaria* 16)

The sarcasm is apparent and also other Aboriginal members of the community comment that "[i]t was of no benefit to anyone if she had magical powers to make

her more like the white people” (*Carpentaria* 16) Still, her “dream house” (*Carpentaria* 21) is considered “an eyesore by Uptown” (*Carpentaria*, 21) and “could not live next to the dream of big Santa Gertrudis” (*Carpentaria* 21). As far as Uptown people are concerned, Angel Day and all the other Aboriginal families who “erected similar makeshifts” (*Carpentaria* 20f) should have waited for “a government grant” (*Carpentaria* 21) to have better houses built for them. Uptown people are worried about their lifestyle and the proximity of Aboriginal people and hold several council meetings to discuss the situation:

Paranoia was the word that best described what took place inside of the squashed Council chambers. [...] Some Aboriginals were seen pushing up into Uptown itself – abandoned car bodies to live in. You could see Aboriginals living in them behind the fences at the end of their backyards even. Aboriginals were thinking about setting up another camp. [They needed to protect] the town against encroachment from people who were not like themselves. (*Carpentaria* 34)

Apart from the distinct difference in housing, the racism and prejudice that are part of every-day life for Aboriginal members of the community in Desperance is apparent. Therefore, it comes as a logical consequence to demand that they should “[b]ulldoze the crap out of those camps, flatten the lot” (*Carpentaria* 36) When town clerk Libby Valance explains why that is not a feasible action plan the white people of Uptown simply demand that “they should live like everyone else then” (*Carpentaria* 37) so that their lives can go back to normal. There is little understanding, no support, financially and morally, for the Aboriginal community in Desperance. They are barely tolerated on land that they have called their own forever. They are pushed to the fringes of the town in dwellings whose third-world standard and quality could easily be remedied if the government deemed it necessary to take action. The gap between the two communities could not be any wider.

*True Country* paints a similar picture, albeit less hostile and with more implied racist attitudes than *Carpentaria*. Kim Scott offers more detailed depiction of the houses than Alexis Wright. His in-depth description allows the reader to imagine more clearly the inferior quality of housing the Aboriginal people live in. The teachers’ houses resemble houses that one would expect to find in a rich country like Australia while housing for the Aboriginal community is lacking. When Fatima

visits Billy she comments that “‘is a nice house,eh?’” and that they “‘should make one like this for [her]. But with no step’” (*TC* 30). Billy instantly feels uneasy as he “‘thought of how it must seem compared to her own house” (*TC* 30). He is relieved that she “‘was not bitter about the difference in our housing” (*TC* 30). The teachers’ houses have air-conditioning, which is noted by little Beatrice matter-of-factly, “‘[i]t’s cool in ‘ere, eh? Mr Seddum’s house cool too, like this one. I been there’” (*TC* 45). Fatima’s house, on the other hand, has no oven so the Sisters in Karnama have to cook for her (compare *TC* 47) when she invites Billy and Liz over for dinner. Moreover, she neither has cutlery nor enough plates to host a dinner:

‘I got no oven here and they did it for me. I asked them. I knew you were coming and I wanted good food for you. I asked you. I told that girl Stella for mother, to tell you ... You got plates and ... we haven’t got, so you go first and ...’

Liz and I had each brought a soup bowl, dinner plate, and knife, fork, and spoon. The others had no utensils. So we all ate with our hands. (*TC* 47)

Kim Scott’s description of the surrounding and the housing is detailed, informative, and paints a bleak picture of Aboriginal living standards in Karnama (compare *TC* 73). He talks of “‘corrugated iron huts built decades ago” and smaller buildings out the back with “‘a piece of hessian or a blanked thrown across its doorway” that function as toilets. Only some houses have showers and most houses have “‘the ashes of a fire, some rubbish, a few blankets, and perhaps an old mattress, or an old wire bed that doubled as seating” out the front. The few newer houses are “‘standard suburban bungalows and not altogether appropriate to the climate or the inhabitants” but they are “‘more prestigious” (*TC* 73). Inside, the houses maintain the inferior and almost inhabitable quality. There are “‘no coverings on the grimy cement floor” and “‘unfurnished” (*TC* 74) People sleep on the floor and the kitchen is “‘food-spattered” (*TC* 74). The houses seem overcrowded and uninviting, and it is due to this that cleanliness and care for them are not a top priority.

Both Kim Scott and Alexis Wright draw attention to the difference in living standards and inferior housing of Aboriginal people in remote communities. They demonstrate that such living conditions are detrimental to the well-being of the individual and a community as a whole, especially as they are forced to live in

houses that are of such obvious difference from those of the non-Indigenous community. It is a reminder of their inferior position in society.

### 6.5.2 Assertion of Power Through Violence

Violent behaviour, acts of violence, and violent crime are present in both *True Country* and *Carpentaria*. Both authors offer detailed and brutal descriptions of violent incidents that are coupled with a matter-of-factness which makes the reader shiver. Kim Scott introduces Raphael, a young Aboriginal family man, who likes to drink and, as a result, “bashes his two wives, Stella and Gloria, anyone” (TC 113). He is aggressive, reckless, and no friend of rules, which appears to make him a role model for younger, impressionable Aboriginal children who are “excited and impressed with his daring” (TC 114). The reality, though, is that he abuses his wife Stella and his girlfriend Gloria so much that once they seek shelter with Billy and his wife Liz:

Billy and Liz were walking home from school when they saw those two women sitting there, hiding. [...] Those women do not go away from their own house much, except that Raphael lets Stella go to school each day, and then straight home again; special quick on payday. [...] Stella's face was swollen. Gloria's eyes moved quickly, and she was nervous like a kangaroo, watching out for her attacker. Raphael, you know, he bashes them. And he will, again, this day, when he finds them. He has told people he is looking for his wives. He is drunk. (TC 237)

Their story of abuse is a long one, with various injuries and means of abuse. They tell Liz about “how they were beaten; sometimes with a stick, sometimes in front of Raphael's family. He beats Gloria the most. They listed injuries for Liz, and lifted skirts and tops to show their scars” (TC 238). His status as role model or bad influence with the younger children is also apparent in this matter. When Raphael finally finds Stella and Gloria again, his revenge is vicious and commented on by a grinning boy with “[h]e teach them, eh? (TC 242). This time, Raphael “had proper

caught them all right. Hit them around the legs with his club, and half-dragged, let them limp, home” (*TC* 242). The women’s ordeal is not over yet:

Hit them again there. Later he dragged Gloria screaming from the shower by her hair. He slapped and hit her in front of his family; men, women, boys, girls and all. She fell down on the ground of them naked and slippery wet and crying, and all the sand and little sticks stuck to her skin and tears. (*TC* 242)

Kim Scott thus does not shy away from exposing the horror of the violence of Aboriginal people. His interest lies in the representation of the truth and exposure of the reality of life in remote communities. There is no sugar coating this reality and there is no hiding the fact that there is violence among Aboriginal people that is due to many factors, among them alcohol abuse, petrol sniffing, and a frustration with life in general. Kim Scott offers an explanation for Raphael’s abusive behaviour in the form of a comment by an Aboriginal third person narrator who explains:

True, this be a mad place, in some ways. But we can fix that. Maybe. This one was a real sad story, but should not be. This bashing to try show he is a powerful one, and to have control. (*TC* 243)

Raphael has no power or self-determination in his life. Most aspects of his life are controlled by the white people in the community. He has no real job, no real perspective, hardly an education, and nothing meaningful to do all day. This leaves him with a great sense of anger, frustration, and need to prove his worth. The way he attempts to achieve this seemingly is the only way that is accessible to him in his restricted frame of mind. As the above quote shows, members of the Aboriginal community believe that they could fix that and lead him back to a peaceful and fulfilled life that would silence his need to use violence to assert his power and importance. But the question remains whether this is possible at all. Moreover, Kim Scott does not give any indication why the Aboriginal Elders fail to step in and stop the violence. There is mention of the shame Raphael feels and of his “hating himself again” (*TC* 162). Scott also depicts the weakness of the Aboriginal Elders who are aware that no one listens to them as they “got no stories, we got no punishments. We losing it. We losing that power” (*TC* 179). This admission of loss of power indicates their inability to help their own people which might be a reason why Kim Scott offers no explanation as to how Raphael can be stopped.

Violence of Aboriginal men against women is one aspect of violence that Kim Scott presents in *True Country*. Another aspect is white violence against Aboriginal people, and the lack of real consequences of murdering an Aboriginal person. Franny, a “nearly-man” (TC 201), has his first experience of going to a pub in Derby, the nearest town, and is killed in the carpark of the pub by two drunk white men. The description of this murder is a gruesome and horrific account of a racist hate crime. Franny has too much to drink and he is vomiting in the carpark, vomiting and trying to find a place to lie down in a car. When the two men see him, they become angry and run over to teach him a lesson. This lesson becomes even more ‘fun’ when they realise that he is Aboriginal:

Oh, he was black! Aborigine! They hit him, kicked him, punched him. He was like a bag, he didn’t fight back. Groaned. Maybe they enjoyed feeling their fists and their feet striking flesh. They held him up to hit him. He slid to the ground; maybe yelled, sobbed, whimpered. Pick him up, hit him more. One of them killers hit him with a brick. Oh, yes, they told us later. Oh, they jumped up and down on him. His heart went away. (TC 203)

After that beating, one of them uses a knife, “held his head back and sawed through his throat” (TC, 203) When the killers are tried in court, Franny’s family and friends hope for justice as “if [they] gotta follow the white law then [they] expect them to do the right thing by all Australians, by everybody” (TC 206):

We Aboriginal people. Look at us. We’re down low, we down there in the dark, and nobody. One time it was different, for us and this land. We had ones that could fix things, and could fly, disappear, punish. [...] We are trying so hard for the past and our hopes to return. Maybe some of that past and our power. (TC 206)

The despair and helplessness that Kim Scott expresses in the above quote is heartbreaking, especially if the brutality of the murder is taken into consideration. The two killers are acquitted in a speedy trial. Yet, both murderers die shortly after; one in a car accident and the other commits suicide. These deaths can be considered coincidental for one and due to a guilty conscience for the other. Kim Scott uses these deaths to allow the Aboriginal commentator to imply that there is justice out there for Aboriginal people that could be brought about by Aboriginal magic powers:

Crash! He crash that car. [...] Dead dead proper dead bastard. Got him. [...] Other one? His mate? Death in our custody, eh? [...]

So we got him too. [...] Him dead. We got him. Just like old times. Still got power, see?

True. True story. Listen! We could do that. Could could could. (*TC* 208f)

It is apparent, though, that the Aboriginal community has no such powers despite their implication of its existence. But it allows Scott to express the need for justice for Aboriginal people in order to close the gap between the non-Indigenous and the Indigenous community.

The unpunished murder of a young Aboriginal may be part of a fictional story so it is obvious that Kim Scott wants his readers to open their eyes to the unfair and racist treatment that Aboriginals are subjected to. In addition, it illustrates their willingness to put their trust in the law in an effort to demonstrate their ability to live in both worlds. Their betrayal by the legal system epitomises their whole existence in Australia and, as a consequence, Kim Scott reminds his readers that the Aboriginal people deserve justice and equality.

The violent crimes in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* are the brutal beating in retaliation that Kevin, Normal Phantom's youngest son who is left mentally handicapped after an accident in the mine, suffers, and the police brutality against the three young Fishman boys, Mozzie Fishman's and Angel Day's sons, when they are detained for a murder of Gordie, the white neighbourhood watch. In both cases it is young, innocent Aboriginal males that fall victim to white racist acts of violence.

Like in *True Country*, Kevin is picked up outside the pub and lured into a car by three white males. They speed off into the night, kidnapping him, rendering the youth scared for his life as he understands that getting into the car was a mistake:

All Kevin could see were the white hoods each of the people in the car had placed over their heads. Then he felt the hands somewhere in the back seat pushing something over his head. He reached up and felt the rough thread of the material, like a sack, and he could smell the wheat or flour, like poultry feed. He knew the smell, recognising it from when he had passed Uptown people's backyard fowl coops. [...] Kevin knew he had to get out of the car, but he feared the consequences of jumping out, as it headed along the bitumen at high speed. (*Carpentaria* 343)

The account of the beating is also realistic, detailed, and shocking. The motive for the attack is clearly stated when one of the attacker says to Kevin that he should



“[t]ake this for Gordie” (*Carpentaria* 343). Alexis Wright gives the reader information about how Kevin feels in this situation and relates the beating through his eyes:

Kevin slipped in and out of believing it was not happening to him, hearing war cries, laughter, and smelling beer and rum. He tried to rip the sack off his head because he could not breathe but the knife dug deeper, cutting him. [...]

Whenever he regained consciousness, it was to feel the thud of being struck with something heavy. He heard his bones break with a pain that forced him to open his shock-sealed lips, and call out through the muffling bag to his father. [...]

His skin was burning, he was being skinned alive, pulled behind the car, its exhaust fumes choking his breath. (*Carpentaria* 344)

The perspective of this scene is different to Kim Scott’s murder scene as here the reader is inside Kevin’s body and feels his pain and emotional distress, while Kim Scott focuses on the actions of the murderers. Both scenes portray racially motivated crimes against Aboriginal people by white people that are despicable. Moreover, these are murders that are considered “only black murders” (*Carpentaria* 313), hence, they are less important and can be ignored, especially in a small town in the middle of Australia, where the police “don’t care about our truth” (*Carpentaria* 223), and the mayor “bragged about how he had chased every Aboriginal woman in town at various times, until he ran them into the ground then raped them” (*Carpentaria* 41).

The mayor also plays a crucial part in the mistreatment and abuse of the three boys, Tristram, aged ten, Junior F. Luke, aged 12 and Aaron Ho Kum aged eleven, for killing Gordie. They are referred to as “Pricklebush boys, the petrol sniffers” (*Carpentaria* 310), and are the reason why none of the white people in Uptown “ventured outside of their louvred homes where windows were tightly shut. So much caution about the colour of skin had been dragged from the past into the new millennium” (*Carpentaria* 311). The three “up-to-no-good” (*Carpentaria* 333) are suffering in goal while everyone wonders why they would want to kill Gordie in the first place. After their arrest which they barely register due to their being high on petrol “like potatoes” they “hit the floor and stayed were they fell” (*Carpentaria* 333). Constable Truthful quickly realises that “[m]anhandling was proving to be a

pretty fruitless exercise” so he “stopped throwing the boys around” as “a cop had to remember his duty” (*Carpentaria* 333). The mayor, on the other hand, finds it difficult to restrain himself and Truthful panics as he realises “there wouldn’t be one politician, or bureaucrat connected with the State government, who would be game enough to challenge the influential Bruiser, Mayor of Desperance” (*Carpentaria* 334):

The boy looked dully at the man through his hooded eyelids, incapable, it crossed Truthful’s mind, of even opening his eyes in fright. The lack of response did not lessen the sport, because Bruiser read the situation as meaning only one thing, contempt. [...] The big man was lost in a frenzy. His big frame stomped from one end of the small exercise yard to the other, while kicking and dragging up one limp sack and throwing it against the wall, then picking up another and throwing it, and another. This struck Truthful in an oblique kind of way as overwhelming reverence towards the search for truth, to the point that it meant killing everyone in the increasingly bloodied yard to find it. (*Carpentaria* 334f)

The brutal beating is only stopped when Truthful threatens to shoot Bruiser in a desperate attempt to stop him from killing the children and involving Truthful in the murder of innocent children. There is neither empathy nor support for the children in his protection of them. It is more a side effect of his need to protect himself from any possible consequences that a deadly outcome of this beating might have for him. The focus of this account is Bruiser and his violent action against three young children who are unable to fight back or understand what is happening to them. Their incomprehension of their incarceration results in frustration, fear and despair, and eventually, death. They are left without information about what is going to happen with them and without any family being able to visit them. As a result of this, they take the only avenue they believe is available to them and commit suicide. The description of their suicide projects a calmness and stillness that is a result of the boys’ deliberate actions:

Luke was the oldest, and he tore the T-shirts into strips, tied the knots, and carefully examined whether each length would be long enough. The other two boys watched his hands work in the moonlight and said nothing, and then he had everything prepared. They just followed Luke into the darkness and into the light beyond, up on the blue sky, swimming under a cloudless summer sky. [...] They boys were dead. Their shredded T-shirts were the first thing [Truthful] saw. Three strands hanging taut from the cross bar at the top of the bars across the front of their cell. (*Carpentaria* 358)

When Truthful is beside himself with confusion and fear, Bruiser manages to twist the truth and blame Truthful for what happened to the three boys, pretending to believe that Truthful “was off with the pixies” (*Carpentaria* 361) as he sits with the dead boys after covering their dead bodies. Still, Bruiser displays zero human emotions while it is clear that Truthful’s guilty conscience is the reason why he shows some respect towards the three boys now they are dead. The white figures of authority in Desperance use violence to assert their power, regardless of the fact that they commit a crime. Alexis Wright wants to demonstrate what kind of abuse and injustice Aboriginal people are subjected to.

Both Alexis Wright and Kim Scott depict difficulties remote communities have to deal with. They emphasise the inequality and hardship Indigenous people living in these remote communities face on a daily basis. The underlying problem, the root of all their struggles is the racist attitude and the lack of respect Indigenous people are subjected to. Without racism, there would be a chance of equality and fair treatment that would offer young Indigenous people growing up in such remote communities a fair chance in life. Alexis Wright and Kim Scott paint a realistic and honest picture of life in remote communities and offer their explanation of why there is violence among members of Aboriginal communities in these remote areas. There is a stark and visible dichotomy between lives in these Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities. The medium of television is easily available, and from these remote communities Aboriginals can be transported to numerous sporting events, unrecognisable cultural events, and in general, given access to a world that is almost entirely alien to them. This perpetuates the feeling of inferiority because they are not represented in these sporting events, these cultural events or non-Indigenous Australian society on the whole. The affluent lifestyle that is beamed into impoverished remote Aboriginal communities could not be further away from harsh reality of alcohol abuse, casual violence, and ill-health. How can they envision themselves in this world of abundance when government policies are in place to prevent that? The economic boom in Australia over the last few decades has further marginalised Aboriginal culture through the aggressive tactics of the Australian government to create wealth through diminishing Aboriginal land. Alexis Wright and Kim Scott have brought attention to the Indigenous Australians’ plight through

the international sales of their books. However, even the United Nations' condemnation of the Aboriginal housing situation in remote areas failed to illicit a reaction from the Australian government that would change the daily lives of the people in these remote communities. In fact, currently there is political pressure to close remote communities altogether. In 2015, then Prime Minister Tony Abbott supported the Western Australian government's plan to close more than one hundred remote Aboriginal communities as it is unwilling to continue its funding for essential necessities, such as electricity. The struggle for equality continues.

## 7. Indigenous Women's Challenges in urban settings as presented in Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* and Anita Heiss's *Not Meeting Mr. Right*

This chapter analyses Melissa Lucashenko's first novel *Steam Pigs*, published in 1997, and Anita Heiss's first commercial fiction contribution, *Not Meeting Mr. Right*, published in 2007. Both novels depict a female Indigenous protagonist living in an urban setting, Brisbane and Sydney respectively, and take the reader on their characters' journey of personal growth and maturity. Melissa Lucashenko's novel is set in an economically disadvantaged suburb in Brisbane while Anita Heiss's female protagonist lives in an affluent Eastern suburb in Sydney. In addition, although both characters are Indigenous, their social standing and backgrounds are markedly different. Melissa Lucashenko's Sue Wilson is lowly educated with little aspirations for her future. In contrast, Anita Heiss's Alice Aigner is a university graduate with a successful career. Despite the obvious differences, both characters undergo a change in their outlook that leaves them with a broader perspective of life and therefore happier women. Both Melissa Lucashenko and Anita Heiss succeed in bringing Indigenous women's challenges to the attention of their readers while emphasising the similar life experiences of women of any colour. Moreover, they bring to the forefront current issues the Indigenous Australian community struggle with, like Aboriginal deaths in custody, being a light-skinned Aboriginal, and still ongoing racism and prejudice.

This chapter will analyse issues presented in the novels that many Indigenous women face today. It will discuss the issue of domestic violence that Indigenous women are subjected to in families and in their relationships, which Melissa Lucashenko tackles in *Steam Pigs*. It will also discuss Melissa Lucashenko's protagonist's learning process of defining her Indigeneity. It will briefly look at the genre of *chic lit* with regard to Anita Heiss's novel and discuss the author's importance and reason for moving into commercial fiction. It will describe the way Anita Heiss attempts to educate her non-Indigenous audience about problems and challenges the Indigenous community faces, and further analyse how she defies stereotypes about Indigenous Australians by emphasising the similarities between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Finally, this chapter will discuss issues around feminism and Indigenous women and the importance of personal growth that both Melissa Lucashenko and Anita Heiss portray in their novels.

This chapter will argue that the role of Indigenous women within their community is changing, and that there is a need to support Indigenous women to overcome traditional gender roles in order to become happier in life. It will show that education and belief in oneself are essential for Indigenous women so that they can fulfil their potential. In addition, this chapter will also argue that embracing one's Aboriginality is imperative in order to become a person that is happy with her identity, regardless of the stereotyping and prejudices that Indigenous Australians are still subjected to.

### ***7.1. Challenges of Indigenous Women in Urban Areas***

Michael Morrissey claims that in the years from 1990 to 2006 “the gap between Indigenous Australians and the rest either remained static or actually widened in terms of the key indicators of health, labour force and education participation, as well as income levels and incarceration rates” (Morrissey 348). These issues are important to address in order to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and support the reconciliation process. Despite the importance of tackling these problematic areas, their discussion has overshadowed the need for addressing issues that are of concern for Indigenous women. Melissa Lucashenko states that “in those cases where Aboriginal political issues have been taken up by the wider society, it has largely been the opinions and agendas of Black men that have predominated” (Lucashenko, “Violence” 379). She argues that “increased Aboriginal agitation for land rights; community initiatives in health, education, and legal reforms; and moves toward political and bureaucratic representation” (Lucashenko, “Violence” 279) have resulted in a lack of prioritising issues of Indigenous women. She claims that

[a]lthough individual Black women struggled in the past to highlight the issues of domestic violence, rape, child abuse, and parental neglect, it has

taken until [1996] to have these problems even acknowledged by Aboriginal men. There is [still in 1996] widespread denial among Aboriginal communities about these sensitive topics. Land rights, poverty, police brutality, and poor health status are much more palatable issues for debate because they do not require an explicit examination of power relations within the Black community. (Lucashenko, "Violence" 379)

As so many Indigenous women live in poverty and are poorly educated, they are "extremely vulnerable to physical assault, sexual assault, rape and molestation at the hands of men" (Lucashenko, "Many Prisons" 142). An Aboriginal woman is four times more likely to find herself in a situation of domestic violence than a non-Indigenous woman<sup>38</sup>. In addition, Indigenous children who grow up in a home where abuse is a common occurrence, learn to think that such behaviour is normal and so the cycle of violence continues. In fact, the idea that some men "do not bash and rape is a startling revelation" (Lucashenko, "Violence" 385) to Indigenous women who have been surrounded by violence and oppression all their lives. Generally speaking, violence is more often than not part of an Aboriginal person's life, including children. However, "much of the bashing is male on adult female; much occurs in settings where alcohol is being abused" (Lucashenko, "Violence" 384). It has been argued that the violent behaviour of Aboriginal men is a result of dispossession and disempowerment but there are Aboriginal activists, like Marcia Langton, who strongly disagree with this explanation. She stated in 1990 that

[t]here is no excuse on the planet that justifies this kind of treatment of women and children, and the white people who do that, out of some mistaken belief that they are being respectful of Aboriginal culture, are very misled, because there will not be an Aboriginal culture for them to respect twenty years down the track if they continue to treat them in that trivialising way. (quoted in Lucashenko, "Violence" 383)

According to Atkinson in 1990, more Indigenous women died as a result of domestic violence than there were deaths of Indigenous people in custody. She also argued that violence in Aboriginal society had become a norm since colonisation, which would support the argument that dispossession and disempowerment are contributing factors to violent behaviour in Aboriginal communities (compare Lucashenko, "Violence" 384). At the same time, Melissa Lucashenko argues that

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<sup>38</sup> [www.CreativeSpirits.info](http://www.CreativeSpirits.info),  
Aboriginal culture - People - Domestic and family violence, retrieved 17 April 2017

some abusive Aboriginal men that were charged with murder, bashings or rape “have claimed traditional law as a defense in court, with mixed success” (Lucashenko, “Violence” 382) and states that

[m]any Aboriginal women are sceptical about their claims [...]. Groups of Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory are now saying that they are being subjected to three types of law: “white man’s law, traditional law, and bullshit traditional law”, the latter being used to describe a distortion of traditional law used as a justification for assault and rape of women or men spending all the family income on alcohol and sharing it with their cousins, justifying the actions as expressions of cultural identity. (Lucashenko, “Violence” 382f)

This shows that there is an urgency to break the cycle of violence in order to enable Indigenous women to lead a life that allows them to focus on other issues than surviving their relationships. Indigenous women in such situations need to be given support to find alternative perspectives and means to leave abusive relationships behind.

Anita Heiss’s memoir about identity, *Am I Black Enough for You?*, published in 2012, discusses the question what it means to be Aboriginal in contemporary Australian society. This memoir includes an account of the group action lawsuit against columnist Andrew Bolt<sup>39</sup>, a columnist of the *Herald Sun* she was part of in 2011. This lawsuit was the direct consequence of one of his articles in which he stated that there were many Aboriginal people who did not look Aboriginal, but claimed to be part of the Aboriginal community to further their careers. In other words, he stated that if you are a light-skinned Indigenous Australian as a result of mixed heritage, you can claim Aboriginal heritage to boost your professional life by fulfilling requirements for positions reserved for Aboriginal people. This also implies that being Aboriginal is a choice not a heritage. Andrew Bolt was found guilty and in breach of the Racial Discrimination Act, a verdict that was important for Indigenous Australians and their right to define their Indigeneity. This verdict was a milestone in the debate about Aboriginal identity that has been going on in Australia for a long time. There are stereotypical expectations about what it means to be Aboriginal that are based on appearance, social status, and character traits that

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<sup>39</sup> Bolt, Andrew, “Is it So Hip to Be Black”, *Herald Sun*, April 15, 2009 ([http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1109\\_heraldsun09.pdf](http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1109_heraldsun09.pdf))



both Melissa Lucashenko and Anita Heiss challenge in their novels. Yin Paradis argues that “people in Australia have, for some decades, been engaged in debates about Indigenous identity” (Paradis 356). She argues that “asserting a multi-racial Indigenous identity is neither common nor straightforward because racial loyalty demands that anomalous individuals choose to be either exclusively Indigenous or exclusively non-Indigenous” (Paradis 357). A “hybrid space of multiplicity” (Paradis 357) that allows non-Indigenous people to identify as a person with more than one nationalities is a space that seems unavailable to Indigenous Australians. In addition, she argues that there is a “prevailing misconception that if you are middle class you can’t be Aboriginal [and] being educated, well-remunerated or simply enjoying material assets can expose one to suspicion of wanting to be white” (Paradis 358). This concept of what it means to be Aboriginal is one that is being challenged by Indigenous Australians living in urban areas. There is a growing Indigenous middle class, and, as Paradis states, “between 1994 and 2002 the proportion of Indigenous people with at least a Bachelor degree increased threefold (from 1% to 3%)” (Paradis 358). At the same time, employment of Indigenous people has increased, too (compare Paradis, 358). Nevertheless, light-skinned Indigenous people experience “racism, scorn and disbelief from other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike” (Paradis 359). Such “questioning of authenticity” (Paradis, 359) is the result of light-skinned Indigenous people’s challenging of the “Black-White racial dichotomy, so fervently clung to in Australia” (Paradis 359). Paradis asks Australian mainstream society to acknowledge “that we now live in a thoroughly hybridized world where boundaries have become utterly porous, even though they are artificially maintained” (Paradis 361). Anita Heiss explained in her TED talk in October, 2013 in Brisbane<sup>40</sup> that it is language used by Westerners that makes Aboriginal people different. She discusses how it is widely accepted for a non-Indigenous Australian that if they identify as Australian with European or Asian descent, they are being referred to as being cosmopolitan. Yet if Indigenous people consider themselves as having one identity and many heritages, they are told they are losing touch with their roots or living in two worlds. According to Heiss, it is such language that creates a divide which should be overcome in today’s society. It

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<sup>40</sup> OnexSameness. Dr. Anita Heiss at TEDxBrisbane, 25 October 2011 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1f8ew23tLI0>)

marginalises Indigenous Australians and assigns them a role in mainstream society that is defined by being the other. Paradis argues that Indigeneity must be “decoupled from disadvantage and marginality, from cultural and physical alterity and from callow moral dichotomies” (Paradis 363). Brough et al argue that Indigenous people seek “both acknowledgement of their Aboriginality as well as the freedom to participate in the multicultural space of a large Australian city” (Brough et al 407) but state that

mostly we witness a failure to acknowledge the diversity of Aboriginal identities, along with a failure to imagine ways in which strong Aboriginal identities can be allowed to mingle in multicultural landscapes without being assimilated, hybridized or otherwise de-legitimated. Stereotypical, racist and other exclusionary practices and ideas are the drivers of inequality. These drivers are clearly at work in determining how people come to be positioned in some social networks and not others. (Brough et al 407f)

It is this difficult position of invisibility of Indigenous Australians, in particular of Indigenous women, which Anita Heiss has been trying to combat in her writing. She has been called the inventor of Australian Indigenous chick-lit and after the release of her novel *Not Meeting Mr. Right* in 2008 she was considered “Koori Bradshaw”, a moniker modelled on the famous character Carrie Bradshaw in Candace Bushnell’s chick lit ‘classic’ *Sex and the City*. Anne Fullerton from the Herald Sun states that “the sub-genre of Australian Indigenous chick-lit was virtually invented by Heiss, and, in providing a more nuanced, accessible vision of Aboriginal identity, she has addressed a glaring absence from the literary landscape” (quoted in Heiss, *Am I?* 211). Imogen Mathew argues that “chick-lit” has become a ubiquitous – if not always celebrated – feature of the contemporary literary, social and cultural landscape” (Mathew, *The Pretty*, 1). According to Cris Mazza, the term ‘chick-lit’ was coined in order “not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype” (quoted in Ommundsen 107). Ommundsen argues that the commercial success of chick-lit was unexpected and most likely due to the fact that

the notion of conflicting desires remains strong, reflecting the challenges facing young women as they navigate between careers and relationships, independence and commitment, and commodity culture and traditional values. Going commercial and global, chick-lit [...] marks the emergence of

a new cultural norm [...] and an ethics of freedom, with young women as its preeminent subjects. (Ommundsen 108)

Imogen Mathew states that the chick-lit genre is “heteronormative, white, and middleclass; traditional gender binaries are taken seriously and living in the big city, consumer culture dream shapes the narrative arc” (Mathew, “The Pretty” 1) Anita Heiss is defined as a ‘*choc-lit*’ author because “her chick-lit heroines have all the sass, fun, and gloriously messy love lives of their American and British sisters, but [...] they are glamorous and assertive Aboriginal women” (Mathew, “Educating” 334). Imogen Mathew argues that the author tries to “make visible a population that mainstream Australia seems bent on disappearing [...] as Aboriginal Australians only figure on the ‘national identity radar’ when their skin is black and they are viewed as ‘a problem to be solved or an exotic fantasy’” (Mathew, “Educating” (quoting Heiss) 335). Imogen Mathew continues to explain that choc-lit celebrates “the lives and careers of urban Aboriginal women for whom countering racism and finding Mr. Right are the same thing” (Mathew, “Educating” 335). Moreover, she argues that Indigenous writers are attracted by the chick-lit genre as it allows them to “challenge common stereotypes” (Mathew, “Educating” 335) and reach a readership – “mainstream, middle-class, non-Aboriginal women” (Mathew, “Educating”, 335) that they want to educate about the lives of Indigenous women today. Anita Heiss’s fiction is

a densely packed inventory of names of Aboriginal artists, writers, singers and filmmakers; it instructs the reader in culturally appropriate language conventions; and it models exemplary modes of behavior toward Aboriginal people. (Mathew, “Educating” 335)

In addition, there are references to current issues relating to the Indigenous community as well as information about the shared history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This is to ensure that Indigenous Australians in general and Indigenous women in particular, are better understood and recognised as equal participants in Australian society. The necessity of this pedagogic agenda becomes apparent when considering the following quote:

A vast number of Australians do not know any Indigenous people, do not mix with Indigenous people socially; they rarely live within Indigenous communities, whether rural or urban. This lack of contact, coupled with a lack of education about experiences and perspectives, allows Indigenous

communities to become invisible, appearing only to fill negative (or positive) stereotypes. (Behrendt, 76)

Stereotyping and the European paradigms of past decades are also issues in terms of feminism, a notion especially of concern for Melissa Lucashenko but also discussed in Anita Heiss's novel. In her article about Aboriginal women and Australian Feminism in 1994, Melissa Lucashenko argues that "mainstream feminist ideology is not appropriate for indigenous women, both in Australia and elsewhere" (Lucashenko, "No Other Truth" 21). She explains that

[t]he overwhelming facts of reality for most Black women are three – racism, violence and economic struggle. The white feminist who is not of poor working class background therefore has little immediate connection with us [...] To hear white women speak of their powerlessness seems nonsensical to many Black women who fail to see beyond the power which Migloos exercise over their Black lives, through the economic system, through the legal system, through the media and through Government policies. (Lucashenko, "No Other Truth" 22)

She argues that if Indigenous women knew that feminism would offer them "spaces and relationships safe from violence, safe from overt racism, safe from white ignorance, safe from the role of 'Black educator of whites'" (Lucashenko, "No Other Truth" 23), Black feminism would become a more accessible notion for Indigenous women. According to Lucashenko, the future success of Black feminism lies in "educating our communities" (Lucashenko, "No Other Truth" 23). Aileen Moreton-Robins argues that Australian feminist literature "has been extremely useful in exposing the oppressive conditions of Indigenous women's existence" (*Blacklines* 67) although "relations between Indigenous women and white women are analysed through the white woman's filtered lens" (*Blacklines* 67). She maintains that this lens fails to see the way in which white privilege is apparent in these relations. She argues that Australian feminist literature "does not reveal how Indigenous women study the whiteness before their eyes – how Indigenous women penetrate the subjectivities of white women and men" (*Blacklines* 67). This understanding results in knowledge of whiteness that is disregarded by white society. She states that "the dismissal and suppression of our knowledge about whiteness is tied to the maintenance of white racial domination and privilege in this country" (*Blacklines* 67). In her view, white power remains untouched regardless of "intention, power differences and goodwill" (*Blacklines* 66), merely due to the fact

that “it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal” (*Blacklines* 66). Melissa Lucashenko explains that Indigenous feminists are unable to experience non-racist environments but instead are offered a space where they are “accepted as feminists if [they] don’t rock the boat too much by discussing cultural issues which need addressing” (Lucashenko, “No Other Truth” 23). As Moreton-Robinson states, “[if Indigenous women] enter feminism and its debates, it is not on [their] terms, but on the terms of white feminists whose race confers dominance and privilege” (*Blacklines* 77). Lucashenko concurs, stating that the “major obstacle to totally effective Black feminism is white racism in the feminist movement” (Lucashenko, “No Other Truth” 23). More often than not, Indigenous women find themselves in a “prison of disempowerment” (Lucashenko, “Many Prisons” 143) and, as Lucashenko argues, the problems of Aboriginal women will not be the main focus of a white government (compare Lucashenko, “Many Prisons” 143). She argues therefore that Indigenous women’s empowerment

lies in educating [themselves] on many levels, and talking about [their] oppressions. Education about how to love [themselves] as black women. Education on what being Indigenous really means. Education on how to live by Aboriginal law in a modern context. Education on how to fight racism. Education on how to fight abuse and reject it in its myriad forms. Education on what a complete waste of time it is to blame anyone for [their] predicaments. And education on how to become respected members of [their] communities. (Lucashenko, “Many Prisons” 144)

Contrary to other Indigenous feminists, Melissa Lucashenko believes that there is “a place for supportive white people in [Aboriginal women’s] recovery” (Lucashenko, “Many Prisons” 143), and states that the “white feminist who is not of a poor or working class background therefore has little immediate connection” (Lucashenko, “No Other Truth” 22) with Indigenous women. As a result, it can be argued that Melissa Lucashenko distinguishes between white feminists who are privileged and white feminists who are not. Despite the problem of occasional racism in the white feminist movement, Lucashenko identifies the task

“of white women who wish to be allies of Aboriginal women [as] crucial. Their task lies mainly in the white community, and in the challenge to interrupt racism wherever they see it, be it in the street, in the media, in the women’s movement. A handful of white feminist women are rising to this challenge – had they not, we wouldn’t be aware that such positive change on the part of Migloos was possible. It is through feminists such as this –

feminists able to come to terms with the racism which an Australian upbringing has given them as *their* birthright – that indigenous women can learn what white feminism has to say. (Lucashenko, “No Other Truth” 23)

In other words, the author believes in the possibility of change in society, despite what other Indigenous feminists might say. She believes that the similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, or people in general, will help to overcome the racism and the barriers it creates.

At the core of Melissa Lucashenko’s and Anita Heiss’s fiction is their need and their motivation to showcase the difficulties Indigenous women face in Australia today, and to educate other Indigenous women as well as non-Indigenous women on how to break free from any pressures put on them by society or life in general in order to lead loving, enriched, and purposeful lives.

## **7.2. Domestic Violence in Melissa Lucashenko’s *Steam Pigs***

Melissa Lucashenko’s first novel, *Steam Pigs*, was published in 1997 and is set in Eagleby, a poor suburb of Brisbane. The protagonist Sue Wilson is a 17 year old teenager who lives with her older brother Dave and his two sons, Kirk and Lucky, who are aged six and four respectively. Dave’s wife has left the family, and so Sue helps her brother look after his children. Sue left Townsville to move in with her brother after an abortion and tries to find a job to help pay her way. She is into karate and it is there she meets Roger, her new boyfriend, before she moves in with him and her life takes a turn for the worse.

Melissa Lucashenko sets the scene for the novel in the prologue in which she describes the deterioration of Dave’s car over a period of time and the constant struggle to make ends meet. The opening sentence, “Everything in their lives is going to be fixed one day soon, (“I dunno when, soon I said, *alright?*”) and Dave’s XB is no exception” (*SP* Prologue), alerts the reader to the fact that this is a story in which people’s lives are in need of mending and improving. All Indigenous characters in Melissa Lucashenko’s novel have a tough life and kill the pain of their existence with alcohol. The children seem neglected, like Sue’s nephew Lucky who

“[l]ike a miniature teenager, [...] spends a lot of time in front of the TV” (*SP* 12), which leads Sue to suspect that he can only go down two possible roads in the future as she wonders “what there was for a bright young desperado [...] apart from petty crime or the gay ghetto option of running from bashers every other night” (*SP* 13). The suburb Eagleby – “that death of outer suburbia that was Eagleby” (*SP* 5) – is depicted as a bleak and glum place, where Dave and Sue live in a “brick box” (*SP* 6), only “twentyfive minutes away from respectability to the fringedwellers, watching the affluence seep away with the minutes from CBD” (*SP* 7). The inhabitants of Eagleby are presented as people who lead lives that are defined by boredom, financial struggle, lack of education, and wrong priorities:

[...] the population melted into limpid living rooms, tranced by the flicker of flannels on screens. Up and down the folk heroes ran, followed by thousands of proletarian eyes. Too cowed to admit the killing boredom of their existence, too dulled to imagine more than the Six by Slater, the inhabitants of Slammer Street would sit and charge on and cheer with cheerless eyes. Polytheists these, worshipping the twin gods of cricket and TV on Saturdays when – *bliss!* – the two came together in a coupling of men and machine. (*SP* 5)

Puberty “starts at eleven in Eagleby, middle age hits hard at twenty-five” (*SP* 57) and on Saturdays at the shopping mall there are “[w]hole families of beer-gutted twenty-five year-old men in T-shirts proclaiming that ‘Holdens Shit on Falcons’ – or vice versa (*SP* 100). And despite a demographic that is far away from education, financial security, and aspirations “the poor white trash [...] looks down on [the] Murriss as ignorant and drunken, while they piss their own lives away at the pub and the video store. [...] Ah, go get rooted, ya braindead lotta cunts” (*SP* 101). There is a pecking order which ranks the Indigenous population in Eagleby below the poorest and most uneducated in a white society that has nothing to show for itself. Melissa Lucashenko uses this pecking order to depict the challenges Indigenous people face when they live in urban areas, or more specifically, are residents of poor suburbs. They are considered to be at the bottom of society, despite the fact that the non-Indigenous residents “threw money at the pub, and come the weekend they’d vomit obeisance at the altar” (*SP* 1). In addition, the stigma of living in a poor suburb adds to their status as fringe dwellers. It is difficult to bridge the gap between affluent suburbs and the CBD, and Indigenous people living in poor suburbs. Melissa Lucashenko shows that the gap is not only caused by a difference in

education and financial background, it is also based on a lack of empathy and understanding of mainstream society about what it means to struggle to make ends meet:

What do you know? You're not them. You think they're stupid because they're poor, but their bare feet beat rhythms your city never will. You can talk cos talk's what your world wants, but them – they can fight. They know how to avoid the random pendulum of the police at any cost. They can live on your lunch money for a week, because they must. Your North Quay towers are no more exclusive than their CocaCola huddles, and your suit is almost as funny as your straight, white face. (*SP* 7)

This position as fringe dweller at the bottom of society instils a feeling of inferiority in Sue, and she contemplates that “moleskin trousers and blue shirts struck her incompetent with fear, and three-piece suits remained an invitation to vanish, not to mutiny” (*SP* 7). Eagleby also gives her “good enough reasons to vanish” (*SP* 8), as it is a tough place and where you either “won or you lost, you punched or you bled” (*SP* 8), and irrational anger towards Indigenous people can easily lead to violence. Melissa Lucashenko depicts Eagleby as an urban environment that is tough for all its residents but even tougher for Indigenous people as they are used by low-class white people to have someone to look down on.

Melissa Lucashenko uses strong language and her vernacular gives her writing a depth that allows the reader to imagine her characters' anger, frustrations, and fears. The author's Aboriginal characters' use of language is realistically modelled on Indigenous English, and in an interview she explains her reasons for doing so:

I think so few people read novels. I think it might revitalise things on the margins maybe but real revitalisation has to happen through other means. This came up at the festival yesterday<sup>41</sup> when someone asked me why I incorporated language in the novel. I suppose it's such an integral part of being on that country – to think about it in language – that I wanted to express it in the novel. It wasn't a conscious decision ... it just came along with the territory, literally. (Lever 122)

It can be argued that Melissa Lucashenko's use of Indigenous vernacular is a means to make her writing more accessible for her Indigenous readership, but also familiarise non-Indigenous readers with this dialect of English. She uses various terms for the word *police*, like “booliman” (*SP* 15), gunjies (*SP* 31), pigs (*SP* 180);

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<sup>41</sup> The Sydney Writers Festival 2013 where Lucashenko presented a talk.



she uses “coon” as a term for Aboriginal people and “migs” as a term for white people. Both terms are derogatory and portray an underlying hatred for the other person. Her language is tough at times and mirrors the hard life that her characters lead. It is not easy to survive in Eagleby where alcohol, violence, and abuse are regular occurrences.

Melissa Lucashenko stated in an interview that

[t]here’s an epidemic of violence in the Australian underclass, and I think a lot of Aboriginal people think the level of violence we live with is normal because they (a) see it every day and (b) see it in their white underclass neighbours and relatives. But it’s very far from normal. [...] The violence I’ve written about is mild. I’ve never written what I think is very graphic violence. (Lever 125)

In *Steam Pigs*, violent acts become more descriptive towards the end of the book, and even then it is more recollections of what happened and the subsequent injuries that are described. In the first chapter there is a foreshadowing of how Sue’s karate training will be useful for her in the following months of her relationship with Roger:

The trick is to swallow time inside yourself, hide it in the hollow of your gut, and only let it out once the order comes, and it’s safe to let yourself feel the other reality once more. [...] Sue is learning, and the *karateka*’s magic – to be always a temporary person, always ready to shut out what’s being done to you, the outrage of the body versus the voluntary disappearance of mind – is a lesson that she’ll be grateful for more than once in the months ahead. (SP 4)

The final beating she suffers from Roger is related as Sue wonders how to tell her brother about what happened to her:

“Look, he...” the girl pausing wondering what to say about the orgy of violence and screamed abuse she’d somehow survived, “hit me last night, I look like something the cat dragged in.” (SP 195)

Sue is a rather strong person, and lucky to get out of this abusive relationship alive. The realisation of what she has been through and what tragic ending it could have had makes her cry:

And she remembered, for the first time since Kerry’d said it weeks ago, about how many women got killed, not just bashed, but killed in domestic violence. One a week in Queensland, and a black homicide rate ten times

that of whites. She shivered and cried again, [...] from remembering her terror, rolling into a ball on the lounge room floor as Rog went to sober, sadistic, blazing-mad town on her [...] She swallowed with difficulty, and spoke: “I thought I’d had it, this time. Thought I was a goner. He just went off his fucken nut, he’s never been like that before. Not crazy. And anyway, I don’t deserve this, no-one does. Wouldn’t matter if I hadda done what he thought, so what?” (SP 200f)

Sue manages to escape with the help of her white friend Kerry and her girlfriend Rachel who succeed in making Sue understand that she needs to break the cycle of violence her life revolves around:

[Sue] caught her breath at the pain searing up to the shoulder, saying mentally, there you dumb bitch, that’s all you’ll get from the likes of him ... dirty bastard, wake up to yourself. Circle of violence circle of violence circle of violence she repeated under her breath, the mantra to save herself more floggings ... flowers and fists are all part of the same pattern ... circle of violence circle of violence – breaking it today! (SP 213)

Melissa Lucashenko’s repetition of the phrase *circle of violence* can arguably be considered as a means to get her message across to readers who find themselves in a similar situation and still need to find the courage to leave men who “can’t help saying ‘I Love You’ with [their] fists” (SP 98), and who need to understand that “[a]pologies don’t mend black eyes” (SP 117). The author also provides Sue’s violent upbringing as another way to identify with the protagonist, and offers some explanation why one’s upbringing is may be the reason why it is difficult to break the cycle of violence:

Actually, [Sue] remembered, that was the day after he hit Kirk, shoulda known ... they start on walls and glasses, move up to kids, and then lay into the woman, it’s the same old pattern time and time again. I shoulda known the instant I walked into [his sister’s house] and saw the fistholes in the walls. Wonder why I couldn’t see it coming? Love’s blind alright ... time after fucken time. First Dad flogging us, then Jeffrey, then Roger. Even Dave’s pretty much the same mould, not as fisthappy maybe, but abusive in other ways ... maybe that’s the answer, like Rache said, it’s people sticking with what’s familiar no matter how bad it is. (SP 215)

Sue has suffered abuse all her life, starting with her father, then Jeffrey, her first boyfriend, and now Roger. But she is determined now that “it’s not gonna be familiar for [her] next time, familiarity’s bred too much contempt for this little black duck” (SP 215).

Sue does understand that the domestic abuse is wrong, primarily in relation to her little nephews. When Roger hits Sue's little nephew Kirk for nearly scratching his car she tells him off for it, saying that she "had enough being flogged by [her] old man when I was a kid, [she does not] need to see it happening to them" (*SP* 32). Similarly, she interferes when Dave beats Lucky for wetting his bed and is relieved when "Dave's stopped flogging him up for it since [she] told him off" (*SP* 97). Her love for her nephews enables her to stand up to her brother and her boyfriend – an action that definitely does not come easy for her. For her, suffering violent abuse "it's like it's part of being Murri, you know, you expect it" (*SP* 145), and the idea of "women telling men they weren't allowed to go somewhere" (*SP* 63) or criticising them startles Sue as "[m]ost of the men she'd grown up with would give you a flogging for less" (*SP* 63).

Melissa Lucashenko also discusses the shame that comes with being abused. Sue learns to overcome her embarrassment and shame that may come from an ingrained and learned belief that she might be to blame for the abuse she suffers. Her brother's first reaction to the information that she was beaten up by Roger is his question "Why, what'd ya do?" (*SP* 195), followed by his accusation that "[y]ou know you've always had a big mouth, and now you've met someone who isn't prepared to put up with it" (*SP* 196). It is also "way beyond Sue to talk about what had happened after Rog had finished bashing her" (*SP* 204) although she is "almost happy now her secret's out" (*SP* 143), and she can finally release all her fears and shame when her white friend Kerry refuses to believe her story of having been injured during karate training:

Sue begins to protest furiously but Kerry's face stops her. In her teenage shame she tries once more to hold it precariously together, then her face crumples. Kerry rushes forward, and Sue – untouchable, hardhearted, never-to-be-hugged-or-touched Sue – clings to her like she's a life raft, shaking with sobs, the tears streaming down in silent rivers of self-reproach. (*SP* 142)

Sue has learned to keep her feelings inside and built a wall around her that enables her to get through life. She knows that in some situations "anger isn't allowed" (*SP* 78), and that if she is careless she "might indeed end up as an Eagleby housewife, dodging Roger's crunching fists and crying into pillows over a life lost to screaming children" (*SP* 46). Deep inside of her, a little voice warns her, "*you'll be sorry...*"

but she ignores this voice until it is almost too late. The hope for a change in Roger's behaviour increases as the bruises and injuries heal. Only his final violent attack that ends with Roger raping her releases her from him and gives her the courage to leave him and start a new life without him:

Too accustomed to thinking of him as her knight in slightly tarnished armour, she was already aching at the idea of his absence from her life. The memory of his latest attack was fresh, but as always fading rapidly, just like the bruising and facial mutilation. All except the rape. That was the clincher, the one thing to cling to when she came back to remind herself that under the broad shoulders and good looks lurked someone she couldn't begin to know, someone with a stranger's eyes that could do that tearing thing to her, and then ring her up the next day apologising, sending flowers that couldn't rot too soon on Rache's compost heap. (SP 212f)

Melissa Lucashenko succeeds again in describing reasons why a woman might find it difficult to leave an abuse relationship and break the cycle of violence. She relates Sue's longing for a partner who seemingly is her knight in shining armour but in actual fact is more like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The fact that Sue understands that she will never truly comprehend what it is that makes her boyfriend abuse her is crucial as in order to walk away from an abusive relationship one has to let go of the need to understand the abuser's motivation and reasons for his violent behaviour. Melissa Lucashenko makes it indubitably clear that comprehension will not break the cycle of violence - only finding the strength to walk away will do so.

### ***7.3. Learning about Being Aboriginal in Melissa Lucashenko's Steam Pigs***

Melissa Lucashenko introduces Sue's Aboriginal heritage in a scene in which the girl is being mocked by her brother for lighting fires in the backyard, presumably for cooking or burning leaves. His comment "Ay, lookitcha out dere, real old traibal way dat one" (SP 9) fails to instigate a reaction from her as Sue is disconnected from her Aboriginal descent. This is due to the fact that "[h]aving a bit of Aboriginal blood was largely an irrelevance in her life, she tanned easy and could sprint at school, that was about the size of it" (SP 10f). Nevertheless, she feels uncomfortable when she becomes a witness of racist comments that are made in her

presence as she is not perceived as being Aboriginal due to her rather fair skin. After a fight in the pub she works at between an Aboriginal person and white person the white person's remark renders her unable to choose an appropriate reply:

“Typical coon,” says the crewcut in contempt to Sue, “have to shoot it before it'd feel anything. No brain, no pain, eh?” She just looks at him and is saved from choosing a tightrope reply by the impeccably timed arrival of the booliman [...] (SP 15)

Melissa Lucashenko uses the phrase *tightrope reply* to give a clear indication of Sue's predicament. The girl might want to defend the Aboriginal man and address the white man's racism but that means choosing sides with the possibility of identifying as Aboriginal. At this stage, Sue is unable to do so and is therefore relieved that she is spared the need for an answer. Later in the novel, Sue witnesses her new boss Nick, for whom she drives a delivery van, expressing his disgust at three Chinese men asking him for a job:

When they have moved out of earshot, Nick grins at her.  
 “That'll be the day, don't want a bunch of yellow slopes in here.” Sue doesn't answer, shocked by the viciousness of his words and his duplicity – he'd been perfectly polite to their faces. Shit, she thinks, I never get to see stuff like that close up, the lives of fair-skinned Murriss must be so different to the dark ones like JJ. No wonder he's such an angry little ant ... [...] The lesson of Nick's hatred was instructive however, and she was glad she'd never mentioned to him about her own black blood, he could go on thinking she was white at this rate. (SP 136)

Sue realises that she has an easier life than dark-skinned Aboriginal people. She understands that her light skin enables her to be part of the privileged club, a fact that she is not really aware of until she meets Roger and her learning begins. In fact, as the above quote shows, Sue is at liberty to choose which team she wants to play for and in the situation above she chooses to continue to be considered part of the white society. Melissa Lucashenko affords Sue the ability to choose in this instance, as she is still insecure, and eventually she will realise that being Aboriginal is not a choice, it is who you are. However, Sue's white upbringing and her white skin allow her to decide not to inform other non-Indigenous people about her Aboriginal heritage. In other words, she chooses not to be identified as Aboriginal to make her life easier, which arguably is the point the author wants to make.

When Sue meets Roger she fails to realise that he may have selected her for having Aboriginal heritage. He is happy that “she’s Murri” (*SP* 19) as

[s]he’s got an athleticism about her that the karate is enhancing, muscle definition strong under the jeans and a straight strong back – all Murris got good backs, he ruminated, had to so we could work for the bloody migs. Country built on the sheep’s back. What about all the Murri stockmen, drovers, farmers, soldiers, down the ages...? Another white lie, another way to put the black man down, the kind of racism so ordinary to us that it’s part of breath itself. (*SP* 18)

As the above quote shows, Roger is not only happy that Sue is Aboriginal he is also passionate about Aboriginality to the point of being angry about the suffering of Aboriginals. He strongly identifies as Aboriginal and the fact that he is the “pale-freckly type that nevertheless tans a little in summer, hair reddish blonde, broad nose between green-grey eyes” (*SP* 20) is the reason why Sue is surprised when she learns that he is Aboriginal. His “heart’s with the blackfellas” (*SP* 21), and he feels sorry for Sue as she “must have been brought up white, obviously, pity, it’s a pain in the arse going through it all the time” (*SP* 20). Rogers is aware of what it means to be a white-skinned Aboriginal, and is annoyed with Sue for asking whether he has “got black blood too?” (*SP* 20). He feels so strongly about being Aboriginal that he explains to Sue that

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

This concept of a white-skinned Aboriginal is new to Sue, despite her being one herself. Her Aboriginality is a notion that is far removed from her and difficult to grasp. In fact, her concept of Aboriginals is more stereotypical:

She didn’t dispute what Roger said about his colour but it would take an effort for her, used to the norther omnipresent dark faces, to see Roger as being as one with the fatlipped parodies the Townsville media painted of the Palm Islanders. Together the two of them might add up to a real Aboriginal, she thought briefly, and then dismissed the topic from mind. She was here for fun, not an anthropology lesson. (*SP* 21)

Sue does, however, increase her knowledge about Aboriginal culture and history with the help of Roger who shares with her what he learned about these matters at university. As a result, Sue “was learning a lot from him about that Murri stuff (*SP*

43), and her interest is aroused. She buys Roger a T-shirt with Aboriginal design on it (compare *SP* 60), starts paying attention to Aboriginal issues in the media, and is annoyed when she cannot “hear what they were saying about the new land rights bill on TV and [gets up] irritated to turn the volume up” (*SP* 156). No one else at her mother’s house in Townsville takes an interest in Aboriginal issues. Her brother Dave “was such a coconut, or maybe coconut wasn’t fair, no pun intended [...], he just didn’t understand that stuff ... about assimilation, and claiming your heritage off the migs” (*SP* 166). His children Kirk and Lucky “had only the vaguest hint of an idea that they were black, same as Sue had no clue until talking to Roger woke her up” (*SP* 54). Sue now believes that

[h]alf of Eagleby’d be Murri, he’d claimed, they just don’t know it or else they’re so brainwashed by the migloos that they think it’s a shamejob. The whites knew what they were doing when they took the kids away alright. (*SP* 57)

With regard to Sue’s mother, the situation is a similar one as “mum still wouldn’t think of being black if the cops came down to bash it out of her, she’d go to the grave protesting, shamed from being brought up like a whitefella” (*SP* 166). Melissa Lucashenko explains the difficult position Aboriginal people find themselves in:

It was so weird, they’d brainwashed the old people so well that it wasn’t a matter of denying their Aboriginality, more the matter of them really thinking they *were* white. And everything and everybody in the world told em so too. And there was quite a few blackfellas that’d agree with them. Sue sighed at the irony of it, how when in the early days, when being a little bit dark was the same as being a real true blackfella, the whites got stuck into her mother over it, and now that the country was full of dark-skinned migrants, the Murris like her were told they weren’t black at all, and to claim Aboriginality was all a big con. Doesn’t matter which way you sit, she thought bitterly, they’ll twist it so you lose in the end. (*SP* 166f)

She also includes another example of a Tasmanian Aboriginal, Michael Mansell, an activist and lawyer, who the media criticised for not being Aboriginal:

Even in the papers, carrying on all the time about Michael Mansell cos of his blue eyes, and then what did she see a few months ago but a headline screaming about tribal people up north claiming back blue-eyed blonde babies. Like they had no right to their own kids. (*SP* 167)

Melissa Lucashenko voices her anger about the way the issue of Aboriginality and identity is handled in Australia. She attacks mainstream society for believing that it

can arbitrarily decide who is Aboriginal and who is not. Ian Anderson argues that the reason for this volatile treatment of Aboriginality might be an underlying fear of losing control:

[t]he ‘mixed-blood’ community, the ‘not quite others’, actually constituted ‘an anomaly, if not a danger’, as Beckett reflected in 1988. The most fundamental threat to the symbolic legitimacy of White Australia was, in fact, presented by those impure forms of Aboriginality which blurred the distinction between black and white. The threat of cultural throw-backs continued to subvert the maintenance of an Australian nation, whose history was imperial, whose culture and race were white. (*Blacklines* 50)

Having white skin offers you inherent privileges that are assumed and come with a sense of entitlement that is never questioned by white people. Sue comes to realise that her light skin offers her these privileges and she begins to understand why Roger and other Aboriginals are angered. When Sue visits her mother in Townsville, she understands that she “had the advantage of being brought up like a white, used to assuming the privileges of her fair skin” (*SP* 169). She witnesses racist police arresting an Aboriginal man for “[i]ndecent language in a public place” (*SP* 181) despite the man insisting that they “got the wrong bloke [and that they] got now warrant for [him]” (*SP* 181). The police officer simply states that “you coons look the same to me at night” (*SP* 181). Sue learns of other Aboriginal people’s “racist cop experiences” (*SP* 182) while she can be “grateful for her fair skin that made the passing of the menacing paddy wagons less relevant. She could see the pigs’ eyes cruising past dismiss her as just an ordinary kid, no coon” (*SP* 239). Sue is not an obvious member of the Aboriginal community, but she is now more aware of her heritage, her privileges that are based merely on her light skin, and the responsibility that comes with having an Aboriginal heritage. She is no longer content with turning a blind eye to racism and ignoring or suppressing her background. Melissa Lucashenko’s choice of the term *Steam Pigs* as title for her novel sums up Sue’s situation in life:

[...], what a fucking pair of steam pigs [...]

“A pair of what? Pigs?!”

Ker laughs at Sue’s bewilderment. “Don’t get your fucking knickers in a knot. I didn’t say ‘pig’, I said ‘steam pig’. Quite different. It’s railwayman’s talk for something that doesn’t fit properly, a square peg in a round hole. A mongrel. Something not really definable, you know? A white blackfella. (*SP* 146)



Sue's friend Kerry refers to Sue as a *white blackfella*, which epitomises Sue's learning process that has led her to her new understanding of herself. She has increased awareness of her challenging situation, and the fact that she will not be able to change it unless prejudice and stereotypes become notions of the past. It almost seems that Sue wishes her skin was darker as that would position her more clearly in society. When she looks at a dark-skinned model in a magazine she is jealous and angry at the same time:

Snatching the magazine away and resenting the dark skin of the beautiful Maori girl modelling sarongs. I'll never go that dark, no matter if I stayed in the sun all year, Sue thought unhappily, poorfella me, black inside but looking like a wog all me life. (SP 127)

Sue's Aboriginality has become relevant to her, Aboriginal issues are on her radar, and the expansion of her knowledge about her heritage is of importance to her. Her skin colour will never change but she has undergone a change inside that, ultimately, is more crucial and beneficial to her. This change is a determining factor in Sue's personal growth that allows her to overcome her self-doubt, get a university degree, and ultimately, give herself a chance for a better life than the one she thought was meant for her.

#### ***7.4. Educating the non-Indigenous Reader in Anita Heiss's Not Meeting Mr Right***

*Not Meeting Mr Right* is Anita Heiss's first commercial fiction book, which catapulted her into the unique position of being the only Indigenous Australian writing for an audience that was mainstream and middle class. The protagonist of her story is Alice Aigner, a twenty-eight year old Sydney based Indigenous woman with Austrian heritage. Alice is the first female history department head at a private Catholic girls' school, with a great apartment in Coogee, a trendy Eastern suburb of Sydney, who enjoys life with her three best friends, Peta, Liza and Dannie. With the exception of Dannie, who is married with two children, all women are successful career women, single and independent. When Alice decides she wants to be married by her thirtieth birthday, her girlfriends help her devise strategies and the reader

accompanies Alice on a succession of first dates until she finally finds her Mr Right in the seemingly wrong place. The tone of the novel is light, with humorous scenes, plenty of dating advice, and insights into life in Sydney. Anita Heiss assumes that her readers know about Sydney, as her references to suburbs and her character's reason for preferring one over the other will probably be difficult to understand for a reader who is unfamiliar with Sydney. The challenges that Anita Heiss's Indigenous characters face in this urban environment are less frightening than those in Melissa Lucshenko's novel. Anita Heiss's Indigenous characters live in an affluent suburb, and enjoy their privileged life. They are not intimidated by non-Indigenous people, as they are successful and sophisticated women. However, they are still confronted with racism and prejudice, which as a reader seems inconceivable and therefore even more disturbing when it happens. When Anita Heiss's protagonist sends a picture of herself to a potential date, which was taken at an Indigenous arts festival and in which she is holding up a small Aboriginal flag, he replies that he is "just wondering about your photo. You look gorgeous, but what's with the flag?" (*NMMR* 290). When Alice replies asking him if he is "trying to ask whether [she is] Aboriginal or not, the answer is yes. Is that a problem?" (*NMMR* 291), she never hears from him again. Anita Heiss describes this short text message conversation briefly, as if to show that although such racism can happen it does not affect her character who simply states that she "already knew it was [a problem], if not for him, then definitely for [her]" (*NMMR* 291). Unlike Sue Wilson in Melissa Lucashenko's novel, Anita Heiss's protagonist is not deflated by this man's treatment of her. On the contrary, she decides that she wants nothing to do with a man like that. Anita Heiss shows that despite being a successful Indigenous person and living a great life in an affluent suburb in one of the most expensive cities in Australia, one can still be affected by racism. However, she also demonstrates that racist attitudes will not stop these Indigenous people as they are self-confident, self-assured, and strong.

Anita Heiss's characters are highly intelligent, and love their lives and their professions as much as they love their friendships and their nights out. In short, Anita Heiss's novel has all the ingredients that a classic chick-lit novel needs. What makes her novel, and the other five chic lit novels she has written since, special is

the fact that her protagonist, and as a result some of her friends, are Indigenous Australians, who are all well-educated professionals as well. This is the reason why her novels are considered choc lit or “Koori chick-lit” (Heiss, *Am I?* 214).

Anita Heiss was criticised for moving into the commercial fiction market and explains her reasons for writing about strong, educated, intelligent, career-minded, resilient Indigenous women in her memoir:

These are Aboriginal women who did not appear in contemporary Australian women’s fiction until I put them there.

I wanted to write these Aboriginal women into Australian literature because they did not exist in *any* genre. I wanted to reach an audience of non-Aboriginal Australian women – largely aged between eighteen and forty-five years of age – who may not have ever heard of Anita Heiss or cared about Aboriginal women in Australia before. They may never have shared a coffee or dined with or worked alongside an Aboriginal women. I wanted these readers to have an insight into just *some* of the realities of just *some* of the Aboriginal women like me. (Heiss, *Am I?* 215)

Anita Heiss believes that “when you are born Aboriginal you are born political” (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 37), and so her novel touches on political issues concerning Indigenous Australians. It also includes references to Indigenous musicians, writers, actors, and artists. With regard to political issue, it is clear that Anita Heiss has great knowledge and strong opinions that she shares with her readers in order to give them an Aboriginal point of view and instigate a thinking process that might result in social change. Imogen Mathew argues that there is a shift in gears when

Heiss delivers a lesson: the standard narrative realism of the chick lit novel switches to exposition that is almost didactic in tone. Further, Heiss’s advice is not to be satirized, nor is it an object of humor; aimed at both the reader and the fictional interlocutors of the heroine, it is advice to be taken seriously. (Mathew, “Educating” 338)

When her protagonist Alice attends a function celebrating a local historian’s forty years of service in the eastern suburbs she delivers a lesson on First Peoples in Australia, the difference between invasion and colonisation, and gives her opinion on the topic of Australian history and Aboriginal history through an altercation she has with two older white men she refers to as Suit #1 and Suit #2. The fact that the two older gentlemen are nameless is indicative of the message the author wants to send. It can be argued that they are stand-ins for any white Australian who fails to

understand that the Aboriginal peoples were the First Peoples in Australia, and that the English invaded Australia, colonised the Aboriginals, and changed Aboriginal history with their arrival. When Suit #1 introduces himself as “a descendant of the first people of the area” (NMMR 280), Alice “was fairly sure that he didn’t mean he was Gadigal<sup>42</sup>” (NMMR 280) and asks him, “So you’re Gadigal, then?” (NMMR 280). Suit #1’s confusion about the mention of Gadigal and his lack of knowledge about them are an invitation for Alice to set him straight and remarks, “So you’re a descendant of the first family who were *given* a land grant after the local Aboriginal clan, the Gadigal, were *dispossessed* of their land, then?” (NMMR 280). Their belittling reaction angers Alice and she continues to question them about their understanding of history, expressing her hope that they “recognise *all* history and not just that which serves the coloniser” (NMMR 280). When Alice learns about Suit #1’s division of history into Australian history Aboriginal history and prehistory, she launches into an angry rant meant to educate both the character and the reader:

‘What Aboriginal history? Everything that happened post-invasion is *Australian* history. Aboriginal people didn’t dispossess themselves, they didn’t poison their own watering holes or place themselves on government-run missions. The colonisers and settlers – the so-called *Australians* – did that. That’s *Australian* history. And as for prehistory, what the hell does that mean?’ I knew what he meant, but wanted to hear him say it. (NMMR 282)

What then follows is an opportunity for Anita Heiss to discuss her view on settlement, invasion, and colonisation:

‘You mean history before the British *invaded* Sydney Cove, don’t you? Or is it regarded prehistory because in your eyes nothing *apparently* happened here for the tens of thousands of years before that?’ [...] ‘*Invasion* was what happened in 1788 when the boats arrived, *mate*, and *colonisation* is the process that followed. You should really get up to date with the terminology. And for the record, if the French had colonised us, we’d have better food and fashion!’

I threw back the last of my wine, mentally blaming white people for making Blackfellas *have* to drink. They drive us to it. They make us need to escape their narrow-minded, in-denial, racist, imperialistic bullshit. (NMMR 282)

The above quote showcases Anita Heiss’s intention of opening her non-Indigenous readers’ minds by confronting them with an Aboriginal point of view on their shared

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<sup>42</sup> Gadigal people are said to have occupied the area that is now Sydney.

history that may not be on the forefront of her readers' minds, "given that Australian and Aboriginal history were often treated as two separate subjects" (*NMMR* 68). The anger in her tone is palpable and not easily missed. And as Alice wonders about why she reacts so angrily Anita Heiss explains it is "only because these issues were basic, everyday concerns for me, and completely non-negotiable" (*NMMR* 283). These non-negotiables also include criticism of former Prime Minister John Howard's "concept of the black armband view of history and his assertion that there was no such thing as generations of stolen children" (*NMMR* 56), which are listed as reasons for Alice not to date a certain man, aside from the fact that he is gay. This man is "a huge fan of John Howard and his views, and Keith Windschuttle was his favourite historian" (*NMMR* 56). Anita Heiss mentions these names to alert her readers to the fact that Keith Windshuttle's denial of the stolen generations and John Howard's refusal to formally apologise to the Indigenous community for the past atrocities and wrongdoings are simply outrageous.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to enlightening her readers on matters of history, Anita Heiss also points out to her readers that their choice of language has an impact on Indigenous Australians. When Alice informs her friend and colleague Mickey about her project of finding a husband she remarks that she "briefed him on [her] new mission" (*NMMR* 64) and is reminded by him that she should refrain from using the term *mission*, considering what associations it could provoke. This again is an opportunity for Anita Heiss to provide information for her non-Indigenous readers:

I'd been ranting about politics and history to Mickey over cocktails for years, so he knew quite a bit about the missions many Aboriginal people had lived on under the Protection Acts. He was right; for many Blackfellas it was a word that brought back a lot of bad memories. 'Goal' was definitely a better choice. It sounded more professional, too. (*NMMR* 65)

Anita Heiss wants to raise awareness of how a simple word, most likely used without any malicious intent, can evoke bad memories in someone with a different background. She places importance on cultural awareness for the simple reason that it is a necessary ingredient in the process of reconciliation while it also makes everyday life for an Indigenous person less challenging as it functions as the

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<sup>43</sup> John Howard's successor Kevin Rudd made a formal apology on Feb 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008. (see chapter 2.3.)

common ground on which new relationships can begin that are based on mutual respect.

Another important issue that Anita Heiss presents in her novel is that of Aboriginal identity. Alice meets a man she refers to as “Caspar” (*NMMR* 136) because his “upper body was blinding white; I doubted it had ever seen the daylight, let alone the sun. He was so white he was almost fluorescent” (*NMMR* 136). When she meets him for a second time she learns that he identifies as a “Koori” (compare *NMMR* 163) due to the fact that he “found out six months ago that [his] great-great-grandmother was Aboriginal [but he is] not real positive who [his] people are” (*NMMR* 163). Alice is furious and calls him “the latest in the Johnny-Come-Lately-family-tree spreading through the country” (*NMMR* 164). Anita Heiss’s explanation for this anger follows shortly after:

If he were smart, he’d just shut up. But on he went about ‘feeling out of place all his life’, ‘always feeling different’, and ‘family secrets’. It was a common story, of course, but others had more dignity, didn’t assume their identity until they were actually sure who they were. I was dying to tell him he’d felt out of place all his life because he was a deadest weirdo and loser. It had nothing to do with Aboriginal heritage. Why should we cop all the blame for him being a dickhead? (*NMMR* 164)

The author addresses the issue of authenticity and Aboriginal identity and teaches her readers that it is “not something you *find* by accident and then attach its name to yourself” (*NMMR* 165). She explains that she is “sick of white people deciding they’re Black so they have some sense of belonging, or worse still, so they can exploit our culture” (*NMMR* 165). It can be argued that the fact that Caspar has almost transparent white skin is merely to emphasise the ridiculousness of him getting a “Koori flag tattooed” (*NMMR* 166) on his arm, living in Blacktown and “singing some songs at the pub with Blackfellas when [he is] pissed” (*NMMR* 165) within six months of having discovered his Aboriginal heritage. Anita Heiss uses his unnatural skin colour to prove a point, namely that his understanding of suffering and discrimination is lacking:

What racism and discrimination have *you* experienced as a six-month-old lily-white Koori that could give you the passion that Anthony<sup>44</sup> has? Did

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<sup>44</sup> Anthony Mundine is an Indigenous Australian boxer and former rugby player who won Indigenous Deadly Awards for the Indigenous Male Sportsman of the Year in 2003, 2006, 2007.

*you* have to deal with taunts and stereotypes based on *your* race growing up? Did *you* ever get called names because of *your* skin colour? I stopped then, because he may well have been called names – he was so fucken white it was offensive. (NMMR 165)

The author manages to incorporate a humorous ending to her attack which allows her to depict her character as a person who is able to emphasise with Caspar regardless of his stupidity. Anita Heiss also shares with her readers what it means to be Aboriginal in an attempt to help them understand better. After hearing about Caspar's identifying as Aboriginal Alice replies:

‘Sorry, you’re what? Koori? How?’ It’s not like he was sporting a deadly tan or anything. In fact, he looked almost albino. Identity’s not about skin colour, of course, but there are definitely characteristics that most Blackfellas can pick up with their Koori antennae. Language, an understanding of shared concepts and experiences, family connections, *something* – anything that lets you know the other person is one of your kind. Simple Simon didn’t have any of it. He wasn’t Koori, he couldn’t be. (NMMR 163)

Anita Heiss points out that identity has nothing to do with skin colour and all to do with having a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture, and shared language, concepts and experiences. Similarly to the discussion about history, this debate about Aboriginality is angry in tone and intelligently presented. It succeeds in making the non-Indigenous readers feel the anger and frustration situations like these can bring about but might also succeed in changing people’s behaviour and way of thinking. Anita Heiss explains in her memoir how she uses Alice to instruct her readers about issues that are important to her:

Alice works in a history department at a private girls school in Sydney’s eastern suburbs, and her discussions at the local history association allow her to unpack the terminology around invasion versus colonisation. In scenes of her in the classroom, I wove in dialogue about Aboriginal women and voting. Then, like lots of Kooris in Sydney, Alice heads to the Yabun Festival to celebrate Invasion Day on 26 January, and does Koori-oke down at the Covent Garden with the Block Release students from the University of Technology. I think you can see the parallels with my life there! (Heiss, *Am I?* 219)

Anita Heiss admits that she “wants to use [her] storylines to challenge the notions of what it means to be Aboriginal in the twenty-first century, with a focus on urban experiences” (Heiss, *Am I?* 216). She wants to “showcase as many diverse

Aboriginal creators as possible” (Heiss, *Am I?* 222) to offer some insight into Aboriginal culture today of which her non-Indigenous readers might be unaware. As Mathew argues,

Heiss’s chick lit functions as a densely packed inventory of names of Aboriginal artists, writers, singers, and filmmakers; it instructs the reader in culturally appropriate language conventions; it models exemplary modes of behaviour toward Aboriginal people. (Mathew, “Educating” 335)

Anita Heiss’s choc lit achieves all of this and more - she invites her non-Indigenous readers into her world and gives them a glimpse of what is important to understand about it while allowing them to relate to her protagonist’s search for love and love of life and enjoying her journey. It is due to this that the anger and frustration regarding Aboriginal issues that is directed at mainstream society, and are made explicit in the educational sections of the book, do not create a negative reaction in the reader. On the contrary, they spark an interest in finding out more about these issues. Anita Heiss has achieved her goal.

### **7.5. Defying Stereotypes in Anita Heiss’s *Not Meeting Mr Right***

In her memoir, Anita Heiss writes that she has “never tried to define any kind of Aboriginal women in [her] books, although [she tries] to ensure [her] characters have good values and are capable and strong human beings, even though they make mistakes (Heiss, *Am I?* 217). In fact, what the author does focus on is the establishing of a connection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. She emphasises the similarities between these women in order to bridge the gap and enable them to discover common ground. As a result, this might spark communication between these women or even allow for recognition of the fact that beyond race they are women who fight similar struggles and have similar hopes and dreams. As mentioned in the last chapter, Anita Heiss’s intended audience are middle class non-Indigenous women of a certain age whose lack of knowledge about Indigenous women of a similar educational and financial background may be the reason why they cling to stereotypes about Indigenous Australians. Anita



Heiss's *Not Meeting Mr Right* and her subsequent commercial fiction novels combat these stereotypes and emphasise the similarities between these women.

The protagonist Alice Aigner describes herself at the beginning of the novel:

I was now the head of the history department at a private Catholic girls school, living in a funky two-bedroom flat, full of sunlight and right on Coogee Beach, and I'd aged well compared to my old school buddies. (NMMR 2)

This short description suffices to position Alice as a woman who enjoys certain privileges. Living on her own in a fairly large apartment on Coogee Beach informs the reader that she must make a good living due to the fact that she has no flatmate to help with the rent or mortgage repayments. Coogee, one of the Eastern Suburbs in Sydney, is an affluent area where most people have to share flats in order to be able to afford to live there. Anita Heiss assumes her readers know what it means to live in Coogee in an apartment that is your own. Later in the novel, Alice wonders "how many Kooris actually lived in Blacktown now (NMMR 141), a suburb in the west of Sydney where "Blackfellas settled after Governor Macquarie made the first land grants to Aboriginal people in New South Wales, around 1820" (NMMR 141). She continues to explain where most of the urban Aboriginal people live in New South Wales and comments on the fact that not many live in Coogee:

Western Sydney has the highest population of urban Aboriginal people in the country. God knows they're not all living in Coogee, though if they were, that'd be cool. I wouldn't have to deal with all those pain-in-the-arse backpackers by myself then. (NMMR, 141)

Further to emphasising Alice's privileged position in society, Anita Heiss uses another group of people, the backpackers, to focus on a shared dislike of certain people gathering primarily in Coogee, who bring with them a culture that that is defined by fun and few responsibilities, and creates a transient vibe that residents, generally, do not appreciate. Anita Heiss demonstrates that her Indigenous protagonist is also displeased at the number of backpackers in Coogee, and therefore shares another similarity with her possible readers. This similarity is arguably a shared snobbishness that may be considered as belonging to affluent middle-class Coogee residents.

At Alice's school reunion, one of the women is surprised that Alice does not already have children, contrary to what everyone expected from her:

'That's funny. I thought Aboriginal women had children young – married or not. We all thought at school you'd be the first to have children.' Bitch! Had they really all thought that? (*NMMR* 16)

Anita Heiss uses this scene to elaborate on this stereotype, admitting that there are still many Aboriginal women who have children young but at the same time, reminding her readers that this is not true for everyone:

Debra was wrong about me being the first pregnant, but she was right about Koori women and kids in general. Fact was, most of the Koori women I knew had squeezed their kids out in their early twenties, some even before that, and none of them had a bloke around at all. Many of the young girls I know were still doing it. It was a hard thing to understand, coming from a two-parent family and a Catholic background. (*NMMR* 16f)

The author takes it a step further and has Alice present the motivation to have children as one that is rooted in boredom and selfishness by stating that "[s]ome do have children young [...] because when there is nothing to do - no employment opportunities for instance – and you have low self-worth, why not create a life – someone who will love you back unconditionally" (*NMMR* 17). Anita Heiss reminds her reader that Aboriginal women may have fewer employment opportunities, which may be due to lack of education, but manages to shift her focus away from Aboriginal women by mentioning the need for receiving unconditional love. It can be argued that this accusation is addressed to women in general and by doing so, the author connects her protagonist with those readers who have no intention of having children or wondering about other women's motivation to do so. The question of whether or not to have children, and the pressure of society on women to become mothers is a topical one, especially in western societies. Anita Heiss moves this topic away from simply being about Aboriginal women by emphasising her protagonist's stance on this issue and focusing on people's selfish need for recreation. By doing so, she is likely to reach many of her non-Indigenous readers who sympathise with the pressure the character experiences with regard to the matter of child rearing.

One woman in Alice's close group of friends is Peta, also Indigenous, who "was the party girl of the group" (*NMMR* 39). Like Alice, she is highly educated, intelligent,

beautiful, and full of life. Alice “met her in the Bachelor of Education course at Sydney’s University of Technology” (*NMMR* 39) and “Peta’s career in policy furthered Indigenous education” (*NMMR* 39). Peta is “effortlessly glamorous [...] with trendy clothes, flawless make-up, and about 300 pairs of shoes” (*NMMR* 39):

Peta was also the prettiest of the group. We knew it. She knew it. Her broad smile lit up any room she walked into. Her buttered body was toned and golden (‘Cos I’m a Murri from Queensland,’ she always said), and her long luxurious mahogany ponytail drove guys wild. (*NMMR* 39f)

Heiss’s detailed description of Peta serves as a reminder that Indigenous woman can be beautiful, attractive to men, and may have an interest in shoes and make-up. In short, they are like any other middle class non-Indigenous woman and Alice states that “[she] was a bourgeois Black, and so was Peta. (It wasn’t hard to be in the Aboriginal community – you just had to have a job and your own car and you were regarded as middle class)” (*NMMR* 237). In fact, the author ensures that her audience understands that Peta and Alice are one among many, as Alice explains:

All my Koori girlfriends were relishing singledom, working on their careers, hanging out in the city, and, more often than not, terrifying men with their confidence and expectations, so that even a first date left a bloke in shock and in need of counselling. (*NMMR* 152)

Nevertheless, the two women are middle class by mainstream society’s standards, too, and portrayed as women who like going out and enjoy social drinking with their friends, although “contrary to media perceptions, [they’d] met quite a few non-drinking Kooris” (*NMMR* 221). Anita Heiss draws another parallel to her target audience, emphasising the fact that social drinking is acceptable in society with all its more or less pleasant side-effects. She mentions Coogee Bay Hotel, which “wasn’t one of [Alice’s] hangs. There were too many backpackers, and the number of brawls there had been growing in recent months” (*NMMR* 242). This pub on Coogee Beach now has increased security and patrons need to sign in in order to be granted entrance. Anita Heiss highlights the fact that although there is a problem with alcohol in the Aboriginal community, there is also one in mainstream Australian society that should not be neglected.

Some of Alice’s love interests Anita Heiss depicts are Indigenous men who defy any stereotypical notions that the author’s target readership might have about this group

of people. She introduces Tufu, a thirty-year-old Indigenous man who lives in Coogee and is “employed, gorgeous and brown” (*NMMR* 113). The order of adjectives is indicative of the point Anita Heiss makes. This Indigenous man is earning his own living, and therefore falls into a category of men that has an appeal for the author’s target audience. Then she presents Malcolm, an Indigenous project manager from Melbourne whom Alice introduces to many other “single Black women. Gorgeous, strong, single, capable, single, sexy, smart, single Koori women” (*NMMR* 124). Once again, the author reminds her readership of the great number of intelligent and beautiful Indigenous women looking for love, just like probably many of her target readers. Finally, Anita Heiss depicts Alice’s short-lived love interest, Paul, “Koori, [t]hirty-eight, single, straight, has a good job as an engineer. Plenty of walang, and doesn’t mind spending it either. He’s got perfect skin and he’s not precious at all” (*NMMR* 173). Paul works for the city council as the “[f]irst Blackfella they’ve ever had as an engineer” (*NMMR* 206). He is “the only Blackfella on indoor staff” (*NMMR* 206). Anita Heiss uses him to comment on the lack of Indigenous presentation in the council when he states that “[y]ou’d think a big city council like ours would have heaps of Kooris on staff. I mean, with so many living in Sydney” (*NMMR* 206). Paul is well-mannered, well-off, and sensitive to a woman’s needs. Paul’s introduction to the storyline enables the author to address another prejudice that is prevalent in mainstream society, albeit not only with regard to Indigenous men. He “spent some time in prison” (*NMMR* 263), “in Bathurst for a break and enter” (*NMMR* 263). He “was trying to break into this place, and when he went to smash the security camera with a cricket bat he ended up knocking himself out” (*NMMR* 264). The reason for his criminal activity was that “a few years back he was heavy into the oky-doke and needed more money than he had” (*NMMR* 264). Anita Heiss demonstrates that a prison sentence and drug abuse do not necessarily take a person down a path from which there is no escape. Her depiction of Paul epitomises the potential that people have of returning to the straight and narrow after a difficult time. The author reminds the reader that people should be given a second chance, and that turning one’s life around should be applauded and rewarded rather than stigmatising one and denying one the chance of full rehabilitation and re-integration into society.

Anita Heiss's protagonist finally meets her Mr Right who is a non-Indigenous Australian and works as a garbage collector. The author's explanation for her protagonist's preference of a white man suggests her intention to break down race barriers by uniting non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians:

Facilitating harmony between Black and white? That's what we need [...] I could breed with a Black man, but we needed to unite with the whiteman as well. It would help water down the white race.  
'It only takes one Black parent to make a few Black kids,' I said. 'I'd do it for my people.' (*NMMR* 104)

In addition to uniting Black and White, this quote can also be interpreted as Anita Heiss's humorous and sarcastic take on the former Australian policy of breeding out Aboriginals. It can be argued that the author wants to draw attention to the fact that this policy is part of Australian history, and her character's suggestion of reversing this policy is a demonstration of strength and power that her Indigenous characters epitomise. Wenche Ommundsen argues that "[a]ssociating mainly with non-Indigenous men, Heiss's heroines conveniently sidestep one of the most uncomfortable social issues in Indigenous communities today – male violence against women and children" (Ommundsen 119). While this is an interesting point it fails to address the fact that violence against women is not exclusive to race, class, or location. It is a problem that infiltrates all levels of society. In addition, the author does introduce eligible Indigenous men, although they fail to be compatible with her protagonist. Arguably, the author's choice to finally unite her protagonist with a white man who works as a garbage collector can be considered as the ultimate act of rebellion for her, and a reminder that prejudice about class and race can prevent a person from finding their happiness. At the same time, Anita Heiss's intended audience may find it easier to identify with her protagonist's choice of man if he is non-Indigenous. It might be easier for her readers to overlook class than might be to forget race. In addition, the author's Indigenous characters should first and foremost be perceived as women rather than Aboriginal, and even Alice's friends "don't think of [her] as *really* an Aborigine, either" (*NMMR* 27). Anita Heiss draws on similarities between middle class women, regardless of heritage and aims to overcome stereotypes and prejudice that hinder a unification of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian society. She wants her readers to look beyond skin colour and

race and appreciate female bonding. In her memoir, Anita Heiss explains what drives her to present the similarities between her Indigenous characters and her target audience in her fiction:

I feel that within mainstream media generally there's too much emphasis placed on the differences between human beings, and the fear of difference is what leads to intolerance. Difference, while important in many ways, is too often used as a tool to alienate and often denigrate individuals or even whole communities. I wanted to be positive with my writing. I wanted to demonstrate through the *Mr Right* and *Dreaming* novels that Aboriginal women, like most women, prize their friendships and desire companionship. (Heiss, *Am I?* 216)

Anita Heiss successfully manages to reinforce similarities and addresses stereotypes in order to break down race barriers, despite the anger Alice and her creator show in several passages of the book at the ingrained stereotyping in society and the refusal of white society to face the guilt of white Australian society.

### ***7.6. Empowering Indigenous Women as presented in Melissa Lucashenko's Steam Pigs and Anita Heiss's Not Meeting Mr Right***

Melissa Lucashenko and Anita Heiss depict Aboriginal women who differ greatly in terms of age, educational, financial, and familial background. At the same time, both protagonists are confronted with ideas of feminism, albeit in very different ways, and undergo a change that enables them to create new perspectives and ultimately allows them to lead fuller lives. Melissa Lucashenko's Sue Wilson's journey is tougher, and filled with a lot of pain. She needs to learn about self-worth, feminism, and the importance of aspirations in life. Anita Heiss's Alice Aigner's journey is one that starts more or less where Sue Wilson's journey ends. But it is nevertheless an important journey for her character in her pursuit of true happiness.

### 7.6.1. The Notion of Feminism

Melissa Lucashenko offers a first indication of Sue Wilson's likelihood of rejecting traditional roles of women when the reader learns about what she thinks of her mother's life choices:

'Don't you marm me, my girl. When I was your age I wasn't out running around with any stray bloke with a flash car and the gift of the gab –“  
And when I'm your age, thought Sue maliciously, I won't be ringing up my kids to scab money and make their lives a misery into the bargain. (*SP* 26)

Furthermore, the reader learns that Sue had an abortion that her “elders and betters” (*SP* 26) advised her not to go through with. As a result, Sue has to leave Townsville and moves to Brisbane. Melissa Lucashenko demonstrates that at seventeen, her protagonist is willing to stand up for herself and looking for a better life. Nevertheless, she finds herself in a relationship with Roger, who is eight years her senior and rather possessive. When he tells her that she “b'long me, woman” (*SP* 28), Sue “laughs him off, hiding her surprise at how serious he sounds” (*S*, 28). After she moves in with him, she automatically assumes all the household chores (compare *SP* 32), and essentially leads the life that may remind the reader of a fifties housewife, the only difference being that Sue has a job. Despite that development, the author manages to remind the reader that Sue is primarily motivated by fear of Roger, which makes her succumb to his idea of a relationship. Sue “wants to be independent of him, financially as well as most other ways” (*SP* 50) yet at this stage she is unfamiliar with ways of thinking and strategies that would allow her to express her ideas to her boyfriend. But the author demonstrates that sometimes all it takes is a little bit of support to open up new perspectives for a person that is on the cusp of pursuing a change in their life. Melissa Lucashenko therefore introduces Kerry Matheson, a white social worker, who runs a self-esteem for women workshop in the community centre in Eagleby in which women can “[l]earn negotiating skills and conflict resolution” (*SP* 60). Kerry Matheson is the type of white feminists of whom Melissa Lucashenko would like to see more in mainstream Australian society. Kerry raises Sue's awareness about the projection of inferiority that she has internalised. The author portrays Kerry as a white person who is angry

“with a system that could do this to people, fucked up Murriss all over the damn country. Land – *gone*, dignity – *gone*, culture – *gone*” (*SP* 146). Melissa Lucashenko uses Kerry to voice her opinion about the position the author wants white feminists to take:

I’m just saying you’re confusing colonisation with culture, and blackness with oppression. [...] It’s manipulative bullshit that whites use to fuck up minorities all the time, internalised oppression, letting us define what makes you who you are, and till you get over this hurdle, your whole life is going to revolve around being fucked up one way or the other. What you’ve more or less said is what most whites think, too, that there is nothing more to being Aboriginal than drinking and fighting and being poor ... but that’s just the garbage we’ve given you since Cook arrived. (*SP* 147)

Melissa Lucashenko’s depiction of Sue’s learning from a white feminist is in accordance with the author’s view that Aboriginal women can learn from white feminists if the latter have “abandoned the racist European paradigms of past decades” (Lucashenko, “No Other Truth” 21). Indubitably, Kerry Matheson is the epitome of such an ideal white feminist and it can be argued that Melissa Lucashenko’s introduction of her in the novel is her way of inviting other white women to become like Kerry.

Kerry’s workshop sparks Sue’s interest as it would “be good to see what she has to say” (*SP* 61), and so she decides to “go and check out the community centre in person. See what this course is all about” (*SP* 61). Kerry cleverly reels Sue in by asking her to join the workshop in order to show the women some karate moves as the workshop is also about the “body image, and part of the body image is about using your body to *do* stuff, not just to look at” (*SP* 62). Kerry also introduces Sue to the concept of “women’s space” (*SP* 63) and explains to a confused Sue what she would do if a man does not accept her woman’s space:

‘Well, it depends. Step one is, you explain the reasons women sometimes need to be on our own, away from men. And if that doesn’t persuade him Inter-lech-ally, usually if you use the right tack, and defuse the situation by listening you can convince people to do just about anything. And if not,’ she cracks her knuckles over her head melodramatically, ‘then we kick the living shit out of them from here to Hobart, until they abjectly apologies on their knee, cravenly begging for forgiveness. Which of course we give them.’ Kerry laughs at the girls face. (*SP* 63)



It becomes apparent that Sue's astonishment has more to do with the idea of telling a man what to do rather than with the threat of a beating if he refuses to comply:

Sue is a bit stunned by the idea of women telling men they weren't allowed to go somewhere. [...] Most of the men she'd grown up with would give her a flogging for less. Wow. But should she tell Rog? And what would he say about her hanging around with the skinny feminist with the weird tats? (*SP* 63)

Melissa Lucashenko makes it obvious that her protagonist is impressed with her new acquaintance's ideas and convictions. As yet, however, Sue is "oblivious to the newly-sown seeds of revolution" (*SP* 64), and the author continues to use her as a role model for other women in similar situations that may be looking to escape and change. Sue's enlightening feminist journey includes a deeper understanding of the "dynamics of violent relationships" (*SP* 68) and the need for "more preventative stuff" (*SP* 68) which is a better way to combat violence in relationships than "drag[ing] women and kids out of their homes" (*SP* 68). Melissa Lucashenko positions Kerry and her girlfriend Rachel at the opposite end of the spectrum of feminism to Sue Wilson. These white women openly live their sexuality, are strong and independent, and both are educated, and Sue is impressed with their lifestyles and knowledge:

Kerry and Rache's house was a feast of words, books in every room, a motley assortment of paperbacks, women's studies texts, tattoo mags, ancient orange Penguins, boring things by politicians about Vietnam and Cambodia, the black and white striped spines of the Women's Press novels that she'd learned to go to first, and a whole library of poetry, names Sue'd never heard of. (*SP* 188)

Sue is acutely aware that there is a plethora of information that she has no knowledge of, a fact that angers Kerry when she challenges Sue how she "can expect to be a leader if [she does not] have the faintest idea what [her] own poets are saying" (*SP* 189). Melissa Lucashenko highlights the fact that education is the key, but also shows that challenging traditional roles of women can create difficulties with "other Murries –they're not gonna like you speaking out, being strong, cos it challenges their own way of thinking, cos if you can make a difference why can't they?" (*SP* 190). Making a change requires strength, perseverance and a never-ending belief that one day one's hard work and determination will pay off. The author demonstrates that being that person is far from easy and has Kerry explain to

Sue that it is not only personal acquaintances that will find her new ways of thinking challenging:

Around Rog – he doesn’t want to be put in the shadow by a woman younger than he is. And especially around whites. They’ll say you’re just angry, or politically naïve, or a thousand other things, before they’ll admit that Murries can be as smart and capable as them. (*SP* 190)

Melissa Lucashenko conveys what it means to be a feminist in the Aboriginal community. But she is also aware of what it means to be an Aboriginal feminist. She wrote many articles about black feminism in the mid-1990s (Lever 128) and explains in an interview why she calls herself a feminist:

I think it’s important to, in a society that is as women hating as this one is, and I think that’s increasingly so. I think it’s important to say I’m a feminist, and I’m and Aboriginal feminist. Germaine Greer said that women have no idea how much men hate them, and I think that’s still largely true. (Lever 128f)

Melissa Lucashenko’s portrayal of Kerry and Rachel and their crucial role in young Sue Wilson’s “beginnings of an extremely shoddy feminist analysis” (*SP* 147) can be seen as an invitation for other Aboriginal women to summon their courage and embark on the same journey in order to empower themselves.

Anita Heiss’s protagonist Alice Aigner has already an understanding of what it means to be a feminist and enjoys her life of independence. She is strong, loves her life, is content with what she has achieved, and not envious of anyone to begin with. The school reunion where she finds herself as the only unmarried and childless women unsettles her contentment and instils a belief in her that she does want to get married. This belief takes her close-knit group of female friends, all but one single and without children themselves, by surprise. It seems that Alice’s goal in life has shifted and she idealises married life. Imogen Mathew argues,

If post-feminism describes the gradual erosion of feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s, chick-lit (along with its cinematic counterparts, the rom com and the chick flick) is held up as emblematic of this decline. The young, single women who populate the post-feminism universe are dismissed as the ungrateful and undeserving heritors of feminism; not only, so the complaint goes, do they take the hard-won ‘gains’ of feminism for granted (for example, the right to sexual, economic, political, social independence) but they explicitly reject these gains in favour of old fashioned, ‘pre-feminist’ sexual and gender roles. (Mathew, “The Pretty” 3)

Mathew's criticism of chick-lit heroines may have some validity but it arguably has some flaws. In fact, as Stephanie Harzewski points out, chick-lit is one of postfeminism's "most culturally visible forms" (Harzewski 8). It depicts women who do as they please, enjoy life's pleasures, and collect consumer goods. Harzewski continues to explain that "endings in chick-lit offer a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring in various degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals, or showing those ideals as unmet, sometimes unrealistic expectations" (Harzewski 40). Anita Heiss presents exactly that – a more realistic picture of what makes a good relationship. Being a feminist does not mean a woman cannot share her life with a partner. It means that the woman "needs to find someone who's comfortable with the way [she] is" (*NMMR* 266). It can therefore be argued that the portrayal of women in chick-lit and the men they pick, who in general tend to be men who are not intimidated by strong women, is supposed to encourage women to find a partner who supports them without encroaching on their personality, their personal relationships, or their careers. Anita Heiss's protagonist's decision to find her future husband is born out of "a growing desire to fit in with this group [...] of the 'married with children community'" (*NMMR* 21f). Her need to "fit in" (*NMMR* 22) overrules her common sense and belief in herself. Her ideas of married life are idealistic:

'Tell me about how wonderful that is – having a gorgeous man who has vowed to adore you forever – your own Mr Right! [...] What about the mansion? The freshly cut lawns? The young, built husband washing the car on Sunday morning, your kids riding bikes and getting good school reports, the dog you take for walks?' (*NMMR* 28f)

In fact, her whole approach to the getting married plan sounds more of a game than a need as Alice "wanted to prove it was possible to maintain your identity and keep up to date with current affairs even while changing nappies and doing tuckshop" (*NMMR* 21). She "knew [she] could manage it" and "wouldn't be like *they* were. [She] was up for the challenge" (*NMMR* 21). She calls herself a "feminist, but [she] was also quite comfortable with not having to swing a hammer or turn a screwdriver" (*NMMR* 52). Her "mental list of all the things a husband would be useful for [includes]: hanging fairy lights, changing the oil in the car, killing spiders and all those kinds of boy jobs" (*NMMR* 190). After a night out and her ordeal of having to take the train home she contemplates how her Mr Right would "pick [her]

up in his flashy car and drive [her] home, stopping for a Coke or two on the way, lavishing [her] with sympathy” (NMMR144). Her list of “essential selection criteria for Mr Right” (NMMR, 37) is basically the definition of a self-confident, emotionally stable, educated, financially sound, liberal and well-mannered man. In other words, it is a man who complements her and adds to her life rather than diminishing it. However, Anita Heiss also demonstrates that her protagonist does not really need a man in her life as “[life] isn’t bad at all, is it?” (NMMR 328), and “[b]eing single isn’t the end of the world” (NMMR 328). In the end, Alice realises that “when you think about the men who’ve been on offer over the past year in Sydney, [she is] *clearly* better off single anyway” (NMMR 328). Anita Heiss encourages her readers to consider men “who were charming and honest and kind, and with no specific agendas or baggage (well, noticeable baggage that is)” (NMMR 333), and this is exactly the type of man her protagonist ends up with, after she “had no concerns about being married by [her] thirtieth” (NMMR 340).

Both Melissa Lucashenko and Anita Heiss depict notions of feminism, albeit at very different stages. While Melissa Lucashenko invites her reader to reconsider their roles and incorporate feminist notions into their lives, Anita Heiss reminds her readers that feminists should find equal partners who are not threatened by their achievements and strength. Both authors place crucial importance on women’s choices and role in a relationship and want their readers to learn from their protagonists. Their message is to all women, not only to Indigenous women. But Indigenous women are confronted with racist stereotypes on top of female stereotypes. It is therefore even more impressive what their protagonists achieve, and as a result, the authors’ message is even more inspiring.

### 7.6.2. Personal Growth

The protagonists in *Steam Pigs* and *Not Meeting Mr Right* are Indigenous women who undergo a transformation of some kind in terms of perspectives of life and character traits. Melissa Lucashenko depicts Sue Wilson’s increasing self-confidence and belief in herself and her understanding that there is more to life than

what the suburb Eagleby offers. Anita Heiss demonstrates Alice Aigner's overcoming of her snobbishness that stands in the way of her true happiness. In both cases, the authors show their characters' growth and maturity as another stepping stone to a fuller life.

When the reader meets Sue Wilson she is a teenager, and "along with most poor girls her age, she would have gone to extraordinary lengths to be admitted to the mythic world of Work" (*SP* 2). At this stage, the author presents her as "[n]ot yet realising the tedium of bluecollar employment, nor that the barmaid is, to the average customer, a form of low-rent prostitute" (*SP* 2). The driving force in her life at that time is "bungoo" (*SP* 2), "an urgent need for cash" (*SP* 2) that makes her pursue any job that will supply money. In her mind, "with enough money, she, Sue Wilson, could stay away indefinitely from the claustrophobia of her too-large, too-poor family in a too-small town" (*SP* 2). When she starts her job as a barmaid it is less glamorous than she envisioned it (compare *SP* 2), and her other job as a delivery van driver (compare *SP*, 58), despite having "great travel prospects" (*SP* 58), is intellectually not very challenging. But Sue decision to "withdraw gracefully from the ring, awarded an honourable discharge in the race to be Working Class Hero of 1998" (*SP* 7) is based on her refusal to become one of those girls who move to the city to pursue riches and success because they "didn't know you can't buy wealth with hard work, then slip easily into the power and the smell and look of it" (*SP* 6). For her,

[t]he streets of Eagleby remained her comfort zone, not Brisbane's riverside cafes, and no matter how articulate Sue became, moleskin trousers and blue shirts struck her incompetent with fear, and three-piece suits remained an invitation to vanish, not to mutiny. (*SP* 7)

Although Melissa Lucashenko portrays Sue as having little self-confidence at the beginning, she also shows that she is different from other women in her life. When Sue meets Maureen, Roger's cousin, the author points out that those two women have little in common as for Maureen "[g]rog and bingo were the uprights of her existence, with TV and gossip forming the lateral supports" (*SP* 34). In addition, Maureen is thirty-six, has four children and "has let her years of welfare dependence leak into her features" (*SP* 34). Sue is adamant that she will not end up like her and being employed will ensure that. She is terrified of being on welfare and joining the

“neverending battle of the underclasses to get their entitlements out of the DSS” (SP 51). Melissa Lucashenko records Sue’s thoughts on people like Maureen:

Puberty starts at eleven in Eagleby, middle age hits hard at twenty-five. Look at Maureen, she’s thirty-six and gonna be a grandmother when fifteen-year-old Gladys has her baby together with her own birthday in January. Lord, spare us from teenage pregnancy, intoned Sue, the first step on the road to poverty for all us blackfellas. (SP 57)

Her boyfriend Roger is a university student and his choice instils some kind of ambition in Sue, although at first it is merely an entertaining thought:

Grade twelve was enough education to work in an office or a factory, she’d discovered at the CES during the week; good jobs were few and far between unless you had a trade, or specific training. I might go to uni meself, she thinks, laughing, get to be a brain surgeon and then go home in me Merc and see what problems mum’d have with *that*. (SP 57)

Nevertheless, it is only when Rachel, who “saw herself melodramatically, a guardian angel standing at a crossroads, urging Sue to go on to the great God of Higher Education and Future” (SP 118), takes her to university with her that Sue fills in an application for an Aboriginal studies course (compare SP 118). When she is accepted on the course, her and Roger’s initial reaction is a celebration because they are “gonna be rich” (SP 192) as

[e]veryone knew that uni graduates got the good jobs, the government jobs on big money where you could flex on and off and no-one cared if you were gone for two hours at lunch, and they paid you heaps for doing fuck-all. (SP 193)

Roger and Sue’s idea of what happens after university is solely based on assumptions and focused on the possible financial gain. It is only after Sue has started at university and moved to Brisbane that she understands what it means to be a university student and lead a life away from violence, poverty, and a bleak future. In her letter to her brother she describes her new life in Brisbane:

*This unit I’m living in is really nice and it’s really different in the city, not like home or Eagleby. I go into town to the movies sometimes or to the libraries around the place. Uni’s good too, but different to what I expected, nothing like school. And there’s heaps of yuppies. I thought they’d all be these radicals but hardly any are. Mostly rich stiffes, stuckup as anything, and not many Murries, more Asians and Indians and that. And it’s funny, half the people are thick as two short planks. The work’s pretty hard but I’m doing ok so far. (SP 221)*

With the support of Kerry and Rachel, Sue enters university and starts her new life as a student. Her preconceived ideas are challenged and she is more self-confident. Melissa Lucashenko demonstrates that despite difficult and seemingly hopeless situations there is a way out. In the end, Sue enjoys her life and her Aboriginal studies. She is “a million miles away” (*SP* 243) from her old life, “living in luxury in [her] flat that the government’s paying for, and half [her] life spent listening to people at uni talk about blackfella’s problems” (*SP* 243). She has learned “how to get along” in this “funny bloody world” (*SP* 245) and Melissa Lucashenko has demonstrated the importance of education, belief in oneself, and aspirations to better oneself, regardless of personal circumstances.

Anita Heiss depicts Alice Aigner as a successful woman, whose success and self-confidence feed her snobbishness and her focus on appearance. She refers to herself as a “lookist” (*NMMR* 85) when she is disgusted by a date’s bad skin and choice of jacket:

Suddenly Charlie wasn’t looking happy.  
 ‘You’ve been staring at my skin all night, Alice. Is it that much of a problem for you?’  
 ‘Have you thought of having your scars, umm, you know?’  
 ‘So my skin *is* a problem for you.’  
 ‘Not as much as your jacket,’ I joked, hoping to make light of the situation, and immediately wished I hadn’t.  
 I’m sorry you find my jacket and skin so problematic, Alice.’ And with that he up and left me there; drunk, alone, disappointed in myself. I was shallow. I was a lookist. (*NMMR* 86f)

Anita Heiss indicates that her protagonist is somehow aware of her cruel streak, although at this stage Alice is not ready to see her faults. Throughout the novel, Alice makes repeated reference to places she refuses to go to as her motto is “[i]f I can’t drive there, I don’t go” (*NMMR* 141) She avoids train journeys, especially out to the west of Sydney, as she “had been influenced by all the stories on the news about gang violence in the western suburbs and assaults on trains” (*NMMR* 140f). When a potential date sends her a message that he is “in Villawood” (*NMMR* 100) she panics. Villawood is a suburb in the Sydney’s west where also the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre is located:

Did he mean *in* Villawood? [...] Now I was being stupid – of course he didn't live in an immigration detention centre. I didn't respond. I was glad there was a distance between Coogee and Villawood. Could westie meet waxhead ever work anyway? It seemed to be working out for Bianca and Ben. They were engaged, soon to be married, and seemed likely to live happily ever after, but I couldn't see it working for me. I turned my phone off for the night, and thought briefly about having the number changed. (NMMR 100f)

Anita Heiss describes her protagonist's exaggerated reaction to demonstrate how ridiculous it is and how easy, albeit extremely wrong, it is to dismiss people based on their postcode. She addresses the divide between the affluent Eastern Suburbs in Sydney and the so-called *Wild West* of the city and points out how snobbish and shallow it is to be so easily "influenced by all the stories on the news about gang violence in the western suburbs" (NMMR 140f). She also mentions Parramatta, another suburb in the west, where some guests at Bianca's Kitchen Tea think of going, which "was a sign that it was time for Liza and [Alice] to leave. There was no way [she] was heading anywhere other than home" (NMMR 153), a welcome excuse for her not to set foot in a pub in the west. At Bianca and Ben's wedding, Alice is nothing but critical of everything, from the groom's outfit to the "champagne-glass pyramid" (NMMR 234) and the "cheap wine" (NMMR 235):

Liza and I carried on bitching about the appalling decorations, the cheapness of things and the lack of class we saw as inherent in the western suburbs. Dannie was disgusted. She was always telling us about the snobbery in her Paddington street, and now she became a vocal advocate for the 'down-to-earth suburbanites', Bianca and Ben. (NMMR 235f)

Alice's unforgiving attitude is also the reason why her almost perfect boyfriend Paul breaks up with her as he believes that Alice's harsh and judgemental nature will render her unable to forgive his criminal past. It is this break-up and the subsequent months of being alone that instigate a change in Alice. Anita Heiss uses her protagonist's eventual Mr Right, "Gary-the-Garbo" as Alice initially refers to him, to exemplify the change that Alice has undergone. He has everything that Alice looks for and finally, she can overlook the fact that he works as a garbage collector. She has learned that the connection and similarities with another human being are more important than postcode or profession. Their "shared passion for history made conversation easy" (NMMR 338) and he "taught her about world history" (NMMR



338). Anita Heiss has Alice sum up the advantages of her new relationship at the end:

At first glance, many women wouldn't consider a garbo or someone they only ever saw at a bar as an impressive option. It worked for me, though. I liked drinking a lot, and I hated putting the bin out. Gary was the complete package. His life would fit perfectly with mine. (*NMMR* 338)

The author succeeds in pointing out that snobbishness and focussing on appearance are reasons for missing out on valuable experiences with valuable people. Judgemental attitudes create a distance between people and a barrier that makes it difficult to connect with other people. Anita Heiss shows that once her protagonist has overcome prejudices she finds happiness.

Both Melissa Lucashenko and Anita Heiss place importance on personal growth and on facing and overcoming challenges. Their characters overcome personal obstacles and as a result, find new paths in life and make new experiences that otherwise would have passed them by.

The protagonists in *Steam Pigs* and *Not Meeting Mr Right* show aspects of Indigenous people's challenges in urban areas from very different point of views. Melissa Lucashenko's Sue Wilson epitomises the uneducated young Indigenous person whose eyes are opened to a world that offers women more than destructive relationships with men, and no future menial jobs that they will lose once they start bearing children. Melissa Lucashenko's novel is almost a step-by-step guide for women who want to be a part of a feminist world and free themselves from traditional expectations. Anita Heiss's Alice Aigner, on the other hand, is postfeminist and therefore struggling with different demands on her role in society. She needs to find a way to maintain her feminist beliefs while allowing herself the opportunity to form a meaningful relationship with a man without falling back into traditional women's roles. The authors show that this is a balancing act for both women. Both characters are fighting for their chosen path, ensuring that they achieve what is possible for them to achieve. Sue Wilson learns that living on her own and pursuing a university degree is the first step to her independence. Alice Aigner learns that a relationship should add to her life, not detract from it. Both characters benefit from ideas of feminism in different ways, which might be due to

the fact that there is about a decade between the creations of the novels. Sue Wilson might be Alice Aigner in ten years' time.

## 8. The Quest for Connection in Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* and Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song*

This chapter will analyse Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*, the author's first novel published in 2006, and Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song* written in 2005. Both novels depict their main character on a journey of self-discovery and of finding a place in Australian society. Tara June Winch's May Gibson and Terri Janke's Tarena Shaw have different family backgrounds and as a result, their journeys are starkly dissimilar. May Gibson is a fifteen year old runaway who leaves an abusive home behind to look for her father and her dead mother's Aboriginal family. Tarena Shaw is law student whose challenge it is to find her voice as a lawyer and the belief that she deserves to be one. Both heroines are proud to be Aboriginal, and there is never a question about their Aboriginality. Their journeys lead them into their families' past, and as a result, they can make sense of their world, which enables them to strengthen their own identity, and find their place in society and a place to call home.

This chapter will analyse the issues young Aboriginal people face in today's society as they are presented in these novels. It will take a closer look at the problem of homelessness as related in Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*. It will look at definitions of homelessness and concepts of Indigenous homelessness and reasons for Indigenous homelessness. It will then discuss Aboriginal dispossession as experienced by Indigenous Australians and its effects as presented in Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song*, and briefly analyse the importance of the Mabo land rights case which can be considered the backbone of Terri Janke's novel. It will continue to describe Indigenous Australians' relation to land and their sense of belonging to emphasise the importance of their connection to family, kinship, land, and their country. Finally, this chapter will discuss the main characters' journeys of self-discovery, and their finding their place in society.

This chapter will argue that Indigenous Australians are still suffering from the effects of dispossession and displacement, and that there is a need for non-Indigenous Australians to create a place for them in society. This place should be

characterised by respect, recognition, and equal rights, combined with understanding the importance of, and the relationship with land for Indigenous Australians. There is a need to establish a connection between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous communities in order to create a richer Australian society.

### **8.1. Challenges of Disconnection**

According to the website of Homelessness Australia<sup>45</sup>, there were over 105.000 homeless people in Australia at the beginning of 2017. Indigenous Australians make up a quarter of these, despite the fact that they represent only 2.5 percent of the Australian population. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's<sup>46</sup> definition, a person is homeless if their living arrangement is inadequate, or they have no tenure, or their living space does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations (compare AIHW report on Homelessness Among Indigenous Australians, 5) This general definition covers all Australians but fails to allow for special consideration of Indigenous Australians' circumstances and situations. Hence, the report adds further definitions that place emphasis on the concept of homelessness among Indigenous Australians:

There are likely to be additional aspects of homelessness from an Indigenous perspective that this definition does not adequately capture [...]. Some authors have related homelessness experienced by Indigenous Australians to their history, values and beliefs [...]. For example, 'spiritual homelessness' and 'public place dwelling' (also known as 'sleeping in the long grass' and 'itinerancy') are experiences more commonly faced by Indigenous Australians than others. 'Spiritual homelessness' is defined as the state of being disconnected from one's homeland, separation from family or kinship networks, or not being familiar with one's heritage. 'Public place dwelling' or 'itinerancy' generally describe a group of people, usually Indigenous Australians, from remote communities who are living—usually sleeping rough in the 'long grass'—on the outskirts of a major centre (for example, Darwin). (AIHW report on Homelessness Among Indigenous Australians 5)

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/homeless-statistics>

<sup>46</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra, 2014: Homelessness Among Indigenous Australians  
<http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129548061> (retrieved 1 May 2017)

As can be seen from the above quote, homelessness for Indigenous Australians is not primarily defined by lack of housing. It includes their disconnection from their country or homeland, their family, kinship and heritage. According to Paul Memmott and Catherine Chambers, “for many Indigenous homeless people, finding accommodation [is] not necessarily their most crucial support need” (Memmott and Chambers 9). They explain that many public place dwellers do not consider themselves as homeless (compare Memmott and Chambers 9) as Aboriginal people have “a tradition of open-air camping” (Memmott and Chambers 9), and it is therefore “not [...] stressful for them to adopt this style of living for a while, particularly in towns with mild climates” (Memmott and Chambers 9). It can be, however, stressful for non-Indigenous people who may consider “regular alcohol consumption, subsequent intoxication and other behaviour [...] as anti-social” (Memmott and Chambers 9), and therefore disapprove of this lifestyle. Memmott and Chambers argue that legislative approaches to public place dwelling and homelessness, such as the forceful removal of Indigenous people from public places, are “likely to result in temporary or local displacement, whilst overall cycles of incarceration, alcohol abuse and public place dwelling continue” (Memmott and Chambers 10), and demand that

any movement of Indigenous people from public spaces due to conflicting public needs should be carried out through a process of negotiation no matter how protracted, and supported by a planned set of alternative accommodation and servicing options acceptable to all parties. (Memmott and Chambers 10)

In other words, a holistic approach should be the preferred option when dealing with public space dwellers and homeless Indigenous people, which would “empower Aboriginal people with effective self-help strategies and problem-solving skills” (Memmott and Chambers 11). Such strategies would ensure long-term effects and are likely to result in more effective solutions and possibly bridge the gap between the general public and those leading a culturally different lifestyle.

Mick Dodson, the Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University, states that in Australia, “Indigenous families are 20 times more likely to be homeless than non-Indigenous families” (Dodson 7) and explains that there are primarily three reasons for Indigenous homelessness. He

maintains that Indigenous teenagers leave home because they feel disconnected from their non-Indigenous family into which they have been adopted. Moreover, Indigenous children leave home due to poor parenting skills of parents who “were themselves removed and brought up in institutions or inadequate private homes and subject to abuse” (Dodson 7). Finally, he claims that old Indigenous people choose homelessness over living in nursing homes where “no one speaks their language and they are denied contact with their country” (Dodson 7). Mick Dodson postulates that the “collective historical experience of Aboriginals has been one of exclusion from the lands they traditionally occupied and used [and because of which they] lost control over the location, design and function of their living spaces” (Dodson 7). It can be argued that this exclusion is the reason for spiritual homelessness experienced by Indigenous Australians. Memmott and Chambers define spiritual homelessness as

a state arising from separation from traditional land, and from family and kinship networks [...], and involving a crisis of personal identity wherein a person’s understanding or knowledge of how they relate to country, family and Aboriginal identity systems is confused or lacking. (Memmott and Chambers 10)

This separation and disconnection from their homeland and community connections can be detrimental to an Indigenous person’s mental health. It is important for them to feel connected with related people, which may be a reason why “Indigenous Australians from a common cultural region congregate together in public places” (Memmott and Chambers 10). They join public dwelling groups to experience closeness and a feeling of security among people they know. For Aboriginals, introductions of new people focus on finding out two main points, namely where they come from and which mob they belong to (compare Memmott and Chambers 10). In other words, country and family or kinship can be considered the pillars of their identity. Loss of both or either of these may result in a crisis of identity (compare Browne-Yung et al 5).

Mick Dodson explains that there is a direct link between homelessness and dispossession in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (compare Dodson 7). He argues that

[m]any Aboriginal people may not officially be ‘homeless’ but may consider themselves as such because of their exclusion from country. The capacity of peoples to care for country, is, from an Indigenous perspective, a necessary consideration in determining and explaining levels of homelessness within a community. (Dodson 7)

He continues to explain that the cycle of “removal, institutionalisation and homelessness” (Dodson 7) is common although he admits that “it is difficult to estimate the number of homeless people who were also removed from their families” (Dodson 7). Noel Murray refers to the May 2006 “Indigenous Homelessness within Australia” report which emphasises that “the homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context cannot be understood without reference to the legacy of colonisation” (Murray 5). Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that

[i]n Australia, the sense of belonging, home and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject – coloniser/migrant – is based on the dispossession of the original owners of the land and the denial of our rights under international customary law. It is a sense of belonging derived from ownership as understood within the logic of capital; and it mobilises the legend of the pioneer – ‘the battler’ – in its self-legitimation. Against this stands the Indigenous sense of belonging, home and place in its incommensurable difference. (Moreton-Robinson, “Senses of Belonging”, online article abc.net.au 21 Feb 2017)

She identifies the “fiction of *Terra Nullius*” (Moreton-Robinson, “Senses of Belonging, online article abc.net.au 21 Feb 2017) as the “original theft” that was derived from dispossession:

The first wave of invading White British immigrants landed on our shores in 1788. They claimed the land under the legal fiction of *Terra Nullius* – land belonging to no one – and systematically dispossessed, murdered, raped and incarcerated the original owners on cattle stations, missions and reserves. In all these contexts, the lives of Indigenous people were controlled by White people sanctioned by the same system of law that enabled dispossession. (Moreton-Robinson, “Senses of Belonging, online article abc.net.au 21 Feb 2017)

The concept of terra nullius was challenged in a land rights case that occupied the courts for ten years. In 1982, Eddie Mabo and others brought a lawsuit against the State of Queensland and the Commonwealth of Australia, claiming *native title* to

Murray Island<sup>47</sup>. On 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 1992, the High Court of Australia upheld the claim and ruled that

the lands of this continent were not terra nullius or ‘land belonging to no-one’ when European settlement occurred, and that the Meriam people were entitled as against the whole world to possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of (most of) the lands of the Murray Islands. (<http://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/mabo-case>, retrieved 2 May 2017)

Arguably, the decision was unexpected and probably considered radical by many non-Indigenous people. It is therefore even more unfortunate that Eddie Mabo and two other plaintiffs died before the judgement came down. Phillip Toyne states that the Mabo case “was a legal revolution” as it highlighted the need to “rethink our relationship with our indigenous peoples” (Toyne 77). This is particularly important when considering the outcome of the ruling in more detail. The rejection of the notion of terra nullius was certainly imperative and a first stepping stone to more recognition. Nevertheless, although it was decided that the Indigenous community held native title in 1788, it was only valid in those areas where no freehold title existed<sup>48</sup>. As a consequence, with regard to the main populated areas of Australia, which are predominantly freehold, there will be little or no chance of any successful native title claims that would reverse the act of dispossession and little or no chance of compensation. Historian Peter Poynton states that

[i]n theory native title may have existed over much of the continent and may have required large compensation payments for its extinction. However, the High Court magically extinguished it, where land has been freeholded, leased or used for some government purpose [...]. (quoted on [www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/native-title#toc2](http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/native-title#toc2), retrieved 1/5/2017)

The consequence of these outlined specifications is that native title is not automatically recognised by law and needs to be won in a court case. Indigenous people claiming native title must prove their ongoing and uninterrupted traditional association with the land. Any appeal that proves that there is government interest or Crown interest in the land will result in failure to be granted native title. In 1996, the High Court’s Wik decision found that native title and other interests in land can

<sup>47</sup> A group of islands located north of the Great Barrier Reef.

<sup>48</sup> Compare: [www.CreativeSpirits.info](http://www.CreativeSpirits.info),

Aboriginal culture - Land - Native title, retrieved 5 May 2017

Source: <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/native-title#ixzz4gFX5XsQN>



coexist. This meant that more land would potentially fall under native title. It also meant that since then, native title and land rights claims have become more complicated and more time-consuming. In addition, it created a certain amount of unrest among the non-Indigenous population who reacted to the scare tactics of the mining industry, warning that the Indigenous community would take their backyards away. The result of this campaign was a wider gap between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous community fuelled by racism and prejudice. Simon Emsley states that “[t]he dispossession of Indigenous peoples of the former white settler colonies is a work in progress and one that is at times coordinated by the modern state with the full gamut of its contemporary powers” (Emsley 19).

Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that non-Indigenous Australians’ “notion or rights and the sense of belonging [have been] reinforced institutionally and socially” (Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home, 26), and are “inextricably linked to dispossession” (Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home” 30). She explains that

Indigenous people’s sense of belonging is derived from an ontological relationship to country derived from the Dreaming, which provides the precedents for what is believed to have occurred in the beginning in the original form of social living created by ancestral beings. [...] Indigenous people derive their sense of belonging to country through and from them. [...] This ontological relationship was not destroyed by colonization. (Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home” 31f)

She continues to analyse the effects of removal, dispossession and displacement on Indigenous people and argues that Indigenous people, despite living in another’s country, can be “in place” due to “cultural protocols and the commonality of our ontological relationship to country” (Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home” 33). However, she maintains that the position of Indigenous people in Australia is still defined by continued “colonizing power relations [which are] at the very heart of white nationhood and belonging; they are postcolonizing” (Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home” 37f). Paul Newbury argues that “[n]on-Indigenous Australians should consider that resolution of Indigenous claims to reparation for dispossession is a valid part of their identity as Australian” (Newbury, “What is Australia for?” Griffith Review online, edition 36). He says that Indigenous people are still traumatized by the violent dispossession that is part of

Australia's founding history and that non-Indigenous Australians should "embrace an identity that is commensurate with living in an Indigenous land and Indigenous philosophy and spirituality should be a guiding theme" (Newbury, "What is Australia for?" Griffith Review online, edition 36) in their identity. Paul Newbury's demands would enable Indigenous people to establish a connection with non-Indigenous people and most likely result in a decrease in racist attitudes towards Indigenous people. Browne-Yung et al. argue that

[d]espite positive changes in attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and social issues, [they] continue to experience prejudice and racism, which impacts all aspects of life and adversely affects health and wellbeing. (Browne-Yung et al 4)

Browne-Yung et al. also maintain that mainstream society defines the 'correct way' of living, and by doing so restrict other ways of living which then results in exclusion. According to them,

the daily life worlds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians are apart both spatially and socially to such a degree that the consequence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social disadvantage remains largely unwitnessed by white Australia. (Browne-Yung et al, 6)

This obvious separation results in a lack of connectedness of Indigenous people to mainstream society and Australia. This feeling of disconnection is most likely enhanced by their separation from country, family and kinship, and arguably the reason why many Indigenous people struggle with "the history of colonisation that brought with it the negative consequences of displacement, racism and marginalisation, which may result for many [Indigenous people] in a discordant and conflicted habitus" (Browne-Yung et al 6). In addition, their position as second-class citizens has "resulted in fewer capital resources to enable entry into dominant social fields" (Browne-Yung et al 6). They also argue that this inferior position that Indigenous people find themselves in may result in an internalisation of "ideas and structures that subordinate" (Browne-Yung et al 6) Indigenous people. They refer to this phenomenon as symbolic violence which can occur either consciously or unconsciously. Symbolic violence "helps explain how capital resources are distributed to maintain and reproduce societal inequalities" (Browne-Yung et al 6).

In addition to being disconnected from mainstream society, many Indigenous people also experience a disconnection from their families and kinship, which results in spiritual homelessness and a crisis of identity. In an interview<sup>49</sup>, Bindi Bennett explains that as a result of the removal of children policy that was in place in Australia until the middle of the twentieth century, about five hundred thousand children were removed and it is their children and grandchildren that are now searching for their ancestors and want to become part of the Aboriginal community. Many of these may have had some cultural input from direct family members but there are many whose family records have been destroyed and who learn about their Aboriginal heritage either by accident or when someone in their family dies and leaves them some information. Bindi Bennett argues that this search for their Aboriginal identity and family is associated with a lot of loss as well. This is due to the fact that some light-skinned Aboriginal people are scared to return to the Aboriginal community to the point of ostracising the persons looking for his or her ancestors. Hence there is also a need to prove that the search for answers is not for personal benefit but rather for a chance to establish community and kinship ties. As a result, the amount of time it takes to uncover their family's past depends on the family support and community support Aboriginals receive. Bronwyn Fredericks, a Director of Link-Up Queensland, an organisation that assists Aboriginal people to reconnect to their families and communities states that she is "well aware that for some Aboriginal people [finding their families] can take years and for others it may never happen" (Fredericks 6). According to Bindi Bennett, the need for embarking on this difficult journey comes from a feeling of being lost and a feeling of their identity being shattered. If their journey is successful, the outcomes are feelings of pride, being at home, and being at peace. Ultimately, this journey is about self-learning and connection, regardless of whether it includes acceptance by the Aboriginal community.

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<sup>49</sup> Fronek, Patricia, "Finding Aboriginal Identity: In Conversation with Bindi Bennett [Episode 55], *Podsocs*. Podcast retrieved 30 April 2017 from <http://www.podsocs.com/podcast/finding-aboriginal-identity/>

## 8.2. Homelessness in Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*

Tara June Winch's book, *Swallow the Air*, was published in 2006 and is her first book. Tara June Winch is Wiradjuri with an Afghan and English heritage, and wrote *Swallow the Air* when she was only about twenty years old. It is a semi-autobiographical text that "can either be read as a novel with short chapters or as a series of inter-linked short stories" (On, "A Talent" 43). The story follows fifteen-year-old May Gibson who leaves home to find answers about her heritage, "attempting to make sense of the world" (*StA* prologue). The story is a first-person narrative that offers May Gibson's view, and the author's language is "so unapologetically poetic and vivid that at times it makes the reader draw breath [...]". She seems to have the eye of a screenwriter, describing sound and temperature so vividly that the reader feels present" (Moses 35) in many scenes. Kathy Hunt, however, argues that Tara June Winch's style is "high-maintenance and therefore vulnerable, presenting both a problem and a paradox" and asks: "when does white editorial help become a corruption of black writing?" (Hunt 5). She believes that the author has "sacrificed a powerful and occasionally lyrical vernacular style to her youthful and exuberant literary pretensions" (Hunt 5) but admits that "beneath the collaborative prose there is a writer" (Hunt 5) who concerns herself with vital contemporary Indigenous issues. Sunanda Creagh states that Tara June Winch manages to make "tragic events [...] more poignant by delicate descriptions" and emphasises "Winch's ability to unpatronisingly capture accents" (Creagh, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 2006). May Gibson's journey takes the reader from Wollongong, a city about one hundred kilometres south of Sydney, also referred to as The Gong, to outside of Darwin, to the Sydney suburb Redfern, then southwest of Sydney to Lake Cowal and Eubalong, and finally back to Wollongong. Throughout her protagonist's journey, Tara June Winch is "highly respectful of the power of the elements. Air, land, water and fire are described with a sense of awe" (On 43). Tara June Winch stresses that *Swallow the Air* is not an autobiography, "but admits she drew on her own experiences when writing it" (Creagh, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 2006):

When I was 15, I moved out of home and was a bit all over the place at that time. I got into uni, got my head together, but then I thought I wasn't into it.

[...] So I went round Australia when I was 17. [...] I wanted to find out about my Aboriginality and thought I needed to go to those communities and meet people and understand the world and who I was [...]. What do you need to call yourself Aboriginal? There's this idea you have to be traditional, living in the desert, wearing a lap-lap and living hunter-gatherer style. You can only have black skin, brown eyes, flat nose. I felt so proud to be Aboriginal but part of me was thinking, 'What's going on? Am I allowed to be Aboriginal or not?' (Creagh, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 2006)

Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* successfully combines the author's personal questions with her desire to "raise awareness of reconciliation" (Creagh, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 2006) by addressing matters that are of concern for young Indigenous Australians.

May Gibson's story starts with the day her mother commits suicide. The author foreshadows the mother's death by depicting May enjoying a day by the beach in Wollongong "[a]t the furthest rock pool, searching the ledge for [her] usual spot" (*StA* 5), examining a dead stingray. She is "no longer intrigued by cause of death, loss of life" (*StA* 7) and realises that the stingray "was free" (*StA* 7). When May and her older half-brother Billy return home that day, her mother is dead and they move in with their Aunty. Their housing commission flat is in the sarcastically named Paradise Parade where "echoes of broken dreams [are] crammed into [their] own special section of Woonona Beach" (*StA* 33):

Paradise, ha! Way down, past the flags and half a million dollar beachfronts, there hid a little slice of scum. From the wrong side of the creek, we'd had the privilege of savouring the last crumbs of beachfront property. Soon they'd demolish all the fibro and move us mob out to the western suburbs. For now we were to be satisfied with the elitist postcode and our anonymity. (*StA* 33)

As the above quote shows, there is a marked difference in the housing situation of Indigenous people, who live in housing commission flats, and expensive beach properties. Furthermore, the author indicates that the Indigenous people living in the council houses will be moved to a less valuable area in order to make a profit from selling the land to wealthy buyers. It is also apparent that the Indigenous locals have no influence over their living situation due to the fact that they lack financial means. The author describes how comfortable May and Billy are in their surroundings and how knowledgeable they are about the country:

There, at the mouth of the creek we'd find blue swimmer crabs for cooking up. Only certain times of the year you could find the crabs though, all the months with the letter *r* in them Mum used to say. (*StA* 34)

Their Aboriginal mother taught them about traditions, culture and laws. She taught them respect for the land, their ancestors, and the knowledge they is passed on from generations to generations:

Mum used to say that these parts are famous for their leeches, or used to be anyway. She said that the old people used to trade them, big juicy fat ones, they'd use for medicine. She said that the people from this part are called the Dtharawahl people, and dtharawahl means valley, a perfect wet breeding ground for leeches. It is their land, Mum would say, so we have to help look after it for them in exchange for our staying here. Be respectful, she'd say. (*StA* 44)

It can be argued that the author emphasises the Aboriginal people's awareness of the country and their surroundings. It is apparent that May and her family are from a different area which they most likely were removed from and that their ability to create a home in an area other than their own prevents them from feeling homeless. Bronwyn Fredericks argues that "[i]f Aboriginal people live in the Country of other Aboriginal people, it does not mean necessarily their connections to Country are lost, or that significance of Country is no longer present" (Fredericks 6). May and her family have managed to create their home away from their homeland. May and Billy are happy and seem connected, despite their poor living conditions and difficult situation at home which are due to the fact that their Aunty's abusive boyfriend terrorises all of them. But their happiness and connection are threatened, not only by the imminent relocation through the council, but also by local mainstream society who voice their anger at the Indigenous neighbours' existence in no uncertain terms. May describes how "as we got older we began to feel like we didn't belong" (*StA* 34) as graffiti "*Mull up lads ... fuck off coons*" (*StA* 35) appear and enhance their feeling of not belonging. As a result, May starts to "hide her skin from the other beach" (*StA* 35). Their home country slowly becomes less of a home and it becomes unsafe as well. May is raped on the beach by one member of the surfies, and is told by her attacker that "[t]his gunna show ya where ya don't belong dumb black bitch" (*StA* 36). May's home becomes even less a home when Billy leaves after a violent incident with their Aunty's boyfriend. It can be argued that he

is May's home after their mother's death. He is her connection to the world, the one who understands her and offers her a home:

We didn't talk about Mum or our dads or all the booze and shit around us, we knew the world in the same way that we knew each other, in the quietness we shared. It wasn't in our eyes, or our voices or what we said, it was just there, that understanding, that sameness – it slicked our pores, our skin. It was a feeling that you couldn't see, or smell or hear or touch; you only knew. (*StA*, 59f)

Billy's departure leaves May devastated and "the more he wasn't there, the more [she] realised too, we were all gone" (*StA* 60). May's home the way she has known it has disappeared and she also decides to leave it behind. Her departure is more planned than her brother's and leads her to a squat "where a friend had been staying; [she]'d been there with her once to pick up her sleeping bag" (*StA* 64), and the people there asked her to "[c]ome back and stay anytime, sister" (*StA* 64). This is when May's homelessness in terms of housing begins. Before leaving Wollongong and its surroundings, her homelessness can be regarded as spiritual homelessness, which increases throughout the book, due to the fact that first her mother and then her brother leave her. Arguably, her homelessness is connected with experiences of loss and feeling unsafe. The squat provides some kind of safety, and drugs "take the hurt out of [her] eyes" (*StA* 67). May's life in the squat is defined by drugs and emotional anguish:

When I feel trapped walking in my head, solving unsolvable mysteries, I drown, and the releasing surges out of me, pungent flowing vomit, freeing. The drug doesn't recognise me anymore, doesn't recognise that I even exist under its hold. (*StA* 69)

The day Billy appears in the squat, May is forced to accept that she has lost him to even harder drugs. When she tries "to catch a glimpse of him, he wasn't there" (*StA* 72), and back in her room she realises that there is "more than a door separating" (*StA* 72) Billy and her. May's hope of being reunited with her brother is destroyed. She leaves the squat after witnessing her brother and other people at the squat discarding a probably overdosed girl in an empty carriage on a train. May's ties with her brother are severed and she decides to look for her white father, whose postcard from Darwin she received when she was still in Wollongong, which gave her the impression that he is interested in meeting her.

May hitchhikes to Darwin but realises before she arrives there that her father will not provide the home that she needs and looks for. This realisation happens when she watches boxing fights for money which the truck driver who picks her up and offers to take her to Darwin shows her. The violent fights trigger her memory and she understands that the idea of her father which she created in her mind fails to resemble reality. Tara June Winch depicts May's realisation by describing the same story twice, with the difference that the second time it continues and does not end with "Perfect" (*StA* 80). The author describes a scene outside May's home in Wollongong in which her father repairs her bike and ends the scene with the words, "[h]e looks over to me, smiles. Perfect" (*StA* 80). Six pages later, Tara June Winch repeats the description of the scene verbatim but continues it and relates what happens after May's father looks over to her smilingly. What follows is a brutal attack and abuse of May's mother by May's father. The day May is forced to watch the violent boxing fights she "truly faced [her father], at his side, not the stranger [she]'d wished for, or made [herself] imagine. He was the monster [she]'d tried to hide" (*StA* 87). May's desperate hope of finding a new home with her father is shattered, and she decides to return south and ends up in Sydney.

The author's description of Sydney is not flattering and foreshadows how hard life as a young homeless Indigenous person in a city that has little appreciation and time for the poorest and weakest among its inhabitants:

I spun into the clogging traffic and muffled voices and tides of ironed pleats and searched for the nearest tree. These buildings were like a bed of sprouted nails; I dragged my fingers across them, smooth granite, marble, mirror glass, sandstone and pebble. Around and beyond the still life, for miles, was a crawling prickly blanket of identical houses and roads. (*StA* 94)

It can be argued that the mention of sprouted nails and prickly blankets indicate the hostile attitude to Indigenous people in general, and homeless Indigenous people in particular. May is lost and alone, searching for a tree and then a park, green areas that allow her to feel more connected. But despite her desperate situation, May "didn't need to be saved; [she] wasn't waiting for a stupid here. But one came anyway [...]" (*StA* 95). May is taken in by community Elder Joyce, who offers her a place to stay in her house in Redfern, a suburb in Sydney that, like nearby Waterloo,



is deeply rooted in Aboriginal history. Joyce lives in the Block<sup>50</sup>, a meeting place for Indigenous people in the heart of Sydney that was also the scene of riots after the death of an Aboriginal teenager who was killed during a police chase in 2004. Tara June Winch also fictionalises this tragic incident in *Swallow the Air*. Joyce's place is May's home for a year, and allows the teenager to experience some sense of belonging. Joyce explains to May that she should not "be shame now, everyone need somewhere to stay. Some people got it and some doesn't. Come stay with the women and me. Beats being around bloody strangers, you got family in the city too, girl" (*StA* 96). The author portrays the Block as a lively yet run-down place where everyone is "all family here, all blacks, here, from different places, but we're all one mob, this place here" (*StA* 99). It is "a meeting place for [Aboriginal] people" (*StA* 101) but not heaven on earth. May explains that "[g]rowing up in the bloody Gong was nothing compared to a year living in the Block" (*StA* 100) and Joyce "always made sure [May] was inside by dark" (*StA* 102). Nevertheless, May consorts with the street kids, is arrested and incarcerated overnight during which she "drew the government-issue, cactus blanket over [her] face and dreamt of places, away from winter and walls" (*StA* 128). Tara June Winch shows that although the Block and its inhabitants are important as an Aboriginal meeting place and community, it is also a place where Aboriginal people gather but are unable to find the answers they are looking for. They are unable to make it their home and care for it because there is no government support or white community support to do so. Alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment and violence are daily occurrences in the Block. People living in the Block are not homeless in the traditional sense of the word, but they are homeless with regard to the Indigenous concept of homelessness. The Block provides respite from the hostile environment in Australia's largest city. It fails, however, to provide a safe place and a real home if one succumbs to the strong attraction of alcohol and drugs. May explains that it "wasn't the existing but the enduring that [she] needed. All of [them] did" (*StA* 127). Enduring life in a city away from her family, her kinship, her culture, and her traditions is not the life that May pictures for herself and it is because of this and with the guidance of Joyce that she manages to escape from the Block. Growing up with her mother and brother May had a home and felt a

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<sup>50</sup> The Australian TV station SBS has produced an award winning documentary about The Block. The link provided is to a virtual time capsule where you can explore The Block:  
<http://www.sbs.com.au/theblock/#/explore/>

connection. Her mother was her connection to her Aboriginality and her homeland, despite not living on their family's area of land. May's mother instilled such a sense of belonging and pride in her children, but her death resulted in their feeling of being lost. May remembers that she "felt like [she] belonged, but when Mum left, [she] stopped *being* Aboriginal. [She] stopped feeling like [she] belonged. Anywhere" (*StA* 97). Her mother was the only link to her Aboriginal family, and without her May is disconnected and homeless. Her Aunty "drowned out, she faded from our safety" (*StA* 17) so there is no chance to connect and create a home, which is why May and Billy ran away from there. May's mother was on a mission and witnessed her siblings being forcefully removed from their mother. May and her brother Billy were lucky to have been able to remain with their mother whose strength and determination it was to instil Aboriginal pride in her children and create a home for them, despite being "a beaten person [and] all those silent screams and tears [that ultimately] took her away" (*StA* 88). Tara June Winch depicts May's struggle to find the strength to continue on the path that her mother wanted her to go. Before she can achieve this, however, May is homeless for a while and confused about her identity. Her brother Billy is temporarily homeless, too, although his quest for identity is not presented in the novel. Tara June Winch focuses on May and her search for identity and meaning in her life. This search leads May to the area that originally belonged to the Wiradjuri people who are May's mother's people and therefore also May's. Only when May fully comprehends her connection to the Wiradjuri people and her connection to the land can she overcome her spiritual homelessness and return to Wollongong to be with her Aunty and her brother Billy.

### **8.3. Dispossession in Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song***

Terri Janke, a Torres Strait Islander of Aboriginal, Malay and Filipino heritage published her novel *Butterfly Song* in 2005. Writing, however, is not her main occupation. Terri Janke runs a successful Indigenous law firm in Sydney that specialises in Indigenous cultural and intellectual property.<sup>51</sup> In a TED talk in Cairns

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<sup>51</sup> For more information please go to: <http://www.terrijanke.com.au/>

last September<sup>52</sup>, she explained that her reason for writing *Butterfly Song* was that she wanted to help non-Indigenous Australians to understand why land rights and dispossession are such important issues for Indigenous people. She wanted non-Indigenous people to understand what it feels like if one is robbed of something whose value is priceless to one. Terri Janke's protagonist is a young Torres Strait Islander law student, Tarena Shaw, who at the end of her studies helps her mother to recover her grandmother's brooch. The novel is a parable about Indigenous land rights and dispossession that is primarily set in Sydney and on Thursday Island in the 1990s, and then also recounts the protagonist's family's history in Cairns and Thursday Island in the 1970s and 1940s respectively. The novel has five parts that cover different aspects of the protagonist and her family. It starts with the introduction of the case and all the relevant people, continues with the family history, followed by the protagonist's childhood experiences and experiences of racism, before covering the court case in which the brooch is returned to the rightful owners. The plot is organised thematically and interspersed with legal cases and explanations that serve as the background to the narrative. Natasha Cica describes Terri Janke's language as "dreamy and sensual" (Cica, *The Australian*, 19 February 2005) and Tony Smith argues that the author's "use of short sentences makes the narrative style consistent with the dialogue" and states that "Janke's unpretentious language is surprisingly rich" (Smith, online article, *EurekaStreet.com.au*). In an article, Terri Janke talks about writing *Butterfly Song*:

My novel *Butterfly song*, published by Penguin in 2005, draws on my own personal life experiences, as well as my family stories, told to me primarily by my mother. The process of writing took me over five years and involved a lot of consultation with her. [...] While some events and literary sequences in my novel are not based on fact, much of the story is autobiographical and includes characters based on my family members or events drawn on my own experiences. [...] I had to consult with all family members referred to in the book, even if I used different names or contexts in the novel. They understood that the book was fiction, and that I was drawing on the stories to create my story, my version of the family's story. (Janke, "Writing about Family" 53)

Being a cultural and intellectual property lawyer, Terri Janke is particularly concerned with the "legal and ethical issues that every writer must be aware of when

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<sup>52</sup> <https://tedxjcucairns.com/2016-2/>

writing about real life events and experiences” (Janke, “Writing about Family” 50). In 2002, she published the *Writing Cultures* Protocols<sup>53</sup> which discuss personal privacy and offer advice on what to be aware of when writing about personal information of Indigenous people. The author admits that writing *Butterfly Song* “made [her] stronger, and it made [her] relationship with [her] mother stronger too:

When the book was launched in Sydney, my mother came down from Cairns to celebrate. She gave me the leaf brooch, the one my grandfather carved, and told me that this was for me to keep – it was something to which I had shown a connection and therefore I should have. I love this brooch, I draw from the strength of it when I feel sad or worried and I will treasure it always. (Janke, “Writing about Family” 55)

Terri Janke’s novel opens with a description of how closely connected Indigenous people are with their land. She relates what *they say* happens with a person who lives on an island. It is not specified who *they* are, but it is clear that the author refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders whose knowledge is passed on from generation to generation. This knowledge and their wisdom is what make Indigenous culture so special, rich, and valuable:

They say if you live on an island for too long, you merge with it. Your bones become the sands, your blood the ocean. Your flesh is the fertile ground. Your heart becomes the stories, dances, songs. The island is part of your makeup. The earth. the trees. The reef. The fish. The music. the people. The sun, moon and stars surround you. You are only part of the integral world called life. You and those who follow you will always be a part of it. (BS 3)

The author invites the reader to imagine what it feels like to be part of the land, to be one with the land. It can be argued that this may prove difficult for many non-Indigenous readers as the concept of being one with the land and considering it as part of oneself which one needs to protect and care for unlike how most non-Indigenous people view land. Aileen Moreton-Robinson states that “[Indigenous people’s] ontological relationship to land is a condition of [their] embodied subjectivity. The Indigenous body signifies our title to land and our death reintegrates our body with that of our mother the earth” (Moreton-Robinson, “I Still Call Australia Home” 36). For Indigenous people, title to land is granted through one’s existence rather than by legal transaction. There is no document or financial

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<sup>53</sup> Janke, Terri, *Writing cultures*. Canberra: Australia Council for the Arts, 2002.

transaction to prove ownership. How can ownership of an extrinsic part of yourself be proved? This type of ownership is based on belief, trust, and spirituality and non-Indigenous people should try to respect that. Nevertheless, Terri Janke understands that this connection to land fails to make sense to non-Indigenous people, and she therefore introduces her protagonist's family's butterfly brooch which is for sale in a jewellery shop in Cairns. Tarena's mother Lily alerts her daughter to the sale and asks for her to stop the sale and retrieve it. Tarena has just sat her final exams at law school at a university in Sydney, which is reason enough for her mother to bestow this legal task on her. Tarena's initial reaction to her mother's anger is disbelief at how anyone "would ever want to wear an old ornament pinned to their clothes? Sounds like some old fogey's thing" (*BS* 16). It can be argued that by putting such thoughts into her university-educated protagonist's mouth the author attempts to mirror non-Indigenous people's reaction to Indigenous people's fight for land rights. Tarena is the first person in her family to go to university and lead a rather free life, unlike her mother and grandparents. As a result, she fails to understand the importance of Indigenous people's connection to land, which likens her to non-Indigenous people. In non-Indigenous people's opinion, if you fail "to take control of and manage the land [to help with] the accumulation of capital" (Moreton-Robinson, "I Still Call Australia Home" 25), the potential of the land is wasted, which for them then begs the question why Indigenous people would want land ownership. Non-Indigenous Australians have a different idea of what is valuable. Tarena's mother explains to her daughter why this butterfly brooch is so important to their family:

My mother's eyebrows rise. 'It wasn't a brooch when my mother had it. It was a special carving she kept with her all the time. Your grandfather –my father, Kit – sculpted that butterfly for your grandmother from a pearl shell. After he died, she used to wear it around her neck sometimes on a piece of cord.' The look she gives me tells me she is not making this up. "I'm deadly serious. It's the same butterfly.' (*BS* 16)

By adding the fact that Tarena's grandfather made the butterfly himself, the author succeeds in attaching priceless spiritual value to the item. It is now a family heirloom that cannot be replaced by simply buying a similar one. Personal value has been added and created an item that is irreplaceable. It can be argued that most readers will understand this kind of attachment to an object, which engenders an

ability on the part of the white reader to relate to Tarena's family' need to have the butterfly returned to them. Tarena's search for proof of ownership of the butterfly brooch seems difficult as there are no documents or receipts. Eventually she discovers a photo of her grandmother Francesca in which she wears the butterfly around her neck. Before she finds this photo, however, there is other cultural evidence that connects the brooch with Tarena's grandparents. One of Tarena's uncles remembers "there was a song about a butterfly, though [which was] a bit of a hit here on the island, but it was never recorded" (*BS* 36). The song, however, has been passed on through generations as Tarena finds out a little later. Her new boyfriend, Sam, a Torres Strait Islander, who "works at the Department of Education but wants to be a musician [and has therefore] taken leave without pay to try and get it together" (*BS* 122), performs the butterfly song in a concert in Cairns to which he invites Tarena. When she hears the song, it "has a familiar tune [and the lyrics] make [her] skin tingle" (*BS* 134). After his performance she learns more about how Sam knows about the song:

'It's a song written back in the 1940s, around war time. There used to be an island band called the Castaway Cruisers. They played nearly every month. I learned this song from one of the old fellas in the band. He's passed on now.'

'My grandfather Kit was in the Castaway Cruisers', I say.

'Kit Plata was your grandfather?' (*BS* 135)

The author shows how culture is passed on through generations without the need for any recording or written evidence, and it can be argued that she wants her readers to understand that oral traditions should be given the same respect as written documentation. In Tarena's case, she has a song, a witness who saw Kit Plata carve the brooch, and her grandmother's photo. Before depicting the court scene, the author makes reference to and explains the Mabo court case in a chapter entitled "use the law as a spear" (*BS* 249), after mentioning that "possession is nine-tenth of the law" (*BS* 247). This part, like similar parts of the book in which legal terms are described, can be considered a teaching lesson for her readers. The Mabo case is explained in a straightforward and easily understood way to ensure that every reader knows what it was about. The concept of *terra nullius* is explained, as is

dispossession, and the Indigenous students who discuss these issues in the book are given the chance to voice their anger about the flawed legal system:

‘I failed property law last year. I’m not going to fail two years in a row. It’s useless. How can we learn about the law that dispossessed and controlled us blackfellas? We must be stupid to think we can do this.’ (*BS* 249)

Before going into more detail with the case, the author has one of the students put a hold to the conversation so she can get a pen as “[t]his is getting really technical, but very interesting” (*BS* 250). In a short chapter, titled “judgement day” the author describes the Mabo High Court ruling and briefly mentions the excitement this decision creates among the Indigenous community. The author’s presentation of the Mabo case works because her characters are Indigenous law students and therefore have an obvious interest in the case. Tarena’s family’s case also has a positive outcome although there is no judgement in that case. The daughter of the deceased Dr. Nash, who took the butterfly from Francesca after she died in the hospital where he worked, decides to return it, much to the dismay of her lawyer:

It’s Mr Fraser talking to Mr Albermay. ‘The magistrate’s decision wouldn’t have held up under appeal anyway. There is no way that family had legal grounds for stopping the sale. There’s the statute of limitations for one thing, and the evidence is arguably inadmissible. But there’s not much we can do if the owner decides to give it back.’ He is shaking his head as if it’s all been a waste of his valuable time. (*BS* 279)

The lawyer’s summary can be related to land rights cases and native title claims. Terri Janke shows that the situation is obviously a difficult one, and there are legal clauses in Australian law that make the granting of land rights and native title a complex procedure. Nevertheless, Terri Janke argues that the matter could be less complicated if non-Indigenous Australians showed goodwill, and entered into a dialogue with the Indigenous community which is based on mutual respect and a common goal.

In addition to depicting dispossession of land, Terri Janke gives some insight into the removal policy, which can be considered a dispossession of children. The author describes the pressure Indigenous parents are under to ensure their children are not removed. Tarena’s mother used to work for the Department of Education placing Aboriginal children from remote communities into carers’ homes so that they can be educated (compare *BS* 12). The author also presents Abraham Maslow’s experiment

with baby monkeys that were taken away from their mother and the effects this forceful removal had on the monkeys (compare *BS* 127f). Tarena learns about this experiment at university, and she wonders what effects this removal has on the mothers:

What about the mothers? I cannot help wondering what the mother monkeys must have been feeling. Has anyone done a study on them? In my mind, this is a significant part of the overall experiment. I have reread the chapter, and for all my circling of words with my blue pen, it does not say anything about that at all. (*BS* 129)

Terri Janke's protagonist considers the experiment from a different angle to remind the reader that the removal policy had effects both on Indigenous mothers and children, and both parties need to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, Terri Janke portrays the constant fear of losing their children and the pressure Indigenous families are under through the observation by the Welfare Office. When Tarena's grandfather Kit dies, he begs his wife Francesca not to "let them take the children" (*BS* 112). Later the author describes how Francesca is visited once a month by Mr Woods, the Welfare Officer, who inspects the cleanliness of their home and her children, and checks whether they attend school. His report is brief and factual:

The funny little man finished the list of questions his new supervisor had prepared.  
 Is the coloured women looking after those kids of hers?  
*Yes.*  
 Is she giving them a proper roof over their heads?  
*Rents from Wang, the Chinese marketeer.*  
 Is she healthy?  
*Appears to be.*  
 Working on the side?  
*No evidence of this.*  
 Are the kids healthy?  
*Apart from a little tooth decay, they seem healthy.*  
 Unkempt?  
*No.*  
 Attending school?  
*Yes.*  
 Off the streets?  
*Yes. (BS 219)*

Francesca is under constant observation. When she allows her son Tally a day off school and takes him to the cinema to show her appreciation for his helping her out



with errands, Tally's teacher, who happens to be at the cinema, is surprised to see them there and points out that he should be in school. When Francesca explains that he is ill, the teacher does not believe her and threatens Francesca:

'He doesn't look sick to me. We wouldn't want Mr Woods from the welfare office to hear about this now, would we?'

'Thanks for your concern, Mrs Farrant. May God be with you. We always look forward to your singing on Sundays, especially the solos during communion. Francesca steered Tally away from Mrs Farrant and they found two seats up the back. (*BS* 222)

The fear of losing children is also instilled in Tarena's mother, which is presented in a scene set in Cairns in 1972. Tarena has a fall and hurts her arm so badly that her mother has to take her to hospital. When the doctor suggests keeping her in hospital overnight for observation to ensure she has no concussion, Lily almost panics and wants to take her home:

'But doctor, she'd be better off at home. I must insist that she go home. I want to take my daughter home.' [Tarena listens] to her voice rise as she argues. Her hands are flying up in front of her face. [...] Mum stubs the cigarette on the floor, then lifts me off the narrow bed. 'We're leaving.' (*BS*, 145)

Lily's desperation is palpable and her fear of child welfare removing her daughter increases when they wait at the bus stop and a woman stares at them:

The woman stares at my arm in its slink. Bandaged in plaster, it looks like a snow sculpture. Then the woman looks at my mother. My mother stares back. 'It's just a small fracture. Only a little fall.' She whispers in my ear, 'They probably think I pushed you down the stairs. That's all I need, bloody child welfare onto me.' She lights another cigarette and rouses on me then, so they will overhear. 'Tarena, what have I told you about walking on that slippery fence?' (*BS* 145f)

Terri Janke intends to show her readers that dispossession of children is a fact of life for Indigenous families. Mick Dodson argues that

Policies remain which allow the removal of children on the grounds of neglect. The chronic unemployment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people means that, more than any other group in society, they are reliant on the welfare system. Indigenous families are therefore subject to high levels of surveillance and intervention by welfare agencies. This ultimately leads to the removal of their children at a far greater rate than non-Indigenous children. (Dodson 6)

Such policies put immense pressure on Indigenous families, especially since they are coupled with a racist attitude that implies that Indigenous people are less able to look after their children than white families. Terri Janke depicts Tarena's father Frank, whose mother is told that she "couldn't keep him, that he'd be better off with the white grandparents" (*BS* 215), which results in her feeling a terrible loss:

'Sometime, you know, sometimes I think it was only a dream, that I didn't even have the boy.'

I'm sorry', said Francesca.

'They said I couldn't look after him. That he'd be better off with them. You know, he'd be a little bit older than Tally.' (*BS* 216)

Frank only meets his mother once in his life, at a time when Tarena and her siblings are small children. They are not told who she is at the time and only learn about the fact that she is their grandmother when she dies a couple of years later. This news triggers a sadness in Tarena that she always remembers:

In the years since, that incident has stuck in my head. The melancholy lingered. I would cry – a different kind of weeping. I had cried many times before, but this was for different pain. I'd never had a chance to get to know my grandmother. I never sat on her lap or cuddled her. I didn't have any treasures to remind me of her – not a ring or a brooch, nothing. I didn't know her. But she did matter, didn't she? I felt a sense of loss that ran deep into my heart, and into the heart of my family. (*BS* 164)

By personalising the dispossession of children and emphasising its effects on one family rather than a whole generation, Terri Janke succeeds in raising her readers' awareness of the horror of being disconnected from one's family. Moreover, the author depicts how this dispossession affects many generations and rips a hole into families that is not mended easily. As a result, Terri Janke achieves her aim to present dispossession and its effects to her non-Indigenous readers in order to make them understand why land rights and the stolen generation are matters of great concern for the Indigenous community.

#### ***8.4. The Journey of self-discovery as presented in Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* and Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song****

Both Tara June Winch and Terri Janke depict protagonists who are of mixed heritage, and rather unfamiliar with their families' histories. In addition, both characters experience uncertainty and insecurity in their lives with regard to their identity. Tara June Winch's May Gibson is uprooted by the death of her mother and her lack of understanding her family's history which results in her identity crisis. Terri Janke's Tarena Shaw slowly learns about her family's history and understands her relations and their behaviour better. She, however, also struggles to find her place as a lawyer in society. Their journeys of self-discovery are defined by their understanding of their family history as well as their coming into their own and finding their place in their world. Both Tara June Winch and Terri Janke portray young Indigenous women who seek a place in society that they can be comfortable with. The portrayal of their search can be interpreted on a wider scale as Indigenous people's search for a place in Australian mainstream society.

##### **8.4.1. Discovering Family History**

Tara June Winch's May Gibson has a close relationship to her mother and her half-brother Billy. The siblings are aware that they have different fathers as "Billy's feet were much darker than [May's]" (*StA* 7), and they deal with it in a light-hearted manner. May explains that "[Billy would] sometimes tease me and call me a 'halfie' and 'coconut'. We'd be laughing and chasing each other around the yard being racist and not even knowing it" (*StA* 8f). Their difference in skin colour seems unimportant to them as they know why this is the case. May tells the reader that "Billy's dad ran away, he was the right skin for Mum, too, but he wanted to play rock'n'roll instead" (*StA* 51). She continues to relate how her "Mum still thought that boys needed their dads, needed to have men around to grow into. So she went and found herself another dad for Billy, a white fella. And a few years later I arrived" (*StA* 52). This part of May's family history is clear to her and it is related

matter-of-factly, and it can therefore be argued that May feels happy and at peace with this side of her family story. What May seems to have less knowledge of is her mother's past. Her mother June tells May the story of how June's mother managed to buy the "best saucepans in the land" (*StA* 24) from a white travelling salesman called Samuel. It takes May's grandmother "three years and seven months" (*StA* 26) to pay the last instalment and it is this achievement that May's mother is proud of. The author has June relate the story about what that happened in Goulburn in 1967, but June refuses to go into detail as to why her other brothers and sisters were put into missions:

Anyway, Goulburn, '67. All my brothers and sisters had been put into missions by then, except Fred who went and lived with my mother's sister. And me, I was with my mother, probably cos my skin's real dark, see – but that's another story, you don't need to know that. (*StA* 23)

As a result of June's refusal to talk about the missions and the removal and why she was separated from her siblings, May is unaware of this part of her family's past. June might be ashamed of what happened to her family or the memory is simply too painful. She also mentions that many women at that time "were messed up, climbing those walls, trying to forget. It wasn't a good time for the women, losing their children" (*StA* 24). Again, there is no explanation about why children were lost. June places the emphasis of her story on the fact that June's mother and the salesman "were friends after all that time" (*StA* 26), and adds that he "would've been the only white person to ever" (*StA* 24) enter June's mother's house. June raises her children to be proud Aboriginals in order to spare them the pain of feeling inferior due to the colour of their skin. May finds out about June's psychological pain only after her suicide, which indicates that her mother wanted to protect her children from the painful truth about her past:

I remember the day I found out my mother was head sick. She wore worry on her wrists as she tied the remaining piece of elastic to the base of the old ice-cream container. [...] Mum's sad emerald eyes bled through her black canvas and tortured willow hair. (*StA* 3)

When May stays with Joyce in Redfern, the community Elder repeatedly asks May about her Aboriginal family. Joyce wants to know if May "got old dobs in yer mob" (*StA* 103) like her and probes her, "Go on, what about ya old girl, her mob, where they?" (*StA* 103). May admits that she "[d]unno, she left us so long ago, I remember

stories though and I know she's Wiradjuri – from out west, isn't it, Joyce?" (*StA* 103). It is clear that May is unaware of her family's history and Joyce explains in no uncertain terms why she needs to find out about it:

'[...], May you got people that you gotta find, things you gotta learn. You *will* learn them ere, but I don't want you to. Look at Justine [Joyce's daughter], smack the only thing teachin her now! You gotta go, May, you got somthin to find, fire in the belly that ya gotta know. [...] Think about it, May Gibson. Who they Gibson mob anyway? They gotta be somewhere out there.' (*StA* 104)

May realises she needs to find out about her mother's family and she talks about it with Johnny, Joyce's grandson and May's best friend in Redfern:

I suppose that's what makes it, family, and I suppose we don't see the faces in our dreams yet. We promise each other to find them, the faces, to go to our homelands for our people, for ourselves. "StA 123)

May keeps that promise and leaves Redfern while Johnny decides to stay. His eventual early death can be interpreted as the result of his decision not to find out about his family, and the author reminding her readers of the importance to do so. When May finally reaches her mother's cousin's "white house" (*StA* 177) in Eubalong, out west of Sydney, her expectations of what will happen are high:

I knew my mother's mob would give me a feed, when I got there – to Eubalong – when I found them anyway. [...] Yamakarra, I would say. I practised it as I walked the rest of the river.  
Yamakarra, they would say. (*StA* 161)

The reality of her meeting is the opposite of what she expects. Percy Gibson, who is "the spitting image of [May's mother]" (*StA* 178) is suspicious of May's reason for tracking him down and assumes she is after money:

'What d'ya want anyway, love, ya come here for money, ha? Like your grandmother?'  
'No.'  
'No? Well what ya come here for? Where'd ya come from anyway?' His voice is louder and intruding.  
'Wollongong, sort of. I came here, well I don't know really, not for friggin money though!' (*StA* 179)

May is disappointed, confused and angry, especially when he points out that she should hurry up with her request as he “got golf in a minute” (*StA* 180). His response to her inquiry about stories of the past, about learning from the older generation, and information about her mother’s family results in his outburst:

‘You’re just like your grandmother, you know that? But she knew it. She died of hope, you know that? The thing is, we weren’t allowed to be what you’re looking for, and we weren’t told what was right, we weren’t taught by anyone. There is a big missing hole between this place and the place you’re looking for. That place, that people, that something you’re looking for. It’s gone. It was taken away. We weren’t told, love; *we weren’t allowed to be Aboriginal.*’ (*StA* 181f)

Tara June Winch touches upon a difficult topic that is current in the Indigenous community. She shows that some Indigenous people are still ashamed of admitting they are Aboriginal or refuse to open the door to their past and find out about what happened in their family. May is a representative of those Indigenous people who decide to take the journey back into the Aboriginal community and discover their family’s past. The fact that May’s relative refuses to support her journey means that most likely it will take May longer to find other relatives and connections. Their different attitudes are a result of their very different upbringing. May is raised to be proud of her Aboriginal heritage, despite the fact that she is subjected to racism and hate. Percy grew up at a time when being Aboriginal was shameful and came with a stigma. Hence, he is disconnected from his Aboriginal heritage and is convinced that he has “a good life now” (*StA* 182). His ties to the Indigenous community have been severed and he has no interest in reconnecting with it. May, on the other hand, is determined to find out about her Aboriginal family and it can be argued that she will continue to find out more. She will pursue different options to achieve her goal. After all, she is like her grandmother.

Terri Janke’s Tarena Shaw finds out about her family’s past during her research in preparation for the court case. This is the advantage she has over May Gibson, as without the court case Tarena’s mother might not have spoken about her family’s past. Lily “has never spoken much about [her parents’] life and how they came to move to Cairns” (*BS* 4), and before the case Tarena can only imagine what her grandparents’ lives were like on Thursday Island as “she will never really know” (*BS* 4). She remembers asking her mother as a child but to no avail:

When I was a kid I asked my mother why her parents left Thursday Island.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Was it during the war? Did they leave with the evacuation?’

‘I’m not sure. They were in Cairns before the war, I think.’

‘How come you can’t tell me?’

‘Don’t pressure me for answers. You’re giving me a headache.’

Mum says she was too young to remember. She was never really told, and now that they’re gone she can never really know either. That’s why I was so surprised when she called and asked me to come here. (*BS* 4f)

The retrieval of the brooch is of such importance to Tarena’s mother that she allows her daughter to learn about the past. All of a sudden she produces photographs of her parents and their siblings and Tarena is so happy about this that she asks to keep a photograph “for her own record” (*BS* 38). Tarena meets other members of her family on her first visit to Thursday Island who can provide information about her grandparents. In contrast to May Gibson, Tarena is in the lucky position that she is supported by the Indigenous community in her unexpected search into her family’s past. She meets Horatio, a friend of her grandfather’s, who tells her about how her grandfather saved his life (compare *BS* 55f). She meets Sam, who brings her grandfather’s famous butterfly song back to life (compare *BS* 134). Finally, she also meets Essa, her grandmother’s older brother, whose testimony in court helps her win the case (compare *BS* 277). Tarena spends a lot of time with her mother, which gives her the courage to enquire about her mother’s past:

Mum butters a piece of toast. ‘It was good to see Granny Penny. I haven’t seen her for years. We lost contact.’ She has told me this before, but I know there are parts of the story I will never know.

I ask her, ‘Do you remember much about your father?’

‘Vaguely,’ she replies, pouring chilli sauce on her plate. ‘I was very young, but I do remember the day I dropped the eggs. It made my mother angry.’

‘Mum, how come you never talk about what happened?’

She does not answer.

‘You told me you didn’t remember. Why?’ I pressure.

‘I guess I always blamed myself. I thought I killed Dad because it was me who dropped the eggs that day. Then, with Mum, I was a bad girl. She made sacrifices, I was ungrateful, and that was all my fault, too.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘But if we’d been good, if I’d been good – they wouldn’t have sent Uncle Tally away. I wouldn’t have had to go to live in another family.’

I want to ask her what it was like, but the words stick in my throat. ‘You can’t blame yourself.’ It’s all I can say.

‘But I keep thinking – it might have been different. What if, ay? What if?’  
(*BS* 101f)

The above conversation between Tarena and her mother is one that May Gibson never has with her mother, and again evidence of how less difficult it is for Tarena to find out about her family’s past. She learns that her mother feels a lot of guilt that weighs heavy on her conscience. The reader learns about the special egg story right after this conversation and it becomes clear that Tarena’s mother not only blames herself for her and her brother’s removal but is still mourning her father’s death. The author shows that there is a lot of guilt, secrets and pain that surround Indigenous families and make their lives miserable. These feelings of guilt are detrimental to their mental health. Living with such feelings of guilt cannot be easy. In addition, the author also shows that this burden becomes even greater when it is left unspoken and ignored. Tarena’s mother keeps all this from her daughter until she is left with no other choice. Without the brooch it is more unlikely than not that Tarena would ever have found out about her mother’s guilt and her family’s past. But the court case and their struggle to find evidence brings mother and daughter closer, and allows Lily to open up to her daughter. The brooch is also the reason why they are reunited with Tarena’s grandmother’s brother. Tarena’s mother sees Essa in Cairns in 1975 but refuses to go and speak to him:

My mother stops. ‘What is it?’ says my dad.  
‘I think I saw old Uncle Essa,’ she says.  
‘Well, go and say hello.’  
‘No,’ she says. ‘He banished my mother when she married Dad.’  
‘Go and speak to him.’ He pulls her hand.  
She shakes her head and releases herself from his grip. (*BS* 178f)

Lily blames her uncle for her mother’s difficult situation and possibly also for the consequences her mother’s early death had for herself and her brother. Again, she decides not to open the dialogue and find out about his side of the story. After Essa’s testimony Lily’s attitude changes and she invites him to her house only to learn that he has always been observing her from afar:

‘Will you come over to our house?’ asks my mother.  
‘Yes,’ says Uncle Essa.



‘The address is –’  
 ‘I know where you live,’ says Uncle Essa. ‘I’ve known for a long time.’  
 Mum hugs him. ‘You are welcome in my home.’ (*BS* 280f)

Tarena’s discovery of her family’s past comes easy and with a happy ending. It can be argued that Terri Janke wants to encourage other Indigenous families to open up the door to the past and uncover what lies behind it. The author portrays this confrontation with the past as beneficial for everyone involved and suggests therefore that this outcome is possible for everyone. Tara June Winch, however, paints a different picture. Her protagonist’s journey into her family’s past comes to an abrupt halt when the first person she discovers refuses to engage with her and open up a dialogue. This is primarily due to that person’s fear of what might happen and shame of his own past. Both developments depicted by the authors are likely to happen in Indigenous people’s lives who decide to find out about their families. The message that the authors convey, though, is similar. They encourage other Indigenous people to find out about their families regardless of how difficult it may be as, in their opinion, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

#### **8.4.2. Overcoming a crisis of identity**

Tara June Winch and Terri Janke introduce another layer in their protagonists’ journey of self-discovery, namely their quest to find an identity for themselves. Yet again, their protagonists’ journeys are dissimilar although equally important. Tara June Winch’s May Gibson undergoes a transformation process that involves learning more about her own Aboriginality and truly understanding what it means to be Aboriginal. Terri Janke’s Tarena Shaw transitions from Indigenous law student to Indigenous lawyer and learns to believe in herself, her ability, and her right to have a place in society as an Indigenous lawyer.

Tara June Winch describes May Gibson as a proud Aboriginal who feels “Aboriginal because Mum had made [her] proud to be, told [her she] got magic and courage from Gundyarri, the spirit man (*StA* 97). But May’s only connection to her

Aboriginality is her mother, and the stories her mother tells her, and the passing on of Aboriginal traditions and knowledge of the land. Her mother's death propels her into an abyss of confusion and feeling lost, which leaves May with questions about her identity. When she is asked about her "olive skin" and whether her "parents, are they European or something" (*StA* 81) she replies that she is Aboriginal without hesitation. The response this elicits seems to create a hint of confusion:

'My mum was Aboriginal.'

'No shit? You don't look like an Abo.'

'My old man isn't though; his family are from the First Fleet and everything. Rich folk they were, fancy folk from England.'

'I hate Pommies,' Pete said, and back in the music and the silence, I wondered if they really were from England.

I couldn't wait to find Dad and ask. (*StA* 81f)

May is in a peculiar situation here. The truck driver fails to identify her as Aboriginal and voices his great dislike for her father's heritage. May's exaggeration about her father's family's wealth and their arrival on the First Fleet can be interpreted as an attempt to position herself in relation to the truck driver by emphasising her father's link to the mother country and her birth right to be in Australia. This is due to the fact that his use of the derogatory term *Abo* is indicative of his racist attitude towards Aboriginals. His dislike for English people takes her aback and leaves her with no identity which she could impress him with and earn his respect. Most of the Aboriginals she meets in Redfern are drug addicts or alcoholics, and therefore fail to provide the guidance and help she needs to find herself. She is "lost and hollow" (*StA* 97) and feels there is "something missing" (*StA* 120). She feels disconnected from herself and her Aboriginality. Joyce's forcing her to leave Redfern to find the answers she needs leads her to a Wiradjuri Elder named Isabelle, whom she meets at Lake Cowal, the heart of the land of the Wiradjuri. Isabelle tells her about the mining company wanting to "leach cyanide underneath the saltbush land" (*StA* 145), which is why she is there leading a protest. She explains to May why her protest is important:

Issy says they don't understand that just because you can't see something, don't mean it's not there. She says that under the earth, the land we stand on, under all this there is water. She's says that our people are born from quartz crystal hard water. We are powerful people, strong people. Water

people, people of the rivers and the lakes. They look at the land and say there is nothing there. (*StA* 146)

Isabelle teaches May about her Wiradjuri heritage and the importance of land in Aboriginal culture. She explains that “the lake works like a heart, pumping its lifeblood from under the skin. She says there are many hearts, and with them, many valves and veins. This, she adds, as smoke dances across her shadowy lips, is all life” (*StA* 147). Through the Elder, May learns about the difference in attitude to land between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Isabelle draws circles in the sand to teach her that “everything is sacred, inside the circle and outside the circle; she says that we should look after both areas the same way” (*StA* 147). May realises that “once [Isabelle] too was lost” (*StA* 158), which instils hope in the young girl that it is possible to find herself. Isabelle reminds her to “listen” (*StA* 147) and so May does as she walks to Eubalong to find her family:

*Listen*, Issy had said.

I listened. And the voices would come out, emerging from button grasses, bark shavings and water. Mother. Brother. Anger. Fear. All soaked in sorrow. Intricate words like Joyce’s photo tree of faces. Day doused them yellow, but night crawled the dark moons, hiding light. And answers.

Each day I asked the voices, why I’m here? What I’m doing?

They did not answer. But I kept asking anyway, to make sure that it was ok. Still they did not tell. (*StA* 160)

May only finds her answers that help her make sense of herself and assume her identity after her unpleasant encounter with her mother’s relative. Finally, she understands Isabelle’s drawing in the sand:

And it all makes sense to me now. Issy’s drawing in the sand, boundaries between the land and the water, *us*, we come from the sky and the earth and we go back to the sky and the earth, bone and fluid. This land *is* belonging, all of it for all of us. This river is that ocean, these clouds are that lake, these tears are not only my own. They belong to the whales, to Joyce; they belong to Charlie, to Gary, to Johnny, to Issy, to Percy, to Billy, to Aunty, to my nannas, to their nannas, to their great nannas’ neighbours. They belong to the spirits. To people I will never even know. I give them to my mother. (*StA* 183)

May eventually realises that she belongs to the land and that she is part of a great picture and part of a great family, even though she does not know them all. She feels that she belongs and that is enough for her to feel grounded and rooted and protected

enough to assume her newfound Aboriginal identity that is much stronger than it was before. She felt Aboriginal through her mother and her mother's stories. When she disappears, May's Aboriginal identity was diminished and she needed help to find it again. Her understanding of her connection to the land and the ancestors allow her to do so. She is not alone anymore, and she is able to forgive her Aunty and Billy for leaving her. She also understands that she "could run away from the pain [her] family holds. [She] could take the yarndi, the paint, the poppies, and all the grog in the world but [she] couldn't run from the pain and [she] couldn't run from [her] family either" (*StA* 195). She understands that Billy and Aunty are also Wiradjuri, that

[they] are from the same people" (*StA* 194), and although they live in Wollongong, which is not part of Wiradjuri land, "this place still owns us, still owns our history, my brother's and my own, Aunty's too. Mum's. They are part of this place; I know now that I need to find them" (*StA* 194)

For the first time, May refers to herself as Wiradjuri, which indicates that her transformation is complete and she has overcome her identity crisis. She is one with the land, and knows that as long as she is part of the land she will be protected and happy. Tara June Winch's final words leave no doubt about what she demands from the non-Indigenous community:

And I wonder, if we stand here, if we stay, if they stop digging up Aunty's backyard, stop digging up mother's memory, stop digging up our people, maybe then, we'll all stop crying. (*StA* 198)

The author considers any type of removal, uprooting, and interfering with land one of the reasons why the Indigenous community struggles to find its place within mainstream society. What she wants is for mainstream society to refrain from manipulating the Indigenous community and interfering with their lives, which merely is evidence of how little respect there is for Indigenous people. It can be argued that the author wants the non-Indigenous community to understand that they need to make room for Indigenous people if there is to be hope for reconciliation and true equality.

Terri Janke portrays Tarena Shaw as a law student without any belief in her ability or belief in her right to be at university altogether. The author depicts Tarena's

struggle at school, which is primarily due to the fact that she is subjected to racism. When they read *Coonardoo* in school, the teacher asks:

‘Tarena, you’re an Aborigine, what can you tell us about the cultural practices of *Coonardoo*?’

I want to tell him that I’m actually Torres Strait Islander *and* Aboriginal, but I’m too frightened. I’ve read the book and didn’t understand it. I’m not like that. Does that mean I’m not a real blackfella? I feel stupid. I am silent. (*BS* 74)

Tarena points out that the writer is actually a non-Aboriginal writer and therefore has “little to do with [her]” (*BS* 74), which results in the teacher’s explanation that the “writer’s skill is in depicting, and the author has served to illustrate the awakening of a primitive culture – a moving towards the colonial culture” (*BS* 74). Terri Janke depicts the racist attitude that Indigenous people are confronted with and uses this incident to show the effect it has on Tarena. She believes she is worth less and stupid and questions her Aboriginality. She is singled out because of her heritage. History lessons at school are also not enjoyable for Tarena, especially when the topic is the discovery of Australia. The nun teaches the class of white children and Tarena about how the “settlers had to fend off the Aborigines. The Aborigines were savages. They had no clothes, no houses, no laws” (*BS* 169f). It is also taught that “the land was empty when Captain Cook came” (*BS* 169). History classes like this still happened in Australia in 1976. The author presents Tarena’s experiences at school so that the reader understands where her self-doubt comes from and how deeply it is ingrained. Tarena’s experience at university is similar to her school experiences. She is the only Indigenous law student in her year, and in her first lecture she is singled out again, albeit less obviously than at school:

Professor Carlson’s eyes move on me. ‘And those of you who think you’re here for a free ride can think again. This course requires commitment and hard work. If you can’t give me that, there’s the door.’ (*BS* 23)

The professor implies that Tarena is at university simply as a token Indigenous student rather than on her own merits and through her own volition. He does not seem to believe that an Indigenous person has the intellect and the determination to finish a law degree. Tarena finds friends at the Aboriginal Students Centre as no one else will befriend her. She still feels intimidated and worried that “[she] might say

something stupid. Too shame people might find out [she does not] know anything, that [she] really shouldn't be here" (*BS* 30). Like in school, "people are always asking [her] about Aboriginal things. It's like they expect [her] to be a walking Aboriginal encyclopedia" (*BS* 84). When she is invited to a party at a rich white student's house in Rose Bay, a very expensive suburb in Sydney, she recognises "some of the faces from class, but none of them have ever spoken to [her] or looked at [her] before" (*BS* 85). She smokes dope, "pretending to be cool" (*BS* 85) despite the fact that she does not take any drugs. Her stupidity results in her vomiting all over the living room, which again singles her out in a negative way. This time, however, it is the result of her need to fit in and her desperation to make friends. The author depicts Sydney as a harsh place to be an Indigenous person. Tarena has racist experiences almost on a daily basis, and in her waitressing job in an Italian restaurant she constantly is asked about her colour of skin and her heritage:

'Where do you come from?' Serge asked me.  
 'I'm from Cairns,' I told him.  
 'But your dark skin, which country are you from?'  
 'My grandparents are from the Torres Strait. You know, so I'm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. I also have –'  
 'Oh, Mama mia, you can't be.' He said he'd been to the Northern Territory, where all the real Aborigines lived. 'Oh, the piccaninnies there, they have snot hanging like candle wax from their noses. And the flies!' (*BS* 69)

Guests also have no hesitation about asking her about her heritage and are equally surprised that she is Indigenous. When a guest compares her to *Coonardoo*, stressing the first syllable and turning the name into a derogatory reference, Tarena reacts angrily and states that "[t]hat book was written by an old white woman [and that] it's dated and gives a limited view of Aboriginal women" (*BS* 72). Her boss reprimands her for her reaction and advises her to do as he does when people call him 'wog',<sup>54</sup> and simply call them "Aussie bastard" (*BS* 73). But he is an immigrant and she is Indigenous Australian and therefore their positions in Australian society are not the same. As a result, his advice, although well-meaning, is useless. Another student is surprised when Tarena explains that she "does not feel like drinking" (*BS*, 76) and exclaims, "What? Drinking's in your blood" (*BS*, 76), referring to the many

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<sup>54</sup> A term used in Australia to refer to European immigrants, primarily from Italy and Greece.

Indigenous people who suffer from alcohol addiction, but failing to understand the underlying problem. Another time Tarena is verbally abused in a nightclub (compare BS 77), and so eventually she decides she “wants to leave this horrible place” (BS 79). She feels like she has “*terra nullius* of the brain. [Sydneyiders] have got *terra nullius* of the heart” (BS 95). She hates university as she believes she does not “fit in. It’s just so fucked. And why do I want to be a lawyer anyway? The whole system’s fucked” (BS 79):

We read an article from a law text that tells of the over-representation of Aboriginal people in gaols. I look around the room. I’m the only black person in this class. What does that say about our legal system? Am I on the right side of the law? Perhaps I’m guilty of thinking I could get through this law degree? (BS 68)

The author depicts Tarena’s struggle with the fact that she is the only Indigenous person in class, and her struggle with racism in everyday life. Her law degree seems to be more difficult to achieve than she had imagined, and surely more difficult than for any other student at university. However, Tarena fights against her self-doubt and her uncertainty whether she can be a lawyer. In a scene with her father, Tarena learns about fish and the importance to change your perspective:

‘You see that fish? It’s swimming upstream. It looks like it’s struggling against the tide. But that’s not what it’s like for the fish. You see, that fish thinks it’s dancing.’ I laugh and shake my head. There is always a deeper meaning. (BS 153)

Terri Janke presents that scene to show that although Tarena struggles, there is hope and a purpose to her struggle. With a shift in perspective and an understanding of why it is important for her to persevere she will complete her degree and become a lawyer. There is a deeper meaning for her to become a lawyer – she needs to prove to mainstream society that she can succeed. In addition, she needs to prove to other Indigenous people that it is possible to succeed. Failure is not an option for her. Failure means that her teachers, her university professors, all the racist people who maltreat her, are right about her. She needs to find her place in a society that is unwilling to offer her a place. When she goes to a job interview at a law firm in the city, the receptionist asks her if she “is here to deliver something” (BS 185). At that time, Tarena has not found her voice yet that she needs if she wants to fight for her place in society. She graduates from university with distinctions in all subjects

(compare *BS* 282); written proof that she is intelligent, determined, and capable of forging a career in law. Yet the first time she is at the courthouse, she mixes up the courtrooms and again, she is mistaken for a defendant in a theft, property damage and driving without licence case, simply because of her skin colour. But this time she finds her voice:

This is my chance to run. I can be free of this. I want to be free of this feeling of needing to vomit and scream. I want to break the chains. It would be so easy to run. It would be easy to hide under the frangipani tree, like I did as a child. But in these high-heels, across the carpet and then the smooth floor of the corridor, I would be risking serious damage to my skinny ankles.

I cough, stammer and clear my throat. 'Your worship, I am a lawyer.' I can feel sweat gathering around the elastic waist of my pantyhose. 'My case is Haines versus Symons.'

No one is laughing.

'It's a medical-negligence matter due for call-over this morning,' I continue. The magistrate blinks. 'Then you're in the wrong courtroom, my learned friend. [...] As I enter the next courtroom down the corridor, I tell myself I will learn and I *will* get used to all this. (*BS* 291f)

Terri Janke's protagonist finds her voice as a lawyer and is determined to find her place in society. It will not be an easy fight but it is apparent that the protagonist will succeed and will refuse to give up. The author uses her as a role model and inspiration for other Indigenous people who will certainly find themselves in a similar position. Giving up is not an option if one wants to make a change.

Both Tara June Winch and Terri Janke depict young Indigenous women who continue to look for their place in society after successfully overcoming their own identity crisis. Their successful transformation is meant to inspire other Indigenous people to find their identity and then their place in society. Non-Indigenous readers should regard the protagonists' struggle with respect and admiration. Their personal struggle and difficulty are unrelated to any actions they have taken, but all have to do with society's perceptions and government policies that result in Indigenous people's inferior status, racist treatment, and mainstream society's preconceived notions of Indigenous people's inability to amount to anything. With their more or less autobiographical novels, Tara June Winch and Terri Janke give contemporary Indigenous people the voice they need to fight for their rightful place in a society



that still seems to work hard to prevent that from happening. Their novels are testimony of their own struggle, and the authors' success is proof that this is a fight worth fighting.

## 9. Conclusion

Australian government policy envisage that pervasive socio-economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians be overcome by economic mainstreaming. Critics, however, consider the political attempt at 'Closing the Gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to be ineffective in the absence of material improvements in Indigenous welfare statistics. At issue are also the colonial mindsets and structures that have given rise to Indigenous disadvantage in the first place and the fact that economic mainstreaming largely occurs on the terms of the colonisers to enable the participation of Aboriginal people in the formal economy, which itself is a construct of the privileged. (Brueckner et al 18)

Closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can be considered a primary function of contemporary Indigenous Australian literature. Another function is to create a hopeful outlook and positive role models for the Indigenous community. My research has shown that political and historical aspects are a main concern for the Indigenous writers analysed for this thesis. Generally speaking, all novels that were part of my research discuss issues and matters that Indigenous Australians are confronted with in Australia today. These matters relate to government policies that inflicted unjust treatment on Aboriginals and created a system that resulted in inequality between the ethnicities. The effects of the assimilation and removal policies are a common theme in all novels. They represent Aboriginal people's struggle to overcome the trauma of either being removed themselves or being effected by the loss of family connections and the resulting disconnectedness from their Aboriginal culture and identity. This trauma has long-lasting effects on Aboriginal families and the healing process is difficult and takes a long time. This is partly due to the fact that it was only nine years ago in 2008 that the Australian government officially acknowledged the existence of a Stolen Generation and the repercussions this removal policy has on Aboriginal families today. It is also partly due to the fact that Aboriginal families are more likely to be dependent on government welfare. As a result, their living situations and family circumstances are more scrutinised and they are more likely to fall victim to unjust decisions from child protection authorities that place their children in foster care. In

an article in the Australian edition of *The Guardian*, Larissa Behrendt states that “more Indigenous children are being removed than at any other time in Australian history – they are 10 times more likely to be in care than their non-Indigenous peers” (Behrendt, “More Indigenous Kids” *The Guardian*). It is therefore not surprising that Indigenous writers place emphasis in their texts on removal policies and their effects. This dispossession of children ties in with another recurring theme in the novels written by Indigenous authors, namely Aboriginal dispossession.

My research has shown that Aboriginal dispossession of land and its effects on Indigenous Australians play a major role in most of the analysed novels. Aboriginal dispossession started with the arrival of the colonisers and manifests itself today in land right claims, native title claims, and disputes with the mining industry. The underlying problem which is the reason why land rights are of major concern in Australia today is the majority of non-Indigenous Australians’ failure to comprehend the importance that connection to land has for Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians consider themselves as custodians of the land by having an ontological relationship with it. Economic interest is more often than not secondary for Indigenous Australians. Non-Indigenous Australians and the Australian government have a vested interest in economic stability sustained by profitable use of the land. At the same time, dispossession of land has personal effects on Aboriginals due to the fact that they consider themselves as one with the land. Removing them from their homeland, uprooting them from their ancestors’ land, results in spiritual homelessness; that is, the disconnection from their culture, traditions, kinship and ultimately, their Aboriginal identity. The effects of spiritual homelessness and dispossession are discussed in almost all novels that were part of this research project.

A further common theme is Indigenous Australians’ inferior standard of living with regard to housing. In the majority of novels that were discussed in this study there is a marked difference in housing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This difference is so obvious that it evokes feelings of inferiority and frustration among the Indigenous Australian community. In a country like Australia, where the median house price in Sydney in 2017, for instance, is one million Australian dollars, and the majority of mainstream society considers social housing

a waste of government money, it is almost impossible for disadvantaged Indigenous people to obtain affordable higher standard housing. As a result, they live in neglected housing commission buildings whose standards are more often than not inferior. Being confronted with such an obvious difference in living situation is far from easy, and certainly contributes to Indigenous Australians' feelings being considered second-class citizens.

Lower standards of education and the difficulty of gaining an education are depicted in some of the novels analysed. The novels show that education for Indigenous Australians living in remote communities is inadequate and seemingly of less importance for the Australian government. The teachers are not fully equipped to cater for the needs of Indigenous children whose life in remote communities greatly differs from that of children in urban areas. In addition, the curriculum fails to cater for Indigenous students due to the fact that it primarily places its emphasis on a Eurocentric education. This leaves Indigenous children, who are forced to grow up in two different worlds, with feelings of alienation and lack of interest in matters that are so removed from their Aboriginal world. There is a need to create a curriculum and education model that make allowances for Indigenous Australians' particular needs in order to provide them with a fair chance in life. The Closing the Gap Report 2017 states that

Indigenous enrolments in an award course continue to grow more quickly than enrolment rates for all domestic award course students: in 2015 Indigenous students represented 1.5 per cent of domestic students in higher education, up from 1.4 per cent in 2013 and 1.2 per cent in 2005. Females make up 66 per cent of the Indigenous cohort (compared with 56 per cent of all female higher education award course students) (Department of Education and Training, 2016). (Closing the Gap Report 2017, <<http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/education>>)

Despite the increase in tertiary educated Indigenous Australians there is still considerable room for improvement. Education is the key to ensure a more financially stable life due to better employment opportunities. At the same time, there is a need for educating the non-Indigenous community about Aboriginal culture and traditions, and the benefits Aboriginal culture can bring for the non-Indigenous community, other than for the tourist industry. There is a need for the

appreciation of Aboriginal cultural traditions and their recognition by the non-Indigenous community. There is a need for mutual respect.

A further common theme in the novels analysed is identity. Indigenous Australians are part of all walks of life and many are greatly dissimilar to the western stereotypical image of Aboriginals which the Australian tourism industry tends to promote. Many Aboriginals are light-skinned, live in urban areas, and may not even be aware of their Aboriginal background due to the removal policy that resulted in a complete disconnection from their Aboriginal roots. It can prove difficult to recover lost family connections or find one's place in the Indigenous as well as the non-Indigenous community when one's Aboriginality is not obvious in terms of appearance. In addition, racist attitudes towards and prejudice against Aboriginals make identification with a group of people perceived as inferior a challenge that needs to be overcome.

My research has also shown that despite the difference in the protagonists' educational and familial backgrounds in the novels analysed, there is one issue that affects them all in various degrees. Racism is the one common theme that reaches beyond educational, financial, and familial circumstances. All Aboriginal protagonists are confronted with racism in more or less obvious forms which is an indication that racism towards Indigenous Australians is still a problem in contemporary Australia. Considering Australia's immigration policies that are becoming more rigid, and considering Australia's refugees policy,<sup>55</sup> it is not surprising that Indigenous Australians are subjected to racist treatment. At the same time, their situation can be regarded as being worse as they are the First Peoples of this country who have been disregarded, dispossessed, displaced, and disrespected since the arrival of the first fleet.

Contemporary Indigenous writing is concerned with informing non-Indigenous Australians about the appalling circumstances the majority of Indigenous Australians find themselves in. Its aim is, on the one hand, to educate non-Indigenous Australians about their culture, their traditions, and their fight for equality and a place in mainstream society. On the other hand, it plays an important

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<sup>55</sup> The documentary *Chasing Asylum* gives a shocking account of Australia's offshore detention policies. <http://www.chasingasylum.com.au/about>

part in instilling pride in Indigenous people in their culture, providing role models for them, and offering a sense of hope of and belief in real reconciliation and equality. Contemporary Indigenous writers depict the difficulty of living in Australia, their struggle with the lack of acceptance, the plethora of prejudice and racist attitudes that Indigenous Australians face on a daily basis. Their aim is to make mainstream society understand that, in order to bridge the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, acceptance of their shared history, acceptance of the occurrence of past atrocities, and the abolishment of current detrimental government policies are imperative. Contemporary Indigenous writing aims to challenge non-Indigenous Australians' preconceived notions with regard to Indigenous Australians. It aims to evoke empathy for the plight of Indigenous Australians and their fight for equal rights in a country that takes pride in *giving each other a fair go*.<sup>56</sup> On the Values Australia website the idea of *a fair go* is humourously expanded on, with the following conclusion: "So the real Australian Value is: we give everyone a fair go unless it is politically useful not to, or if it will do wonders for our media profile to attack them" (Fair Go, Values Australia <[http://valuesaustralia.com/australian\\_values.htm](http://valuesaustralia.com/australian_values.htm)>). It appears that Indigenous Australians have fallen victim to ongoing political opportunism and the manipulation of public opinion that have resulted in their inferior status in Australian society. Contemporary Indigenous writing aims to break this cycle by presenting protagonists that are strong and hard-working individuals trying to improve their lives and overcome their suffering crisis of identity. Contemporary Indigenous writers are educated, respected and passionate about giving their community a voice and putting their community on the national identity radar. They regard self-determination and mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as the major ingredients and as the basis for finding real solutions for the problems Indigenous Australians face today.

Indigenous Australian writers contribute to empowering other Indigenous Australians and support them in finding the strength they need to find their place in mainstream society and to persevere in their search for their Aboriginal identity that allows them to live successfully in contemporary Australia while embracing their

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<sup>56</sup> compare: Values <[http://valuesaustralia.com/australian\\_values.htm](http://valuesaustralia.com/australian_values.htm)>

Indigeneity. They are the beacon of hope that there are other Indigenous Australians who are successful and who have found their place and themselves. They are the representatives of a future that should be possible for all Indigenous Australians. Contemporary Indigenous writers are proof that there is no need to feel ashamed of being Aboriginal. On the contrary, they write to remind other Indigenous Australians that they are not alone in their struggle and to instil a sense of pride in Indigenous Australians that allows them to face their fears, overcome their hesitations, and step into the spotlight and put Indigenous Australians on the national identity radar.

Anthropologist Patrick Sullivan argues that

[non-Indigenous] Australians should recognise their futures as inextricably bound with that of Indigenous Australians. Sullivan contends that [non-Indigenous] Australians limit their identity because they do not perceive Indigenous heritage as a factor in being Australian, or that Indigenous peoples are essential to the identity of other Australians. (qtd. in Newbury, “What is Australia for?” 1)

Contemporary, well-educated, successful, and generally acclaimed Indigenous Australian writers are essential in bridging the gap between the two communities in Australia. Their stories represent personalised accounts that are hard to simply forget or ignore. Their stories pave the way over the bridge that leads to a new Australia – an Australia in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are on a shared path to a future that is based on real equality and mutual respect.

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## Appendix

### Zusammenfassung

Diese Dissertation beschäftigt sich mit der Darstellung von Aboriginals in zeitgenössischen Romanen, die von Aboriginal Autoren verfasst wurde. Die Romane wurden zwischen den späten 1990ern und den frühen 2000ern geschrieben. Die Autoren dieser literarischen Werke nehmen eine besondere Stellung innerhalb der indigenen Bevölkerung ein. Sie sind erfolgreiche Schriftsteller, deren Werke eine große Leserschaft erreichen. Alle haben eine universitäre Ausbildung, und sind sich ihrer Verantwortung der indigenen Bevölkerung gegenüber bewusst. Ihre Werke machen auf die schwierige Situation, in der sich viele Aboriginals in Australien befinden, aufmerksam. Die Gruppierung der Romane erfolgt anhand thematischer Aspekte, die vor dem Hintergrund politischer Gegebenheiten analysiert werden. Die Arbeit gibt einen kurzen Überblick über australische Politik im Bezug auf Aboriginals und australische indigene Literatur generell. Danach werden Romane von Alexis Wright, *Plains of Promise* (1997), und Kim Scott, *Benang* (1999), analysiert, die sich mit politischen Linien beschäftigen, deren Auswirkungen noch heute in der indigenen Bevölkerung zu spüren sind. Beide befassen sich mit der “Stolen Generation” (die gestohlene Generation) und deren Folgen für die indigenen Bevölkerung, die unter der australischen Assimilationspolitik zu Beginn des 20ten Jahrhunderts gelitten hat. Danach werden zwei weitere Romane von Kim Scott, *True Country* (1993) und Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (2006), behandelt, in der die Situation von Aboriginals dargestellt wird, die in abgelegenen Gemeinden im australischen Hinterland leben. Hier werden die Lebensumstände aufgezeigt, in der sich die australischen Ureinwohner befinden, welche in einem reichen Land wie Australien nicht herrschen sollten – drittklassige Unterkünfte und zweitklassige schulische Ausbildung. Des weiteren werden die Probleme zwischen Aboriginals und der Bergbauindustrie beleuchtet. Weiters folgt eine Analyse von Romanen, die von Aboriginals handeln, die in urbanen Gegenden leben. Als Nächstes werden Romane von Melissa Lucashenko, *Steam Pigs* (1997), und Anita Heiss, *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007), untersucht, deren Protagonistinnen in einer Großstadt leben, und

daher mit anderen Problemen konfrontiert sind. Hier werden Protagonistinnen dargestellt, die ihre Frauenrolle definieren müssen, unabhängig von ihrem unterschiedlichen familiären Hintergrund und ihrem unterschiedlichen Bildungsstand. Diese Romane erscheinen edukativ für eine Leserschaft, die nicht so vertraut mit Problemen der indigenen Bevölkerung ist, ohne zu belehrend zu wirken. Schließlich werden Romane von Tara June Winch, *Swallow the Air* (2006), und Terri Janke, *Butterfly Song* (2005), diskutiert, die sich mit der Identitätsfindung von jungen Aboriginals beschäftigen, deren Familien Opfer von gewaltsamen Kindesentzug wurden, den die australische Politik bis Ende der 1960er Jahre als nötig für eine Assimilation der Aboriginals ansah. Die Folgen dieser Politik, die über Generationen zu spüren sind, werden dargestellt, wie auch die Wichtigkeit der Verbindung mit der Heimat, dem Land, und der Familienbande. Die einzigartige Beziehung zu Land, die Aboriginals haben, wird erläutert, und die Zerstörung dieser Beziehung durch Zwangsumzüge und Verdrängung, die durch die politische Entscheidungen möglich waren, wird als Grund für viele Probleme in der indigenen Bevölkerung angegeben. Diese Studie zeigt, dass ein dringender Handlungsbedarf besteht, um die Situation der indigenen Bevölkerung in Australien zu verbessern und deren Lebensumstände und Zukunftsperspektiven zu verbessern. Außerdem wird aufgezeigt, dass gegenseitiger Respekt und der Respekt und die Anerkennung der indigenen Kultur und Tradition von extremer Wichtigkeit sind. Die Autoren dieser Romane leisten einen wichtigen Beitrag zu diesem Prozess, indem sie auf die teilweise tragische Situation, in der sich viele australische Aboriginals befinden, aufmerksam machen. Sie leisten aber auch einen wichtigen Beitrag für ihre eigene indigene Gemeinschaft, indem sie Vorbilder und Charaktere kreieren, die dazu beitragen, dass australische Aboriginals ein positives Selbstbild bekommen können, das ihre Position innerhalb der australischen Gesellschaft stärkt. Und sie zeigen auch, dass eine gemeinschaftliche Zukunft nur durch ein respektvolles Miteinander und Akzeptanz möglich ist.

## Summary

This doctoral dissertation deals with the representation of contemporary Indigenous Australian fiction that was written by Indigenous Australian writers. The analysed novels were written between 1990 and 2010. The authors of these novels have a special place in the Indigenous community. They are acclaimed writers and their literary work is read by many. They are university educated, and are aware of their responsibility for their community and their culture. Their novels raise awareness about the difficult situation many members of the Indigenous Australian community are in. The novels are grouped according to themes, and their analyses take government policies which are relevant for the respective novels into consideration. This paper gives a brief overview of Australian government policies which have affected the Indigenous community at various times since the arrival of the colonisers. It also gives an overview of the development of Indigenous literature. Then it discusses Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997) and Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), which deal with the assimilation and removal policies that were in place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and resulted in the Stolen Generation. The novels represent the effects these policies had on the individual. Next, there is a discussion of two further novels of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright, namely *True Country* (1993) and *Carpentaria* (2006) respectively, in which the focus is on the situation of Aboriginals in remote communities. These novels depict living conditions and circumstances that are shameful for a rich country like Australia – they show third-class housing and second-class education which these Indigenous communities struggle with. In addition, they give some insight into the problem between remote Indigenous Australian communities and the mining industry. The paper then analyses Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* (1997) and Anita Heiss's *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007). The protagonists in these novels live in urban environments and deal with a different set of difficulties. These protagonists need to redefine their role as women, regardless of the fact that their familial and educational backgrounds are dissimilar. Both novels aim to educate the reader without being too instructive. Finally, this paper discusses Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* (2006) and Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song* (2005). These novels depict the search for an Aboriginal identity of young Indigenous Australians whose families have been affected by the

removal policies which were in place in Australia until the late 1960s. The effects of this policy are depicted as well as the importance of Aboriginal people's connection to their homeland and kinship. Their ontological connection to the land is explained and the destruction of this connection through forced removal is presented as one of the reasons why many members of the Indigenous community face difficulties. This study shows that there is an urgent need to improve the situation of the Indigenous Australian community, their living conditions and their future perspectives. It further demonstrates the importance of mutual respect and respect for and recognition of Indigenous culture and traditions. These Indigenous writers play a crucial role in this development by raising awareness of the plight of Indigenous Australians. Moreover, they are essential in creating role models for the Indigenous community that they can identify with and may lead to a more positive self-image which will strengthen their position in mainstream Australian society. Finally, they show that the creation of a united Australian society is dependent on mutual respect, acceptance and trust.